

Marketing the Healthy Feet Programme to farmers: a vet's guide.

The HFP works to reduce lameness and it gives a return on investment. However, at least initially, that isn't going to get many farmers phoning you up asking you for it. If only life were that simple!

Farmers are busy and they have lots of things pulling on their attention for time. They also have limited resources and many ways they can spend their money. You will need to market the Healthy Feet Programme so that it works for *your clients* and for *you*.

Often, vets are criticised for relying on selling drugs to support their incomes. And for farmers, it is human nature to be attracted to that magic something in a bottle, or in a bag, which might simply fix a problem. Even if that were true, there aren't many drugs you can sell for lameness - there are no vaccines and antibiotics have a very limited role. So, what are you going to do? Ignore the problem? Allow others to sell spurious solutions? Or push yourself to sell the Healthy Feet Programme?

Time

In the first year, the whole time investment for your vet practice is likely to be:

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| 5 x Mobility Scoring sessions: | 10 hours |
| Initial visit (diagnosis): | 3 hours |
| Second visit (risk assessment): | 3 hours |
| Third visit (develop the plan): | 2 hours |
| Follow up: | 1 hour |
| Total: | 19 hours (of which 10 hours will done by a mobility scorer) |

For the farmer, his/her presence will be required for all but the mobility scoring, so 9 hours.

Sounds a lot? It shouldn't do. Compare this to routine fertility visits. If you visit for 45 minutes every two weeks (a medium-sized farm, typical time), over the year you would spend 19 hours on farm. The farmer would spend a heap more, as they have to sort the cows out before you arrive.

Even better, you can normally deliver the Healthy Feet Programme at a time to suit, for example in the late morning or afternoons when time may be less pressured. There are fewer visits, so less travel time compared to doing routine fertility work, i.e. more efficient.

Money

How you charge is down to your practice policy, but let's say Mobility Scorer time is £30/hour and your own professional Mobility Mentor time is £140/hour. Based on this, and the time allocation above, the whole programme in the first year would cost the farmer £1260 in professional fees plus £300 for mobility scoring.

For a 1 million litres/year farm, this equates to 0.156 ppl. Lameness costs the average dairy farm 3.9 ppl. It is unlikely you are going to eliminate lameness in just one year, so you aren't going to recoup all of that for the farmer. But you only need to achieve a 4% lameness reduction for the farmer to break even on your fees.

In fact, a previous study found that farmers averaged 22% lameness reduction in their first year of the Healthy Feet Programme. That would give a return on investment on *your fees* of over 5:1 for even a modest-sized herd. Larger herds (2.25 million litres/year) gives a return of investment of around 12:1 on your fees, and around 6:1 on your fees plus money spent on changes they make. That is in the first year! After that, the return on investment becomes even greater.

The larger the herd, or the greater the reduction in lameness, the greater the return on investment is likely to be.

Value

The value to the farmer is obvious: they will get more money and more time once they engage in the Healthy Feet Programme and see a reduction in lameness.

Lame cows cost money **and** time. Spending less time treating lame cows is one of the first comments that many farmers have made after reducing lameness via the Healthy Feet Programme. None of them comment that the time spent doing the Programme could have been better spent elsewhere. In fact, the initial time investment is often valued for helping the farm team work more effectively together, regardless of any further benefits by reducing lameness.

What is the value to **your** business when you become an active Mobility Mentor?

That question needs some thought.

It may be different for different practices and individuals, but, beyond the initial fees earned, here are some suggestions which have come from earlier Mobility Mentors:

- A better job satisfaction.
- Cementing the client:vet relationship or the client:practice bond.
- Being an impetus for developing a suite of para-professional services, such as mobility scoring, foot trimming, freeze branding, vaccinating, calf weighing etc.
- Involvement in areas of the farm you would not otherwise have had.
- Building confidence in your own ability to deliver advisory services.
- Building farmers' confidence in paying for your advisory services rather than drugs.
- Developing new transferable skills as an adviser/ coach.
- Building a reputation as vets who deliver results and vets who care about what is important to their farmers.
- Ongoing income: mobility scoring does not stop, and nor will your involvement in reducing lameness in subsequent years.
- Initiating something which grows and grows: one farm leads to another. That leads to benchmarking and Healthy Feet discussion groups. That leads to more demand including from farmers who aren't yet your clients.

It may be the case, to a dyed in the wool old-school vet, marketing and delivering the Healthy Feet Programme can be a more difficult way to earn a crust than selling drugs, which walk out of the door with very little effort. However, taking a more long term view and with appreciation of the sustainability of farm veterinary practice, many forwards-looking vets see the value this type of fee-earning work brings to themselves and their practices.

