Marketing of the food animal reproductive practice
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I’ve always been impressed with the quality and depth of the science presented at the Society for Theriogenology (SFT) meetings and I am proud and indebted to those scholars who have come to these seminars and offered detailed and voluminous data from which they make logical, if not limited findings. I am, however, not one of those scholars. It is my endeavor to explain how I market myself as an exclusive food animal practitioner and, as is my custom, not be compelled to justify my conclusions by any sort of rational details that might back them up, or recommend anything for any other reason that it seemed to me to be a good idea at the time.

First, a few ground rules. You will not learn specifics about how much money I make. I feel comfortable with this because I cleared it with Dr. Jane Barber who said she did not reveal that statistic for herself when she did a marketing talk on a small animal reproductive practice. The statistic is important, however, because it represents a number by which many of you will judge whether I am a successful practitioner. The honest answer to how much I make is the same answer each of you gives when asked how much you make, and that is “not enough”. Also, the honest answer to how much you need to make is the same for you and me also, and that is “more”.

When working on this presentation, several truths or verities were driven home to me.

First, without exception, the following to truths arise so often they must be true:

Everyone wanted to be a large animal practitioner—or,
Everyone’s favorite teacher in veterinary school taught large animal medicine.

Second, this next fact is usually brought up sometime between when I’m in the middle of delivering an emphysematous calf and the moment I figure the bill:

Nobody can make money in large animal medicine.

Now this statement has a corollary that my children hammer home to me since they’ve moved to the big city and have to pay for veterinary care for the dogs:

All the money is in small animals.

This eventually leads to the truest truism of all:

Nobody makes any money in veterinary medicine.

To outline what I’ll cover today, here are the major points:

- My background and locale
- Major components of my practice
  - Breeding soundness examination (BSE) of bulls
  - Female: artificial insemination (AI), embryo transfer (ET), ultrasonic (US), pregnancy diagnosis, fetal sexing by US
  - Lameness and foot trouble
  - Regulatory and organizational
  - Laboratory

- Advantages to my practice
- Disadvantages
- Application of theriogenology (the term and board certification)
- The experiences with student externs
- The food animal practitioner shortage

I stated that I would not be bound by anything scientific to make my points, and neither will I be bound by any sort of definition of marketing that would conform to how the term is actually used or defined. For the purposes of this discussion, I choose to define marketing as presenting oneself for personal gain.

It struck me that with that definition virtually everyone is in the marketing business whether one is a large animal practitioner, a dean of a veterinary school, a horse trainer or a hermit. We each make conscious and unconscious decisions about how to dress, how to express ourselves, what kind of car to drive and how often we think the lawn should be mowed.

Another aspect in the definition must involve to whom one presents himself or herself to gain personally. Now I have nothing against Baptist preachers. Let me be very clear about that. I come from a long line of them; my
favorite uncle—the one who performed the wedding ceremony for my wife and me—is a Baptist preacher. As a large animal practitioner, however, while I certainly would not intentionally offend or insult such men of the cloth, I am much more concerned about my presentation to beef cattle owners than I am, for instance, to Baptist ministers. So in the marketing discussion I need to define to whom it is that I present myself. I must therefore tell you a little about my state and my portion of the state.

Oklahoma is a Choctaw word that means “Home of the Red Man”. We’re a young state, just over a hundred years old and only Arizona, Hawaii, Alaska and New Mexico were admitted into the union after we were. The parts of the states that were not dedicated to Native American reservations were settled by land runs whereby settlers would gather at a specific point on a specific date and at the sound of a gun would dash off on horseback and stake claims around the land they wished to own. Obviously some cheated. Instead of waiting at the starting point with God-fearing, hard-working, industrious and civil people some despicable types would invade the land before the gun sounded. They went in too soon. These people were called “Sooners” and they are as hated to this day by the same God-fearing citizens as they were in the late 1800’s.

