

How I Work: A day in the life of a dairy nutritionist

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No two days in my life are the same. I work with a very diverse group of nutritionists and dairy producers so that no two days repeat themselves. Let me give you a grand overview.

I routinely support 45 field nutritionists from roughly Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to Osaka, Japan. I help them troubleshoot nutritional, management, financial, facility and health issues in their current customers' and their potential herds. I am also head of the nutrition department at Renaissance Nutrition, which means I try to keep the rest of the technical staff pointed in the right direction (think herding cats), look at potential new products and services, and am involved in marketing decisions and quality control. I also spend several weeks a year training new hires. Every day is different whether I am in the corporate office in central Pennsylvania or in the countryside somewhere in the western two-thirds of the U.S. So here is an average day when I am not in the office and out in the field.

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Most Monday mornings you will find me on an airplane flying to see one of our field nutritionists that I am scheduled to meet with. I spend the airport time returning emails from other nutritionists on a range of questions from product placement, forage quality issues and nutritional questions. On the airplane, I'll normally work on rations. I have a few herds I service myself to keep me sharp and current with what is happening farm-side. But a majority of these are rations from my field nutritionists asking questions about feed cost savings to be found, where the next 3 pounds of milk can be inexpensively acquired, any way to get another tenth of butterfat without breaking the bank or anything in this diet to help with this disease outbreak. When I run out of rations to look at for them, I write or read. In fact, this article was written on a long flight on my way out to California.

There are always the weekly tip for the field nutritionists, emails, articles, newsletters and training material that constantly need to be written and updated. It is a great way to spend airplane time. Inevitably, the passengers sitting beside me ask what I do for a living after seeing all the photos of cows on my computer. It usually leads to some great discussions about milk quality, nutritional benefits of milk and meat, and on-farm animal welfare issues. It still amazes me how much of the nonagriculture population believes milk is full of antibiotics and pus, and that dairy producers would injure an animal on purpose. I can proudly claim I have converted hundreds of these folks to our side, temporarily at least.

Once I reach my destination and meet up with the local field nutritionist, we travel out to the farm. These visits usually involve forage evaluation, a walk-through looking at the cow's

overall health, body condition, locomotion score, time budget, manure evaluation, comfort and a review of the dairy records and rations. When we do all this, we are looking for bottlenecks on the farm. There are always several of these bottlenecks, but our job is to figure out which three are having the largest economical impact on the operation. I was told a long time ago by a very successful dairyman that my job was to find 100 things he can do 1 percent better, but to only tell him the big three because that is all he could remember. He also said when I came back the next time to tell him the next three. We would get through the list of 100 eventually. The best part of my job is that the top three bottlenecks keep changing monthly, seasonally and yearly. So, as I see it, I have pretty good job security in the long term.

I have also been called a pigeon. This is where I fly in, defecate on the farm's facilities or management procedures, and fly away. It sort of fits, but I always hope it is said with a "grain of salt." I do not think a pigeon really cares where he does his business, and when we discuss improving one of these three bottlenecks, we truly believe it will help the bottom line of the operation. I always hope the producer does not think I am being critical just to be critical.

Each individual's stop has as much diversity as one can imagine. I might be on a 10,000-cow open-lot dairy on Tuesday and a 16-cow tiestall Amish dairy on Wednesday. No matter which state, providence or country I work in, all dairy producers have very similar issues. A 3,000-cow dairy in Mexico complained about labor issues. A 60-cow Mennonite dairy grumbled about getting the custom harvester there on time. A 150-cow Japanese dairyman asked me about getting higher digestibility forage into his TMR to cut his cost. Everyone wants more milk, better components and healthier cows – all at a cheaper diet cost. It is universal.

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As a nutritionist, these too are our daily goals for the operations we work with, regardless of the milk price. Granted, some of the additives make more economical sense at \$20 per hundredweight (cwt) milk than they do at \$12 per cwt milk, but nutritionists must constantly ask themselves and their producers this very question: Does it pay? Way too frequently this question goes unasked or is assumed. The U.S. is full of empty dairy farms that either saved themselves right out of business or they wrongly tried to buy the last 5 pounds of milk and a nutritionist allowed them to do it.

Another universal perception is that I seem to have some magical ability to control milk production. Granted, while I do my best with the information I am given, my ability to pull a good forage sample, run the balancing program correctly and then communicate this to the right individuals so the animals get fed correctly is limited. We constantly say there are six rations on every dairy. The one I formulate, the one the farm tells the feeder to feed, the one he actually feeds, the one the mixer mixes, the one the cows eat and the one they

digest. The difference between a good nutritionist and a great nutritionist is the amount of variation in each of these six diets. Why is it when the cows go down 3 pounds of milk, it is all the nutritionist's fault? But when they go up 3 pounds, it is because the producer is always feeding better hay?

A typical day will result in two to five of these troubleshooting calls, depending on what the goals are for the visit by the local field nutritionist. Sometimes they are very in-depth, and other times they just want to focus on part of the operation. I am just another set of eyes and ears, another nose and a different brain on the farm. Hey, no one can think of everything all the time, just ask my wife; she'll tell you. Having a second opinion on what they are seeing, hearing and smelling on an operation can be priceless.

Most of my evenings are spent driving to another field nutritionist's location to start the process all over the next day. I spend my hotel time returning emails and text messages from my co-workers on issues they ran into that day. New forage tests from the labs usually come in about 7:00 p.m. EST, so there is always a diet or two to do that evening because someone wants new feed sheets before morning feeding. I finish the day by reading an article or two, and then it is lights out. Tomorrow will be a completely different day than today was, and I look forward to it with enthusiasm because I love doing what I do, every day. ↵



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