

Continuing your education while keeping up with a busy practice

As busy practitioners, we all struggle to keep up with the current literature and continue to learn and refine our skills while managing our practice. Recently, Dr. Scott Dee met with Drs. Teddi Wolff, Mark Hammer, and John Harding to discuss how they manage their time to allow them to maintain a continuing education (CE) program.

What is your current continuing education program?

Mark: When I first got out of school, I went to about five to six different meetings every year but after 2–3 years began to pick and choose because a lot of the information starts to overlap. Now, I attend the AASP Annual Meeting and the Lemna conference, or the IPVS meeting on alternate years. I talk with the faculty at North Carolina State University College of Veterinary Medicine (NCSU-CVM). They are a great resource when I run into a problem. Reviewing papers for journals is an integral part of my CE. Time spent researching problems makes you better able to handle similar problems in the future.

John: I'm in the Minnesota Master's in Swine Science program. That program has propelled my career forward perhaps more than any other single thing I've done. I've made contacts with a number of people across North America. I also attend meetings, but I think continuing education has to be done on a daily basis. When there's a problem, you've got to look it up in the literature on the spot. The real power in CE is learning to work with the written literature that is stashed on the shelves of many libraries across the country. If I had to give swine practitioners one piece of advice about continuing education, I'd say learn how to do a literature review on a computer so that you can find out more about a subject.

Teddi: I have a different perspective on CE, because I ultimately see myself as an information broker or clearinghouse for American Cyanamid's customers. I try to use CE that will help me do the best job I can with that. I just recently completed the Executive Veterinary Program at the University of Illinois, which required a substantial time commitment. The interaction with my classmates was as valuable as anything I learned in a formal presentation. I also attend the key meetings.

How do you manage your time to allow you to keep up with this high degree of CE?

Mark: With a young family, it's extremely difficult. I usually wind up taking a couple of hours in the evening after the children are

in bed to read and review articles. I am close to NCSU-CVM, an hour away, so it's convenient if I've got to research a subject. I try to spend time with my children, and then I make time to read the literature I've gathered.

John: Obviously, family comes first. I make it a point to be home for dinner and don't work until after the sacred hour of 8:00 when the kids go to bed. I do a lot of CE during office hours. I make planned CE time, which I spend looking up articles in the library, but I read them at night after I get home. I find that quite enjoyable — I get a real euphoria out of learning new information — learning new information is what keeps me going.

Teddi: I don't have a family to contend with, but I do have to take care that I balance my own personal needs and social life and not let my job overwhelm me. I work out of my house with my company, which means that I always take my work home — it's always there. I've taken courses to help me manage my time, and the Executive Program also gives you some courses in that. When I fly, I read journals on the flight. I have audio cassette tapes and a Sony Walkman® that I use to review lectures.

How do you read an article to retrieve information effectively and efficiently?

Teddi: I read the abstract first and then I'll go to the discussion/conclusions, and then I'll delve into the actual meat of the article if I want additional information.

John: How I read an article depends on what kind of article it is. In a hard-core research article, I read the materials and methods thoroughly. If I'm just trying to explore a broad-based subject area, I'd look for review articles first and get some of the lay journals. I would also look very quickly at the references section — the references are by far the best part of an article.

Mark: I have a file system to categorize articles into broad areas. Over the years, it has become a good resource for problem solving. I try to read the abstract, introduction, and discussion before I file them. If I don't know a little about an article before it gets filed away, it may be forgotten.

John: As you read more, you get an idea of what authors have decent stuff and what authors have lousy stuff. If you're reading something by one of those questionable authors, you'd better pay more careful attention to the materials and methods section.

What are the journals you most frequently reference that you would recommend to a practitioner?

Mark: I read the *International PigLetter* and *Swine Health and Production*. I also glance at some lay publications, just to know what's being put out in front of the producers.

John: *Swine Health and Production* is the only journal I will pick up and read cover to cover. It is packed full of practical stuff that we can use on a day-to-day basis on the farm.

Teddi: I also find *Journal of Animal Science* to be valuable, as well as *Pig International* and *Feedstuffs*.

To be efficient with CE, do you need to be computer-literate? If so, how did you become computer-literate?

Mark: You've got to know how to operate a computer. It takes a lot of time to learn to efficiently operate a computer system. The only way you're going to learn to use a computer is to sit down in front of one and get screen time. I do take information off of PigCHAMP®'s reports and plot it on graphs to illustrate ideas for producers. A graph is easier to follow and easier to explain than a list of numbers.

John: People in private practice need to go out and buy a computer — that's the only way they are going to do that. You can buy a decent computer for under \$2000 — it's not a big investment anymore.

Teddi: We are just learning how we can use computers to access information. The AVMA's NOAH program has access to research databases, and PIC email has some access to that type of thing.

Scott: I took a Lotus® class at a community college that was about eight sessions in the evenings, but you've still got to sit down and push buttons and experiment.

Do you rely on the industry as a source for information?

Mark: I've asked some people in industry for technical information, and the next thing I see are five technical bulletins from the

company. Technical bulletins have their place, but I like to read scientific papers, preferably those that have been published in refereed journals. I think this information is less biased than some technical bulletins.

John: If someone wants to come in and discuss the merits of a product, I'd expect them to come in with reliable information, not company-oriented research on a company-funded research project. I toss that stuff out. This has filtered out the companies and reps that aren't interested in working that way — the people who don't want to work that way don't come and see me anymore.

Teddi: There is good, scientifically sound company-sponsored research out there, too. Most practitioners can separate the good from the bad pretty quickly. When I get requests from customers for independently generated research, I take the time to provide them with the information if it's available.

John: We have a great relationship with those companies that take the time.

What is the best advice about CE you can give to the young practitioner just starting out?

John: I latched onto a couple of mentors, and they really helped me work through a lot of my problems. The mentors might change over the years as you become targeted in a certain area.

Scott: When I got out of school I put together a schedule of learning. The first year after I graduated, I concentrated on ventilation. The next year, I wanted to work on nutrition. That led nicely into computerization, which led into financial analysis. It kept me from being overwhelmed.



Give instructions this better way

When giving instructions, use positive statements.

Why: Negative statements first require the listener or reader to process what is *not* desired before he or she can consider the alternatives.

Consider this statement: "Don't let others' destructive comments annoy you."

Now compare the difference in this instruction: "Remain in charge of your emotions when other make destructive comments."

Source: Stephen C. Rafe, Rapport Communications, P.O. Box 3119, Warrenton, Virginia 22186, cited in *Communication Briefings*. January 1994.