So as a young state, our culture does not have to look back very far to see that its ancestors were valued for having fast horses, good livestock, a hardy disposition, intent on hard work, and the ability to judge land. We have produced no great statesmen, no superior literary figures, and very few artists of international acclaim. As a state we have major problems funding education, keeping our population healthy and dodging tornados. The population of Oklahoma represents approximately one percent of the total US population and we have, to our credit, produced a disproportionate share of people with physical attributes such as major league baseball players (6) and Miss America winners (6).

The northeast part of the state, where I practice is the home of one of Dr. Peter Chenoweth’s favorite Americans, Will Rogers. Will was born in Oologah, in Indian Territory and went on to be a performer in the Ziegfeld Follies as a trick roper, then continued in the public eye as a newspaper columnist and movie star. He was quite a benevolent person and is Oklahoma’s favorite son having his image in the Capitol in the hall of statues. It was common a few years back to have the name “Rogers” appear on more than 50% of the names on a statewide ballot, and most people in northeast Oklahoma can trace ancestry back to him. I can do the same.

He stands in another room but the other Oklahoman with a statue in the Capitol is Sequoyah, the developer of the Cherokee alphabet. Sequoyah’s statue was sculpted by Vinnie Ream, who in addition to that work of art also did Abraham Lincoln’s statue in the rotunda of the United States’ capitol, and has a town in Oklahoma named after her. That town is Vinita, the county seat of Craig County and the location of my practice and the birthplace of my three children.

It is here in Craig County that I practice, in a county with a population of around 15,000 and about three times as many beef cows as people. Although there are a few stocker operators, the main agricultural industry is beef cows with several seed stock producers and commercial cowmen. While most of my clients are old, white males, with few exceptions the same family has owned most of the ranches since statehood, even though there is now a perceptible shift in ownership to larger landowners whose primary occupation may not be in agriculture. I estimate, however, that ninety percent of my business is from private owners and not corporations and basically these clients are primarily professional farmers or ranchers or in the very least their investment in their land is such that their agricultural pursuits would never be considered as a hobby.

So how do I present myself to these older, white, conservative males who live very modestly, read voraciously, and to say the least are very frugal? Or, how do I present myself for personal gain?

We need to go back to the khakis in the closet. When I arrived in Craig County, fresh out of the Army in 1973 I was full of ideas that I had been taught in veterinary school that would rocket me to stardom in the veterinary world and, coincidentally, turn all the ranches in my practice area into money making machines. I guess I also wanted my pants to have a slimming effect. Looking in the closet, however, I see comfortable clothes, and the fashionable wardrobe—like most of the ideas I had about what I would do with my practice—have been pushed to the back, never to be worn or used again.

So what has worked? In 1997 an idea I heard at a SFT Conference was executed in Craig County by our County Agent, Roy Ball and me. Roy had just moved to Vinita and is aggressive, hard-working, and opinionated and received in varying degrees by the people he serves. We had a pharmaceutical company, Hoerst-Roussel at the time, then Intervet, then Intervet/Schering Plough, now who knows what the name of it is, donate fenbendazole wormer for what we thought would be about 25 bulls. We reduced the price of our BSE, gave a leptospirosis vaccine and dewormed the bull on a certain day in April, about two to four weeks before our spring breeding season.

Roy put out some brochures, I wrote a letter to my clients—I’m guessing about 200 of them—and we scheduled a producer meeting in the week of the bull clinic. The meeting we called “Cowboy College”—Roy’s term and not mine—and at the end of the meeting we had a test over the material covered and awarded prizes to the high
scoring individuals. Intervet, or whoever they were at the time provided a meal and participated in the program and the prizes.

About 150 people showed up for the meal and later in the week we tested about 40 bulls, so we considered it a success. The concept of the Cowboy College needs further examination. Of the attributes I listed of the cattle producers in our area, I did not mention competitiveness. The winners strutted around the fairgrounds building as if their cattle had topped the market, and the losers came up afterward and bitched about trick questions.

The discount for the BSE’s, even including the free vaccination and de-worming, still did not make the services to my clients in line or cheaper than my competitors. I foolishly thought, because I had been brought up with the SFT’s guidelines on examinations, I needed to measure and palpate the testicles, perform a rectal examination to include seminal vesicles and inguinal rings, a visualization of the entire penis, and a motility and morphology examination of the semen. While I think I’m fairly efficient, I can do about ten an hour, and at the moment I charge 45 dollars for that service.

