

Choosing a Large Animal Veterinarian

Occasionally, the topic of discussion among ranchers is who they use as their large animal veterinarian and the reasons they like [or dislike] their vet. It's very important for every rancher to have a good vet, one he can depend on to treat his cattle in case of an emergency, is knowledgeable about the treatment of bovine diseases and in the case of Longhorn breeders, a vet who is not afraid of 'horns'. I am fortunate to have several very good large animal veterinarians in my area and I never have a problem having my cattle treated or getting answers to my questions. I sat down with one of them a few weeks ago and asked a couple of questions about how to go about 'choosing a vet' and thought perhaps our new breeders might find his answers helpful.

Why do most of your new clients choose you instead of another vet? How do they find your clinic?

The majority of my new clients come from recommendations by their friends or family members. Word of mouth references are the best source of gaining new customers since current customers usually won't recommend their vet to someone else if they are unsatisfied with the service they are getting. Newcomers to a community can usually find veterinarians listed in the Yellow Pages and if none are listed, the Chamber of Commerce, the local auction barn, feed suppliers and other ranchers are also good sources when trying to locate a veterinarian. Every livestock owner knows of a large animal vet, so check with other ranchers in your area to ask who they use. We do get 'walk-in' clients once in a while, but those are usually people who are traveling with their pets and need emergency care or supplies.

Do clients ever ask to see a veterinarian's credentials?

It could happen, but in the over 22 years that I've been practicing, I've never had a single person ask to see my license or credentials. State law requires that a veterinarian displays his license so all his clients can easily see it. If anyone wants to verify a license they can check with their state Board of Veterinary Medical Examiners and obtain the information on any veterinarian licensed in that state.

What should a cattle owner ask a vet in order to find out if he's the right vet to use?

If the client has a choice of large animal vets to use in his area he should ask each one a few general questions like:

- 1) Are you a large animal vet?
- 2) What is the cost for vaccinating livestock and is there a discount for the treatment or vaccination of multiple animals?

Some vets charge less for palpating more than one cow and Bangs vaccinating more than one heifer.

3) Will the vet make 'house calls' to your ranch or home to exam or treat your animals and what is his trip charge? What is the cost per hour for an additional time spent at your ranch? Is there an extra charge if he has to bring an assistant along to help him?

4) Is the vet available 24/7 and if not, is there another vet available that will take emergency cases?

5) Does the vet have a large animal boarding facility if cattle need to be kept overnight or for several days? What is the cost for boarding?

6) How experienced are the vet technicians or assistants?

7) What do tests cost and are they done in-house. If not, how long does it take to get the results back if they're sent off to an independent lab?

8) Ask about the clinic equipment – is there an X-ray and ultrasound machine; can the unloading chute and working area accommodate all breeds of cattle, especially those with horns; where are surgeries done?

What is the No. 1 question your clients ask you?

Without a doubt, the question we are asked the most is what our fees are for our services and supplies. Large animal vets deal with ranchers and farmers and many times retired people on a limited income. Treatment costs are a very important factor in choosing a vet, especially if you have a lot of pets or livestock. Asking the vet what his charges are upfront is a good idea.

Do most ranchers administer vaccines and wormers to their cattle or do they bring them to your clinic and have you perform those procedures?

The majority of ranchers work their

own cattle, but many of our clients don't have the proper pens or facilities to restrain their cattle or horses while working them, so they bring their livestock to our clinic. We have the necessary set up so it's safer and easier if those procedures are done here. Usually new cattle or horse owners and those who lack the experience needed to work their livestock or are physically incapable of doing so, ask us to make 'house calls' to work their livestock for them.

What does a vet request of his clients?

First and foremost on our list is for clients to make an appointment before bringing their pets or livestock to the clinic. So many times, we're in the middle of surgery or have several trailers full of cattle lined up to work and someone will drive up without an appointment and expect us to 'work them in' between appointments. However, emergency cases are a different story; we'll see them first regardless of who is waiting to be treated.

While we're on the subject of appointments, being on time for those appointments is another thing we'd ask our clients to do. Our schedule on busy days sometimes doesn't allow us to wait for a client to show up, especially if we're planning on leaving the clinic to go work cattle on a ranch or farm. If they call ahead and say they're going to be late, we're OK with that since we can see other 'patients' before them or re-schedule that appointment if necessary.

The second most important thing would be to ask clients to pay for the service the vet has performed or for veterinary supplies they are given. So many people think that it's OK for them to request that their bill be mailed to them later on. Veterinarian clinics have overhead costs same as other businesses, but all too often we're told by the client 'send me the bill' and they walk out the door.