Transforming Dairy Intelligence

Dairy operators can't control milk prices – but they can control/tighten the variables that determine profitability. New and faster ways of managing and interpreting data will give early adopters an advantage over the competition.

By Tim Taylor (CEO, VAS)

We wax poetic about dairy farming – it's among the most iconic images of life in North America: the rolling hills and sweeping fields; the sunsets; the manifestation of the rural work ethic.

But let's not kid ourselves: it is a business. Complex. Unlike other businesses, it's a 24-hour-a-day exercise in precision and intelligence. No holidays, no days off. One bad input can significantly throw off production. Technology solutions have become commonplace to help identify and control those variables, but the "intelligence" from these solutions is often not able to drive a corresponding reaction until hours or days later. And the person collecting the data often has to interpret the data on their own by comparing numerous different spreadsheets.

Giving a dairy farmer more data doesn't help them. Giving them intelligence about their business that results from interpreting the data and turning it into actionable information does.

Software providers like Valley Agricultural Software (VAS) are taking formerly desktop-based, single-application solutions and providing business-wide platforms that provide real-time access to web-based intelligence via mobile devices, tablets and computers. These programs tie together all the variables that go into milk production in a single platform – from the feed to the cow to the parlor – providing actionable intelligence that allows today's dairy farmer to make decisions when it will have the greatest impact on production: now.

Embracing Technology

"Business-wide platform" sounds intensive — but it actually requires no additional technical infrastructure to be installed on premises. All data collection and computing power is managed, securely, via the web. As an example: dairies that currently use VAS products such as DairyComp 305, FeedWatch and ParlorWatch will be able to do their job exactly as they've always done it[1] — the only thing that changes is where and how they can access their information: everywhere with an internet or cellular connection.

1) Customers who prefer to use legacy VAS products as they have always done, as a desktop-based system, will be able to do so – the new platform will not retroactively affect current products.

The web-based access — via any web-enabled device and on all mobile platforms (iOS, Android) — drives three distinct advantages:

- **Access to business intelligence from anywhere within the operation.**
  Data is no longer limited to the one computer in the back office or back at the house. Dairy operators will be able to access that data standing in the parlor, in the pen or out by the feed truck. They'll also be able to receive informational alerts in real time — such as milk weights, feed chemistry reports, veterinarian needs and cleaning practices — that will allow them to make decisions now for the better of the dairy, versus in a few hours or the next day when they have time to sit down at the computer.
- **Greater reporting and interpretation of data — all in one program.**
  The ability to combine the three pillars of the dairy (cow, feed, parlor) into a single web-based platform allows for more intuitive and beneficial reporting not capable with individual products. The ability to view and compare data on cow health, milk output, feed inventories, milking and feeding times, etc. in a single program allows for faster, more beneficial reporting and decision making (versus exporting and comparing 2-3 different reports).
- **A common interface.**
  Most dairies today are used to running numerous different software applications for different phases of the milk producing process — often featuring completely different user experiences and interfaces. Incorporating all of these into a common platform ensures ease of use and training.

There are also improvements in technical service and support that will be inherent with the new technology. A single, web-based platform introduces a commonality of technology that will lead to better performance and customer support – and more instantaneous changes when new features and capabilities are implemented. Each user of the web-based platform will always be working off of the most current and powerful version of the software.

Understanding the Local Ecosystem

The opportunity for real-time data access throughout the dairy stands to drive improvements at every level of the operation.

Feed

Upwards of 60 percent of the cost of producing milk resides in feed. The supply, the mix, the labor. And, depending on the dairy, feeder compensation may be dependent in-part on their performance each day. Real-time access to feed data via mobile devices can drive a number of efficiencies in the feeding process, and encourage better performance by the labor on hand to drive down operational costs:

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- Immediately view reports on their phone regarding feeding errors, quantities, etc. versus waiting to receive an emailed report. This helps ensure more timely corrections/adjustments.
- Monitor inventories and mixes, and make adjustments earlier in the process to avoid errors and inefficient mixes.
- More quickly compare factors such as feed cost, feed mix and milk output (by pulling in data from the parlor side), and adjust mix earlier in the process to have a more immediate affect on outputs and ultimate profitability.

Cow
The individual cow is the most tracked asset on a dairy, from health and reproductive data to lactation and milk production. It's often the most mature set of data available. The power of a web-based platform with both mobile and remote accessibility amplifies that considerably:
- Multi-site operators can pull in animal information through a single interface, no matter where they are — eliminating the need for travel from site to site.
- Leverage cow data during the milking process to pull out and treat individual cows as they come through the milking parlor instead of segregating entire pens – ultimately saving time and labor.
- Share access with veterinarian partners to have instant access/visibility to animal health.

Parlor
The business end of the dairy — the parlor is the ultimate output of every decision and action that has come before, and the bellwether of total profitability. A web-based platform can provide:
- Real-time access to milk weights, rolling averages and deviations, bulk tank totals, etc.
- Immediate understanding and review of employee performance as it relates to milking times, cows per hour, time per cow, etc. — all information that can help coach employees in better performance — ultimately driving greater labor performance/efficiency.
- Quality control of both the milking and cleaning processes: ensuring that all equipment is at proper temperatures; that cleaning equipment is working properly and that cleaning processes have taken place as scheduled/intended.
- API integration with dairy buyers/testers for greater understanding of quality and output.

The Pen and The Herd

A web-based platform that incorporates intelligence from all three pillars of the dairy process into a singular interface gives greater understanding of the operation as a whole. It provides the catalyst for the establishment of trends and analysis from individual cows all the way up to the pen and the larger herd, thereby allowing dairy operators to make operational decisions based on quantifiable data about the performance of their business.

The Evolution of the Dairy... At the Heart of Your Dairy

The transformation of dairy intelligence from desktop-based computers to a web-based platform capable of being accessed by any web-enabled device has major implications for the industry. Dashboarding, multi-site comparison/compilation and API development for integration with other business partners are all possible with the foundation offered by this technological evolution.

For more information, and to schedule a meeting at World Dairy Expo to demo the next technological advances from VAS, email Sue Hart at Sue.Hart@vas.com, or visit the all-new VAS.com.

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