

Reading *the signs*

Dutch vet, Joep Driessen lives and breathes cows and has used his passion and understanding of bovine behaviour to benefit animals and farmers across the globe, as Mole CountryStores magazine finds out

Joep Driessen is like the horse whisperer of the cow world, although he prefers to call himself a 'cow listener.' "I'm a cow listener and a vet. I read a cow's body language and they tell me how they are feeling and how good their environment is," he says.

It's this ability to read cow signals and translate them into practical messages to help farmers manage their cows better, that has brought Joep global success. By working with the best farmers and research centres in the world, he has created the CowSignals training company which has educated around 30,000 farmers and advisors on the hows and whys of listening to what cows are telling them.

The CowSignals concept is based around; "Look, Think and Act" and is linked to the CowSignals diamond which Joep developed with fellow Dutch vet and business partner, Jan Hulsen.

This diamond encourages the farmer to "Look" at what the cows are telling them through their behaviour and then "Think" about what the likely causes are.

COWSIGNALS CONCEPT

In much of the UK and the world, cows have to be housed for some or all of the year due to poor weather. Housing enables greater control of the cow's environment and feeding. However, when housed, it's crucial that cows are able to express their natural behaviour. The CowSignals concept stems around ensuring cows are able to express the "six freedoms" of the pasture when they are housed inside. This includes access to feed, water, light, space and quality air, along with the right environment to rest. The farmer should then "Act" to address anything that inhibits these areas.

Joep says although all stockman have an understanding of cow behaviour, all too often, day to day management can make them go 'blind' to what's around them. It's a case of not being able to see the woods for the trees.



He explains: "Farmers don't see enough. Company blindness happens very easily. Cow signals breaks through this tunnel vision so they are inspired to keep looking."

It was after spending two years as a practicing vet in Holland that Joep decided he wanted to do something to help farmers prevent cow health problems on farm. He started by setting up VetVice - a vet consultancy business that would export Dutch advice around the world. Then in 1999 he launched the CowSignals training company with Jan to help farmers improve cow health on farm.

"There was a lack of practical knowledge on farms and many farmers didn't realise it was so bad," Jan explains.

STANDING BACK

As part of the training days, farmers are encouraged to stand back and look at animals. For example, ideally a cow should lie down for 12-14 hours a day and 90% of cows in the resting area should be lying in the beds at one time. If a cow is not eating, lying down or drinking the question is why?

Joep says: "Your standing cow is your best management advisor. She will tell you what is wrong - Cows have no time to stand around."

If cows are standing, farmers should ask themselves: Is there enough feed space? Are cow cubicle beds comfortable and set up to the right dimensions for the size of the cows? Are there enough access points in the shed to enable less dominant cows to escape bully cows?

Joep says the ultimate aim is to help farmers produce healthy, happy cows that live a long life in the dairy herd. By ensuring that a farm is set up to cater for a cow's needs, there is the potential to do just that. This will not only help farmers achieve their ultimate aim of maximising animal welfare, but also reduce costs and environmental impact.



"Your standing cow is your best management advisor. She will tell you what is wrong"

The VetVice team now includes four people: Jan manages the CowSignal books, along with research and development; Joep owns and runs the CowSignals training company; and two other vets offer advice on cow building design.

By travelling the world, Joep and Jan are continuously developing the CowSignals messages, by drawing on what the best farmers are doing. For example, in his experience, the most successful farmers are paying close attention to detail at calving.

PAMPERING COWS

Like in humans, giving birth is a particularly stressful time for cows. As such, making sure they are as

comfortable as possible is vital. Joep says the best farms around the world are keeping cows on deep bed straw yards in the run up to calving and then keeping cows in a "pamper pen". The newborn calf is then placed in front of the mother in a clean "cuddle box." Hay or silage is put on top of the calf to encourage the mother to lick the calf and eat food straight away.

"If you get the cow eating straight after calving, you get her off to the right start by maximising dry matter intakes at this critical time. This means you help minimise the risk of health problems after calving and everything gets better," Joep says.

By having a cow in a "pamper pen" her colostrum can be collected and fed to her calf. This colostrum is vital as it includes nutrients and essential immunoglobulins which provide the calf with defence against disease. Feeding the colostrum to the calf by hand ensures the calf gets exactly what it needs, which is hard to guarantee when it is left to suckle its mother.

Joep explains: "Colostrum quality is highest in the first six hours after calving. The calf also loses 50% of the capacity to absorb colostrum within six hours so getting it into the calf quickly is crucial."

GLOBAL SUCCESS

Having hosted the first CowSignals workshop for farmers in 2000 and published the first book in 2003, the company has now trained tens of thousands of farmers and advisors across 66 countries. There are now 350 certified CowSignals trainers in 45 countries from the UK to Kenya, China and Chile. This includes nine within the Mole Valley Farmers team.

The CowSignals book is now produced in 33 languages, with 10 books in the range, including specific topics such as HoofSignals, FeedingSignals and Fertility. In the next five years, the aim is to bring the total number of trainers to 3,000 by making the most of video learning to upscale faster.

The CowSignals principles have also been used to influence government policy in several countries including Australia and Holland. In Holland, 30% of the price of a new cow building is paid for by the government if farmers adhere to environmental and health and welfare standards designed using the CowSignals concept.

Joep says: "Farmers are always surprised that it's so easy to improve things. It's like giving farmers a new pair of eyes and telling them how to do it better."

"My aim is to have no more lame cows and for cows to be able to rest, eat and calve quietly. I want a bed for every cow, a stress free calving line and one feed space per cow. It's very simple and the cow deserves it."

Find out more at www.cowsignals.com