My competition, however, has a helper insert (ram might be a better word) a rectal probe in a bull’s back end, and catch the first drop of something that looks interesting coming out of the prepuce and look for motility. I said “motility”, but the scientific term is actually “swimmers”. The typical charge for that service is somewhere between $12.50 and $20.00 and there may or may not be any sort of certificate supplied at the time. In effect, the people against whom I’m competing could have charged for the wormer and vaccinations and performed their service and beaten our discounted price by fifteen to twenty dollars (Table 1).

We continued on, however, and the bull clinic has grown, as has the total number of BSE’s I do throughout the year. I perform about a thousand BSE’s, it brings in more money than any other service I provide, and it leads to virtually every other service I perform. While this may not work as well in other practices, doing the best job on this examination from a marketing standpoint is either very logical or, if I may say it, brilliant.

I envy my wife as a caterer. People come to her and they are always happy. They are having a wedding, or a reunion, or a baby shower or a fiftieth wedding anniversary. Happy times. I walk in and I’ve diagnosed lymphsarcoma in a client’s donor cow.

Except on BSE’s. There is always good news, no matter what. If the bull is deemed fertile, life is wonderful. If the bull has problems, it’s always good that we found out beforehand. The Society’s BSE is a marketing tool. My clients now are accustomed to the form and know how to read it, and if they buy a bull that was examined by someone other than me, they have become suspicious if they do not receive some sort of document, preferably the SFT form, as part of their papers. Finally, never imagine me as a careful and thorough individual, intent on details. My clients, however, expect care and time to be taken by me in the examination of their bull. If I’m tired or out of sorts for one reason or another, I can always sense from the client that I must take my time and be as particular as possible even if it’s the end of the day or my son is about to play basketball.

This, however, is a khakis in the closet discovery, not a calculated marketing scheme that I designed to bring me personal gain, although it certainly does. I provide a service that my clients and I enjoy and appreciate so it becomes comfortable unlike other schemes such as newsletters, web pages, bigger telephone directory advertisements and signs at our entrance. I’ve tried all of these things and they do not seem to appeal to my clients although they might impress, well, some Baptist ministers.

Table 1. Comparison of “Breeding Soundness Examinations” offered by practices in the area.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pecan Drive</th>
<th>Clinic A</th>
<th>Clinic B</th>
<th>Clinic C</th>
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<td>Yes</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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This one service has spawned other services. In our area the abundance of fescue pastures, inappropriate nutrition, suspicious genetics and abundant rainfall result in foot pathology, especially in bulls. Several years ago I attended a seminar at the American Association of Bovine Practitioners (AABP) meeting in Nashville put on by Jan Shearer and finally got a handle on how to trim feet. Consequently our practice does a lot of foot work and it’s the hardest work I do. It is hard for two reasons. One, even with power equipment the work is very physical, and two, the hydraulic tilt table I have—while I get good exposure to the lower limbs—does not restrain the animals as well as I would like. If you have an answer to a better chute, I’d appreciate knowing about it. Nevertheless, we bring in clients from 150 miles away to work on feet. I try to encourage many of these people to take their bulls to the veterinary school in Stillwater, and I’ve tried to run them away with higher prices and a sorry attitude but it’s not unusual to pull up to the clinic in the morning and have ten fat and angry Angus bulls needing foot trims. My typical charge for this service is just over $100.00.

On the female side of the clinic’s services, I do a fair amount of pregnancy examinations, usually in groups of 100 to 500 at a time and I probably do a little over 10,000 females a year. I have no idea how I compare in price, accuracy and congeniality with others who provide this service, but it takes a clever receptionist to get five to six thousand cows checked in groups averaging 250 when virtually everyone wants the work done on the same day. We also do a fair amount of ultrasound work, especially on heifers and females going into production sales.

We do many heifers 30 days after the bull has been removed from the herd so that marketing decisions on the open heifers can be made as soon as possible even though the cost for this service will be twice what checking them manually would be. Further, sex determination by ultrasound is expanding as one of our services. Once again, I honed my skills on this technique at a SFT symposium that took place in San Antonio.

