



by John Goeser

Avoid using a sledgehammer to pound a trim nail

HAVING the right tool for the job is essential to effectively completing a task. I've learned this through trial and error over the years. In fact, my tool inventory now speaks for itself on this point. Whether crafting cabinetry or replacing an engine, there are specialized tools available to execute certain tasks.

The right tool helps get the job done in a fraction of the time. Having the right tool can also help you from being excessive or damaging other components

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in the process. Using a sledgehammer to pound in a delicate trim nail is an example of this latter point.

There are many nutritional situations on dairy farms that can be thought of like the two different tool examples described above. In one case, having the right nutrition approach or solution is key to efficiency. This is just like having a certain specialty wrench to replace an engine part in the fraction of the time than it would have taken otherwise with a more common tool.

Not always justified

In the latter case, a broad and expensive nutrition approach may not be justified if the problematic issue can be pinpointed and nailed down like a trim nail. In some recent discussions with key allied industry

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technical service colleagues and a follow-up walk-through on the dairy, we've found ourselves delving into similar situations.

Dairy farm efficiency can be thought of in different ways. More milk per pound of feed is the more obvious efficiency metric. However, efficiency could also be defined as maintaining herd health through transition and avoiding unnecessary death or culling losses. All too often I find a colleague or producer seeking a single simple solution, yet in many situations, the issues at hand are multi-faceted.

When discussing this matter, I frequently use the analogy of a breakfast bar stool with four legs. If one stool leg is loose, the occupant can still sit confidently. However, if there are two or three shaky legs, then the likelihood of a fall is far greater. Whether we're troubleshooting transition cow health, milk components, or overall production, there are always many interacting factors.

Pick the biggest wins

Recalling learning moments from my days with the North American Intercollegiate Dairy Challenge, I identify the multiple factors at play and then prioritize these with economics and herd health in mind. After prioritizing, we can then apply the right tool according to the action plan. This is like using your screwdriver and removing the air intake manifold prior to trying to access an otherwise difficult to reach engine component.

In a recent walk-through with a high-performing dairy, we recognized some substantial opportunities

founded in feed quality. These were deeply rooted, yet at the same time, we recognized a simple opportunity to keep the push-up tractor clean and off the manure-covered alleys.

This became priority number one, and it appeared to be the right tool for the job given the simplicity of this task. This was just like removing the air intake; it was simple, and it should be addressed first. The more complicated feed quality issues could be addressed later and after the simple opportunity was captured.

In some cases, a one-size-fits-all approach might be the right way forward. For example, if the tools are in the shop but a nut on a tractor that needs to be loosened is several hundred yards away, then an adjustable wrench may be the right tool for the job. However, as in the carpentry example, if there's a loose trim nail and all that is readily accessible is a sledgehammer, we know that while the large hammer could theoretically get the job done, we're going to do some damage.

In nutrition, with many different situations, I'm often asked what the best nutritional additive is to fix the issue. This approach is like using the sledgehammer.

For example, in feed hygiene challenges, we know there are a number of clay or yeast-based binders, live cell yeast, or bacterial probiotics and other organic acids or preservatives that can help fix feed cleanliness or stability challenges.

In theory, one could blend several of these different ingredients together to offer a one-size-fits-all sledgehammer solution. However, using this sledgehammer nutrition approach

will likely damage your bottom line relative to a targeted plan.

If the issues stem from contamination happening during mixing or pushing up feed, then the right tool may be a pressure washer . . . not the sledgehammer! One industry colleague recently commented that while nutritional additives are often discussed, in many cases, the issues could be partly alleviated with a pressure washer and some time invested in clean-up.

Issue a tool challenge

Whether your farm is looking for the next efficiency and margin opportunity or working through a profit robbing issue, challenge your advisory team to help your farm find the right tool for the job. Spend some time critically discussing what all the possible issues or opportunities are, and then put together a prioritized action plan with the right solutions. Ultimately, avoid taking a sledgehammer to your pocketbook by going overkill or using the wrong tool. 🐄

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