Ideas

No-one is claiming that starting out marketing the Healthy Feet Programme is easy. Learning from other Mobility Mentors can help. Mobility Mentors are encouraged to attend catch-up meetings to share and discuss ideas. There are many examples of how practices have successfully incorporated the Healthy Feet Programme into their work, but all have had to start somewhere.

Some ideas which come from the experiences of other Mobility Mentors include:

1. **Go for low hanging fruit.** Initially, choose keen farmers that you get on well with. Whilst you might have in mind some other farms who you feel would benefit more from tackling lameness, in fact the first few farms you work with may have lameness relatively under control as these are the ones who prioritise it already. Don't beat yourself up if you spend longer than you intend and charge less than you'd like for the first Healthy Feet Programme you deliver. Consider your first couple of farms as a learning exercise for yourself too.
2. **Use your practice newsletter.** Promote yourself as the practice lameness expert. Let everyone know your interest, that you are a Mobility Mentor and that you have had further training in this area. When you have successes, celebrate them and spread the news.
3. **Engage your colleagues.** Let other vets and staff in the practice know you are looking for new Healthy Feet farms. Tell them what you are able to offer. All you require from them is a bit of promotion and the leads - you will do the rest.

4. **Develop a mobility scoring capacity.** Trying to do the mobility scoring yourself is probably the most common stumbling block for mobility mentors. It is better to train someone up. This could be someone who already works for the practice, a local self-employed milk recorder, or other individual. You might already employ para-professionals or “vet techs” in the practice, in which case these are the most logical people to become mobility scorers. Ensure they are trained properly and are members of ROMS (Register of Mobility Scorers). Resist the temptation to use students: having a consistent scorer is more important than using someone cheap.
5. **Consider a monthly fee/ contract.** There are many different ways you can charge for your time. A large one-off lump sum is likely to be unpalatable to many farmers. It may be simplest to spread the work over a few months and charge your time just as you normally would for other types of work. This way, the additional fee on the vets bill is unlikely to be very significant for any individual month. Conversely, other practices charge a monthly contract fee, say £150, to cover the periodic mobility scoring and all vet time on the HFP. This spreads the cost over a whole year. Sometimes, the Healthy Feet Programme is part of a full annual foot care package which includes foot trimming.
6. **Start a Healthy Feet discussion group.** After your first farm, you have the basis of a discussion group. You can invite farmers, with or without a small charge, and do a farm walk to discuss what you have done and what the plan is about. This can be very motivating for the HFP farm as well as show-casing your work. All or some of the farmers may wish to benchmark themselves: and your independent mobility scoring service suddenly takes off. Mobility scoring is the logical beginnings for more farms doing the HFP.
7. **Offer “HFP-lite”.** Some farmers may not want to commit until they have more idea of what will be involved. As a minimum, you’ll need an independent mobility score for the farm, and then a one-hour farm walk or co-trimming session to discuss the issues. Charge for this. Your farmer will soon get a taste and see if it is for them. They might be tempted to try for themselves an intervention that they have had in mind before committing to the full HFP. That’s fine, and you can offer a further independent mobility score to measure their progress. Slowly-slowly catch your monkey! Be aware, however, that the full HFP benefits are very unlikely to be seen by the farmer by opting for this “HFP-lite” option.
8. **Set up a time-lapse camera.** For one vet practice, collecting some time-lapse footage of cow behaviour in their clients’ herds using a GoPro camera was just the hook required to encourage farmers to do the Healthy Feet Programme. It was about piquing the farmers’ interest with some fascinating viewing whilst demonstrating the enthusiasm and expertise of the Mobility Mentor too. There is often more to lameness reduction than farmers first realise (both the *causes* and *effects*) and a little discussion on cow behaviour in a shed can be just what is needed to set something in motion.
9. **Use available funding.** There are sometimes funding initiatives, which may be linked to grants farmers are applying for, to part pay for delivery of the Healthy Feet Programme. Whilst it is best not to get too reliant on these initiatives, if they are easily available it makes sense to make use of them. External funding might just help get you going on your first few programmes. Never become dependent on funding or use lack of funding as an excuse *not* to deliver the Healthy Feet Programme: that way failure lies ahead.
10. **Buddy up.** If there are two trained Mobility Mentors in the practice you are more likely to help and enthuse each other. It makes it easier organising a Healthy Feet discussion group, for example. If that isn’t possible for you, choose a member of support staff who you can partner up with (e.g. a mobility scorer) to become lameness champions together.
11. **Make use of the HFP support.** In addition to having a buddy within your own practice, use the HFP support network offered by AHDB. The Healthy Feet Programme is supported by an experienced and enthusiastic team who will be happy to help you with technical queries, or to use as a sounding board. You can also join regular meetings with like-minded Mobility Mentors to top up your knowledge, confidence and enthusiasm as well as sharing new ideas.