I am involved in ET, although most of what I do is transfer ova. I have worked with several ET specialists, both veterinarians and non-DVM’s, and while this work has tapered off significantly in my practice (attributable to finding genetic defects in my clients’ herds) I have found that having someone else flush and freeze works out better for me than performing the entire procedure, which I used to do, with no other professional help. I learned the hard way that balancing a clinic schedule while trying to accommodate a flushing schedule exceeded my capabilities. I had to decide if I wanted to be an ET specialist—which would probably require more travel than I care for—or be a clinician. I chose the latter.

Our clinic is also involved in a small amount of AI. We will synchronize and breed an occasional group of 100-200 heifers and from time-to-time we will house and breed small groups of 10-15 cows at our clinic. We usually house, superovulate and breed all the donor cows undergoing ET at our clinic. As a note of interest, we have in the past been contracted to AI a group of cows owned by a corporation while other cows owned by the same people have been inseminated by experienced non-DVM technicians on other parts of the ranch. With numbers adequate to satisfy my own statistically challenged mentality, I’ve found veterinarians, young and old, male and female, experienced or not in AI can usually match or more probably exceed the results of non-veterinary inseminators. This has surprised me because it seems like nobody knows more about bovine reproduction than someone who has attended a two-day AI school.

A question arises about my method of charging—whether by the hour or the task. I charge by the task almost exclusively. I envy the dairy practitioner who, by virtue of doing most of his work in a barn, can work all year round. My practice has two distinct humps with the peaks generally in April and October. In the heat of the summer and the cold of the winter I simply don’t have much work, and to make up for this I must make my money when I can. While I’m working I can make around 300 to 500 dollars an hour, and while my clients recognize this, my rates would be around twice what the most arrogant attorney in our town charges.

The remainder of my practice consists of examination and treatment of the individual animal, some regulatory work—I inspect a feed, water and rest station for the USDA for dairy cattle shipped from Canada to Mexico—dystocias and practice management. I’ve got three people that work for me, including my wife on a part time-basis, and we get along well and as a group we are liked and enjoyed by clients.

A word about staff meetings: we have them. They are conducted in the pickup on the way to work cattle. I understand the importance of personnel management but suggestions I’ve read about how to conduct that have left me confused. As with web pages and newsletters so it is with staff meetings. Somebody has to take responsibility to get things done. The manager of our electric cooperative said that in his evaluation his senior staff always wants more staff meetings. Improve communication, develop bonds, establish priorities, etc. So it is at our clinic. The problem both for the cooperative manager and me is that we (he and I) must organize, set the time, meeting location and agenda, hand out responsibilities and have a method to check on results. It’s tough for him to delegate those items with a far greater staff than I have and so we’ve both found the first staff meeting works great while each succeeding one loses its punch. After a while the meetings don’t happen until someone complains that the reason for our troubles is we don’t have staff meetings.
I mentioned web pages, and I have some experience with them. I don’t know whether a catering business or a large animal veterinary clinic would benefit more from a web page. Several times my wife and I are asked about the ability for someone to find information on our individual businesses. My wife got many more inquiries than I did so she had a web page developed by AT and T. In one year she got 100 hits and virtually no business directly related to the web page that cost her $80.00 a month.

I do know, however, that my son is what is called a search engine optimizer. It’s his business that when certain words (in this case insurance) are put into a Google or whatever search engine that his company is at the top of the list on the first page of the search. He wanted to do the same thing for my clinic a few years ago. I was afraid that I would either get a number of phone calls just wanting information that would not lead to income, or that I would get more business, probably foot trimming, that I might be reluctant to handle. I do, however, have an approved USDA laboratory where I perform tests for equine infectious anemia (EIA), so I let my son optimize my laboratory but not my clinic. Within a week I was number two on the search engine list when you put in “Coggins”, “veterinary laboratories”, “EIA testing” and the like. It resulted in business and good contacts and exposure until a conflict at work required my son to abandon the project. So my experience with web pages has prompted a feeling of beware of what you wish for.

