

# The changing face of knowledge transfer

*How dairymen are looking at non-traditional sources for extension and management information*

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In the past, each province had been equipped with a well staffed dairy extension service that has been able to provide sought-after advice for producers. Extension services have been severely cut, in most cases leaving a void for dairymen to find quality advice. With the proliferation of information available on the internet, it is not the information, but the application of the information that is needed.

The private sector is moving forward rapidly with evolving technology that is extremely valuable, but producers often require advice from an independent source on product evaluation and economic viability.

Roger Mills has been providing independent advice as a Dairy Business Consultant for 8 years, after a 35 year career as a dairy farmer. He is a co-founder of the Manitoba Dairy Farm Management Group and has been involved as one of its leaders for the past 14 years. This is a producer-run organization focusing on benchmarking and group discussion with organized meetings, farm tours and an informative quarterly newsletter. The well-attended meetings are open to all producers who seek depth of information from presentations on current business management topics.

Another primary objective of the group is to improve producers' bookkeeping skills. They encourage top managers to either do their own accounting or use a qualified bookkeeper to ensure that they have the numbers with which to help make decisions. These producers are also the more likely to assemble a team of professionals to provide the necessary financial and production advice.

In Ontario, the Progressive Dairy Operators, (formally Large Herd Operators), was organized in 1981 by a group of farmers and extension people who felt that there was a lack of practical information available to those farmers who had free-stall operations. At the time, the vast majority of Ontario dairy farms were tie stall, and free-stall operators were having a hard time accessing management information. PDO provided farm tours, educational seminars and major conferences on cutting edge dairy topics.

As the industry has moved to fulfill that particular role, PDO has moved to other areas of the industry where they can further expand their mandate of education – areas where again there is a lack of good information and advice. Their support of initiatives such as the Profit Profiler Dairy Financial Analysis service which was

developed by CanWest DHI with significant input and support from PDO and the new Management Seminars for Dairy Youth are an attempt to push past the traditional production based programs.

Ben Loewith, the Chairman of PDO says "Programs that are organized by farmers for farmers tend to be more relevant to our membership and potentially less biased than those that are put on by industry vendors. As a non-political organization, our tours and seminars are designed to showcase a variety of opinions and options."

He adds, "For the symposiums, we try to get the most knowledgeable speakers in the field, regardless of geography. It has always been the case that 'producer panels', at any event, rate extremely well amongst the audience. We try to balance the need for topics to be explained by professionals, with the practical knowledge that comes from those in the field. This holds true whether the topic relates to production, finances, succession planning, or human resources."

There are many more dairymen being proactive about their continuing education, than those found in the two organizations mentioned. Basically they are all searching for a balanced opinion of how to apply the abundance of information in a practical way. If the advice is beneficial to them, cost is no more of a problem than that from other farm advisor professionals.

