How I helped a resistant client with BVD control

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When asked to solve an animal health problem by a farmer my approach has always been in the past to ask as thorough history about the problem as possible, do a clinical exam and take tests if the situation requires it. This was the usual standard protocol that we were taught at vet school. Then using my knowledge about the subject I give the client the answer. For clinically sick animals this approach has worked well. But I have always been disappointed in the lack of up take on animal health problems that required my skills as an advisor.

In June 2013 I was lucky enough to be sent up to the BVD champions meeting in Wellington. I had a number of clients that had some BVD issues and knowing I was going to the meeting had informed them I would seek expert advice and help sort their issues on my return. So I was pretty keen to learn and take home as much knowledge as I could. There were some key technical aspects that I had to brush up on and there was also a talk on adult learning which I thought would be good but didn’t realise how key this talk would be until later.

The adult learning section included Lab Wilson and others talking about why a lot of vets have poor uptake of their expert advice. I felt like I was certainly in this category. So armed with Stu Bruere’s/MSD’s excellent BVD presentation I was keen to get these farmers to take on my advice and I was surprised on how well it went.

The key things I learnt from this adult learning session that I now take into my advisory work from BVD advice, healthy hoof, and In Calf consults are to pay great respect to the farmers own personal knowledge, and to listen better. I now always ask at the start of the consult the question they have asked of me. “What do you think is the cause of the problem” or “what do you know about BVD” and sincerely listen and ask questions around this. If I think about it, the reason why I have never asked these questions before was because I thought they were paying me to answer that; and I thought of course they do not know, that’s why they are asking me; and I presumed their reply would be, “you are the vet you tell me”. I think if I’m really honest in some situations I was probably even a little bit unsure if I had the answers and think by asking the farmer, they would find me out. But not once have I had a farmer tell me that. Quite the opposite.

By asking these questions and listening better I have learnt more about my farmers and their operations. I have also been pleasantly surprised on how much they know which makes me respect their knowledge even more. Besides no one likes to be made to suck eggs so its really important to find out what they already know and the exact problem they are asking of you.

At the beginning, if I’m really honest I only said this statement to the farmer: “no one knows their farming operation like you do and after this presentation you they will know what is best for your situation”, because Lab Wilson and Stu Bruere said it’s a great idea to get farmer uptake and I was keen to try anything. I really didn’t believe this statement. I believed I knew what was best. Looking back I think this is where I was going wrong all along. I now actually believe in the above statement.

It doesn’t matter what relationship you have if you do not listen to the other person and have no respect for them then the relationship falls down. I think we all know this but for me I wasn’t fully transferring this when I switched to giving technical advice about an animal health matter.
One particular client I have always struggled to get to take on my advice had a BVD problem. Historically if this client had an issue I would ask him all about it and then tell what he needed to do. From lame cows, mastitis, and non cycling cows. I get on really well with this client outside work, I’ve been on a few hunting trips with him and enjoy his company. But try as I might I just can’t get him to take on what I’ve been telling him. So needless to say I was very skeptical about how receptive he was going to be when I sat down to talk to him about BVD.

However, after taking this new approach with him I was very surprised on how much he lapped it up. He stayed engaged for the entire BVD presentation asking lots of questions along the way. Usually he argues the point on everything I say. One other change I made to my approach was for me to go in with knowing the farmer owns BVD. This I feel is very important because it makes me relax and concentrate on my role, which is to guide and answer any technical questions. The farmer owns the control program, and any benefits or losses associated with it. I felt I had done my job well by empowering him with all the up to date knowledge on the disease, and the risks and benefits of doing or not doing the available control options.

Believing the farmer owns BVD and every other disease on his farm is really important. I always felt I did and because of that would be forceful in what I thought was appropriate for the situation. If the client wasn’t taking it on board the consult would become a bit awkward with I’m sure both of us not really enjoying it. I certainly would leave frustrated more often than not. I now love BVD consults and other advisory work. I’m a lot more relaxed.

So by me making myself believe the farmer owned his BVD problem, by me greatly respecting his own knowledge on the subject, and by listening better I was able to get this reluctant client to take on a BVD control program.