I am an exclusive bovine practitioner, and I believe that exclusivity leads to several advantages and corresponding disadvantages.

- Efficiency
  - Drug inventory
  - Equipment and facility
  - Education
  - Reputation
  - Time management of appointments

- Predictability
  - Boredom from routine
  - Feast or famine

- Physical
  - Healthy? Physically fit?
  - Fatigue, wear and tear, exhaustion
  - No appreciable after hours call

- Cyclical
  - Have definite down times
  - With cyclicity comes expanding and contracting bank account

- No dispensing
  - Questionable profitability
  - An ethical problem
  - Removal from management
  - No free clothing
  - No detailing
  - No appreciation of influence

I’ve got three more areas of conversation. The first is about theriogenology, the term, the college, and benefits. While I won’t go into it in detail, my quest for board certification was not a thing of beauty, and once I received it there was, for me and others, a period of confusion. My close friends congratulating me on being certified in whatever it was, some colleagues were impressed and other older ones had never heard of the discipline, one client wondered if I accomplished this because my conception rate on ET had improved and customer of another veterinarian in town brought me an international health certificate to Canada to be endorsed. If I am honest with myself, this certification brought me great personal and professional satisfaction but the stars had to align perfectly for me to fit the study required in between the birth of our third child and the commencement of following my oldest two children in their athletic careers once they entered junior high. I think the only people in town who knew and understood the term “theriogenology” were my wife and children and the employees at the clinic.

I will say, however, there are close to three hundred of my clients who can read and understand the SFT Bull BSE form. Also, no less than fifty veterinarians have asked me about board certification and while they are unwilling to devote the time to learning as much as what is currently asked, they are acutely interested in some sort of partial recognition or certification in the particular specialty they pursue. I understand this is probably beyond the capabilities, policies and legal precepts of the college and society. However, had I first encountered BSE’s as done
by veterinarians who just look for “swimmers” I might have missed out on some financial success and my clients
would have suffered from an inferior service. I’m in favor of spreading competence that exists in theriogenology as
far as possible, and if a partial sort of recognition helps that along so much the better.

Secondly, I would like to visit about how student externs are an important part of our marketing of Pecan
Drive Veterinary Services. Our fortieth student left our clinic in May; thirty-nine of them have been absolute
delights. Without fail these young men, and mostly young women, are enthusiastic, polite, inquisitive, hard-working
and attractive. The only thing that brings them more joy than having a nerve-wracking busy day at the clinic is to
get a call at midnight of that same day with a cow that’s been in labor for five days.

We take them to church, Lion’s club, trail rides and fish fries. They will eat lunch with about twenty-five
to thirty ranch hands, and one young man spent time after clinic hours helping build a playground for our elementary
school. Our clients are accustomed to them and are more than willing to let them do whatever I think will not cause
any harm, and our students and clients remember one another long after they’ve gone back to school. I’m a great
fan of the St. Louis Cardinal baseball player Matt Holliday. If to promote and market my clinic I had the choice of
having Matt ride in the pickup and say good things about me or a veterinary student interested in food animal
medicine and squirming to get to the ranch and get a face full of cow manure it wouldn’t even be close. I’m so high
on what I’ve seen come out of the 13 veterinary schools that have trusted us with their students that I think the
profession is in very good hands.

Finally, I’d like to talk about the food animal practitioner shortage. I really cannot make intelligent
conversation about why this is happening or what to do about it. What I can tell you is how it affects me and how
this all fits into a marketing discussion. At this stage of my career, I’m not interested in working much harder than I
already do. Because of that situation, I have enough business to live the life I desire, but not enough to hire someone
else. I’ve been in group practices all of my life, and in previous presentations at the Oklahoma State Veterinary
School I’ve encouraged students to look for multi-practitioner practices. Being by myself, however, I find I’m
working less, enjoying life more and making more money than I ever have.

The marketing concept prevalent at the time I entered practice, however, was to work hard until your knees,
back or heart gave out, and then sell your practice to some young veterinarian. The purchase price of the practice
was your retirement. I was late in recognizing that I might not have a practice to sell, or put differently, I might not
have a practice anyone would be interested in buying. I don’t think I’m alone in this respect.

