Everything I need to know about life, I learned in Idaho

Jeffery Bewley, Graduate Research Assistant, Purdue University, for Progressive Dairyman

If you have read any of my articles in the past, you may have noticed that the byline under my name has changed in the last few months. You may have also noticed my preference for writing about technical topics. For this article, I have taken a different approach, with a light-hearted reflection on my experiences in the Idaho dairy industry as Dairy Tech Services Manager for PerforMix Nutrition Systems.

Recently, I started a PhD program with a focus in Dairy Systems Management at Purdue University working with Dr. Mike Schutz. It was a tough decision for me to leave a great job, company, friends, and state; however, one of the things that became clear to me during my two years in Idaho was that, in order for me to accomplish some goals that are important to me, I needed to return to school to complete my formal education. But, in the meantime, I was receiving considerable education of the practical kind. So, borrowing from the “Everything I Need to Know about Life, I Learned in Kindergarten” and its many parodies, here is a look at some of the lessons I learned in Idaho.

1. The rest of the country needs to “wake up” to the Western style of dairying. There were many times when I was in total awe at the efficiencies and creativity of dairy producers in Idaho. As a general rule, these dairy producers are far ahead of their “back east” counterparts in managing their dairy as a business. There are many valuable lessons that could be learned from emulating this successful business model.

2. Family dairies are alive and well. They just look a little different than what I remembered. Growing up on a 60-cow dairy, I have always been a little skeptical of the role of large scale dairying. Some of this doubt likely came from my fondness for family dairies. Any such thoughts are no longer existent. Countless examples of family dairies exist in Idaho and other parts of the country; they have just adapted to a business structure that takes advantage of economies of scale and efficiency.

3. There is progress yet to be made in decision making strategies for dairy operations. While this statement could be made for every business type, dairy producers need to determine how each decision affects both short-term and long-term profitability and strategy. New tools are constantly being developed in this area. This is, by the way, the focus of my PhD research with Dr. Mike Schutz.

4. Today, more than ever, the need exists for well-planned, scientific research in the dairy industry. Every day, dairy producers are inundated with sales calls and promotional materials for hundreds of...
products, each claiming to solve one or multiple problems. I was shocked at the number of these products that had little to no research to support their claims. Granted, we all recognize that different products work differently in different operations; but, the purpose of scientific research is to determine what these circumstances are and how to maximize, statistically, the probability that positive or negative effects observed are real. Often, it’s worth an extra dollar or two to pay for the increased assurance gained from this kind of statistical power.

5. A milk pricing strategy is an essential component of an effective dairy business plan. The low milk prices of 2002-2003 may seem like a distant memory today, but strategies available to minimize the effects of milk price volatility can be the difference between paying the bills and bankruptcy during tough times.

6. Quality of life sometimes supersedes “by the book” dairying and business management. This was one of the biggest lessons I learned. Sometimes, the reason why we don’t do things the way we know we are supposed to is that there are more important “lifestyle” priorities that take precedence. Implementing a new technology or spending an extra 5-10 hours a week on a project may be the difference between attending a family function or something else important to an individual. These decisions are important to overall happiness and sanity and must be made every day.

7. Most of what you need to know about a job you learn on the job. It is amazing how much we all learn by doing. I talk to students frequently who are afraid to apply for or take jobs because they don’t know everything. Of course they don’t. None of us do. Most of what we need to know, we learn as we go. The organizations we work for and the people we work with will do everything they can to help insure we are successful in learning the tricks of the trade as we go.

8. Total Quality Management systems have tremendous potential to improve dairy organizations. ISO 9001, HACCP, TQM, BTM – which total quality management system you choose, is really not as important as what you gain from the process. The dairy industry can continue to learn from its industrial counterparts in implementing a formal structure for managing the complexities of the dairy system.

9. Microsoft has spoiled us. I don’t own any stock in Microsoft and recognize that they are not perfect, but they have developed pretty sophisticated software programs that fail only intermittently. So, when we use agricultural software, it is easy to get frustrated because we are spoiled to systems where the chances of us being the ones who find the bugs are relatively low. While this can be frustrating, the power of these agricultural software packages, with a somewhat limited customer basis, is phenomenal. The list of applications is endless and represents a tremendous opportunity for dairies to fine-tune their analytical management capabilities.

10. The term “independent” is apparently more flexible than I ever realized. I’m not sure I understand what the requirements are for someone to list themselves as an “independent” consultant. Does independence simply mean that you don’t work for a company? Or are all recommendations independent of personal financial interests? Dairymen need to be sure they understand where their consultants are receiving income. You may be surprised.

11. Some of the biggest mistakes are caused by simple mathematical errors. Whether it is a dry matter to as fed conversion or the placement of a decimal point, mathematical errors can create major problems for dairy producers. It is important to double check your calculations for accuracy in order to avoid potentially disastrous consequences. Sometimes, we spend a lot of time looking for complex answers when the root of the problem boils down to a simple mathematical mistake.

12. Spanish courses should be a requirement for every Animal Sciences graduate in the country. This is an essential skill for anyone who desires a career in production agriculture. Like other businesses, being able to communicate with and motivate dairy employees is a key component of dairy business management. Human resources management will continue to be a challenge and an opportunity for dairy producers.

13. Metrics for monitoring nutritional status are an underutilized tool. Regular body condition scoring, manure scoring, lameness scoring, fresh cow monitoring, and hygiene scoring have tremendous power in tracking trends of key indicators of nutritional status. Tracking dry matter intake and feed efficiency can be a useful tool in detecting variation before a disaster occurs. Calculating “shrink” of feedstuffs provides an excellent opportunity for dairy producers to find potentially large sums of money sitting on the table. These and other tools used to monitor nutritional status should be used more regularly and strategically.

14. If you can get your cows through a smooth transition period, everything else is smooth sailing. Look around for dairy producers that spend a lot of time and effort managing their transition cows. At first glance, it may seem like they spend excessive time there. But, look a little deeper, and you’ll be amazed at how few problems they have beyond this period of time. Time and money spent in the transition period is a lucrative investment.

15. The industry is constantly changing and everyone must be prepared to adapt quickly. Pick up any dairy publication and you will likely be overwhelmed with the number of articles on animal ID, odor control, waste management, milk pricing strategies, statistical process controls, crossbreeding, infectious disease control, and a myriad of other issues that you may or may not have considered to be issues a couple years ago. The survivors will be those who determine how to react to these and yet unknown challenges in a positive, proactive, and innovative manner with a focus on how each of these issues affects the big picture of how the dairy is managed and poised for future success.

On a personal note, I would like to thank the following groups of people for all they contributed to my informal education during my time in Idaho. (I’m sure a couple people are escaping my memory right now; my apologies in advance).

Dairymen (along with their families and employees): Tom and Jo Ann Kasper, Lisa and Harvey VanEss, Bert and Tina DeWinkle, Chuck Turner, Denis Dunlop, Kent and Dawn Regli, John Toledo, McKee Brothers, and Curtis and Cindy DeVries.

Industry leaders: Dr. Rick Gutierrez, Dr. Earl Aalseth, Dr. Mirelle Chahine, Dr. Joe Dalton, Dr. Mike Lormore, Dr. Mark Kinsel, Dr. Mike Arambel, Dr. Lyle Rode, Cam McKenzie, Nick Nicholson, Gary Winter, Brian Miller, John Rosecrans, and Jorge Estrada.


Reprinted from May 2005