

While survival is probably uppermost on dairymen's minds at the moment, with producers under extreme pressure due to the drought, increased input cost, and milk prices lagging escalating production costs, it is difficult to focus on new horizons, of which there are a number.

NEW HORIZONS

FOR THE DAIRY INDUSTRY

by Cliff Harrington



GEBRUIK HIERDIE SKAKEL

om die artikel in Afrikaans te lees.

LISTEN TO THE CONSUMER

Asia is probably the fastest-growing market for dairy products in the world and research has shown that its consumer base has a rapidly changing dynamic, which has seen wide acceptance of dairy as fundamentally good nutrition. However, it is also a market which is looking for different kinds of products than those found in traditional dairy markets, with different taste and texture requirements. The same is probably true for young people in Western countries. They are looking for something different. Fonterra's research predicts that in five years' time, the most popular dairy items will be cultured products, flavoured beverages, protein drinks and smoothies. This provides both challenges and opportunities – taste and texture developments should be at the forefront of dairy processors' minds.

Furthermore, an increased awareness of the importance of the role of protein in a healthy diet is becoming commonplace and research has regularly highlighted the many positives of dairy protein – a fact that has not been actively marketed to the extent that it could have been.

Demand for cheese and yoghurt is also increasing, which makes it clear that the demand for high milk solids is on the increase. While milk component pricing has improved, it is not yet at the level which actively incentivises producers to focus not only on the total kilograms of butterfat and milk protein produced both via breeding and nutrition, but also to target the percentage per litre of butterfat and protein. The future will see milk solids enjoying a heavier weighting in determining milk price than it has at present.



The NDF content eaten by a cow is mostly under the farmer's control because the farmer controls the stage at which a given pasture is grazed, the species and cultivar planted and the stage at which hay or silage is made.

New horizons on the farm

The new horizon in dairy cow nutrition is probably a more effective means of managing neutral detergent fibre (NDF) and its digestibility, with its massive impact on dry matter intake (DMI).

Cows have a defined capacity to take in NDF. This capacity is affected by NDF digestibility and diet mix, but is generally accepted to be between 1% and 1,5% of bodyweight. As a rule of thumb, most nutritionists work on 1,25% of cow body weight. In other words, a 500 kg cow can consume 1, 25% of her body weight in NDF, or 6,25 kg. This means if a ration contains 32% NDF, a cow can eat approximately 19,53 kg of dry matter. This outcome will, of course, be affected by stage of lactation, breed and a number of other factors.

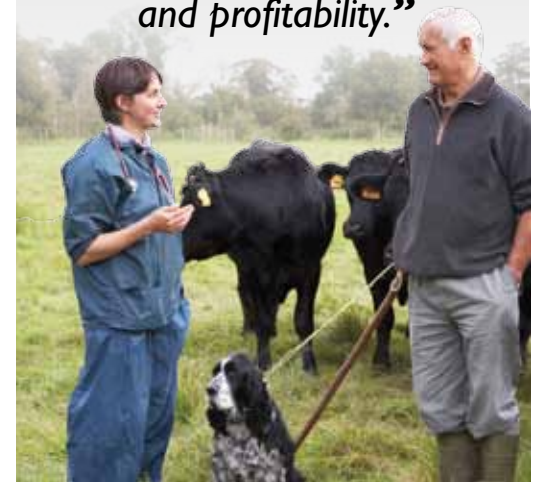
Bear in mind that the NDF content eaten by a cow is mostly in the farmer's control. The farmer controls the stage at which a given pasture is grazed, the species and cultivar planted, the stage at which hay or silage is made, as well as the products that are bought in, and the way in which the ration is formulated and blended.

The NDF component of the plant increases with maturity, while NDF digestibility usually decreases. Maximising DMI remains one of the most important drivers of milk production and thus profitability. This is especially true in transition cows. Bear in mind that the higher the DMI, the lower the required diet density to achieve a given production and milk component level.

QUALITY OVER QUANTITY

In general, pasture-based dairymen are utilising roughage quality more effectively than their TMR-based counterparts, which has led to a dramatic decrease in production costs. We have seen a move away from a largely kikuyu-based production system to one of ryegrass, together with in some cases clover, and recently, grazing chicory. Grazing management has also improved dramatically and pasture intakes of over 12 kg of dry matter per 400 kg-cow are not uncommon, seeing concentrate levels dropping to 1 500 kg in the production of a 6 000 l lactation. The challenge for TMR farmers is to emulate this by improving the quality of silage and hay made, reducing the levels of NDF by possibly harvesting a little earlier, which normally means giving up some volume and, in the case of silage, filling and compacting bunkers at a faster rate. This will significantly lower the cost of the ration and invariably lead to an increased milk yield.

“ Farms where regular meetings are held between the dairyman, veterinarian and nutritionist tend to have better herd health, fertility and profitability.”



MANAGING MARGINS

Understanding and managing margins remains an elusive horizon for many of us. A margin represents the difference between income and cost, which is the best way to calculate, and aim for, profitability. All too often the target aimed for is not ideal, such as the highest possible milk production per cow or the lowest cost of production. While both can be significant in maximising profit, they do not necessarily result in the highest profit. It is only by achieving the highest margin, be it per cow or per hectare, that maximum profit will be achieved. For example, when evaluating a concentrate or roughage purchase, unit price alone should not be the deciding factor. Rather evaluate the margin over feed cost. Often a more expensive input will yield the better result.

IT TAKES A VILLAGE...

An obstacle to be overcome is the often disjointed approach of veterinarians and nutritionists involved with a given herd. A team approach is vital, and farms where regular meetings are held between the dairyman, veterinarian and nutritionist tend to have better herd health, fertility and profitability.



CLIFF HARRINGTON is the sales manager at Meadow Feeds in the Western Cape. He completed an honours degree in animal science and has been part of the dairy industry for over 30 years. E-mail him at cliff.harrington@meadowcape.co.za. **TDM**

“Research predicts that in five years’ time, the most popular dairy items will include protein drinks and smoothies.”



CONCLUSION

South African dairymen have proved themselves to be some of the best in the world, meeting and overcoming challenges head on. Today's new horizons will become tomorrow's normal.

MEADOW AD STC