I find it interesting how many children follow their parents in the same profession, and indeed there are
numerous examples in Oklahoma where sons and daughters of veterinarians have become veterinarians themselves
just like baseball greats Bobby Bonds and Ken Griffey spawned Barry and Ken, Jr. None of my three children have
shown any interest in following either my professional footsteps or those of my wife as a caterer. Further, all of my
children work for large corporations and not for themselves. While I am not disappointed in this at all, I do wonder
if they did not see the rewards and satisfactions in our professions, or if they did were they payoffs insufficient for
the work my wife and I put in.

With that track record, how do I market my practice to someone when those most familiar with it have
declared it lacking? The answer, I believe, lies both with me individually and our profession of food animal
practitioners collectively, and is the subject of this presentation and I assume the reason I was asked to speak. I think
this once again goes back to khakis in the closet.

As I look back on my practice, I realize that my career has been a 40-year process of my clients and me
adapting to one another. Marketing pre-conditioned calves is an example. That concept never worked for me no
matter how aggressively I pursued it. The work I do in marketing bred heifers fell in my lap. One of the points of
my speech is that I think there are existing aspects in every food animal practice that are already valued and
appreciated but under-marketed. If BSE’s suddenly fell out of favor I think I would join with a few clients and
sonogram some heifers or cows for fetal sex determination, or buy some older but still worthwhile embryos from
clients who no longer want that particular genetics and implant perhaps 10 or 12 for clients who would not otherwise
consider it. I enjoy working with dehydrated calves. Perhaps I would restructure my charges on that service—a
contract perhaps; someone suggested a partnership. While I know there are pitfalls in each of these ideas, the
experience would nonetheless logically spread further. These would be comfortable for my clients and me.

Comfort, however, can only go so far. While my clientele is my clinic’s most valuable asset, I sense that my clients’
comfort is more palpable with lower prices.

Individually I must do several things. I must pursue those avenues available to me that provide client and
personal value and satisfaction, and abandon those activities that result in frustration and fatigue. I must arrange my
professional life so that I have a personal life. I must raise my fees. If the statistics I’ve shown you exhibit nothing
else, they at least state that my business—our business—is not based on being the low bidder on every project. I
wonder how much easier it would be to attract young veterinarians into our specialty if we could offer them $50,000
a year more income than others aspects of practice with the same number of hours worked each week? If what we do cannot provide those sorts of compensations, it is a fault of marketing by food animal practitioners or there is not enough value in what we do to justify our existence. If that is the case, we deserve to diminish and die.

Collectively, we as a profession must provide support, recognition and innovation to each other and our upcoming colleagues. With communication capabilities that we now possess it should be easy, but in my case it is very intimidating. The AABP, the SFT and the American College of Theriogenologists all have listserves and I read some or all of them every day. I rarely respond or enter the conversation. What I would enjoy would be a small group of, say, ten primarily food animal practitioners—perhaps from different parts of the country—who would participate in discussions about our practices, our frustrations, our solutions and our futures. I would even like an academic or two involved in the group. Nothing pleases me more in a professional sense than when a fellow veterinarian commends the job I’ve done. Since there are so few food animal practitioners, and our numbers are rapidly dwindling, it should be easier to mobilize a few people to develop methods of recognition, support and mentorship.

I have not touched on many political implications in this presentation. I have not asked our associations or their lobbyists to carry messages to the state or federal authorities pleading the case for the kind of practice in which I’m involved. I am not prescient enough to predict what will happen five, ten or twenty years down the road. While it may seem self-serving, I’m not sure how I will be replaced in my community. Clients have expressed this concern. What I do know is I’m confident that if we communicate well to our clients and ourselves, we should be able to rejuvenate our section of the profession. As a small animal practitioner in a crowded and competitive area of Tulsa asked me when I told him of the food animal veterinarian shortage: “What part of being a monopoly bothers you?”

A final statement to my food animal practitioners involved in reproduction as a parting shot in this marketing presentation: We’re small, we’re valuable and we’re powerful. We just need to act like it.