

COW PSYCHOLOGY

Given my reputation of writing unusual and thought-provoking stories on farming I thought some words on cow psychology would definitely not go astray.

The main reason for this story is really about cow behaviour and how it differs from humans. You often hear fishermen saying: "If you want to catch fish then you need to think like a fish." Maybe, therefore, if we want to understand cows, we need to think like them.

The other reason for this story is that it seems that the cow is just another disposable unit in the business. Often very little thought is given to understanding her and working with her rather than against her. The humble cow is a docile and slow-moving animal. She really dislikes quick movements and pressure around her. Getting her up the race to the milking shed must be a slow and pleasant process. The herd likes to spread out along the race and does not like being pushed hard up against their sisters, so to speak. Being made to run out of the paddock and rushed down the race is not desirable for them at all. This situation will upset the cow, and is therefore likely to affect her milk let-down.

The cowshed yard is another area where we need to think like a cow. I once met a young Australian agricultural graduate who was sent to New Zealand to study square yards verses round yards in our dairy industry here. He sat up on the cow shed roof and watched the cows travelling into the cow shed. He assured me, beyond reasonable doubt, that all of his study showed that a square yard was better than a round one. This article is not about differing yards for the farmer. It is about the cow's ease of access to the bail and cow flow into and out of the shed. After speaking to him, needless to say, I changed my own cow shed yard from a round to a square one, in the 1980's, with outstanding results. We changed because the yard worked so well and there was very little stress. I accept we only milked 170 cows compared to some of the large herds that are milked today.

We actually used to have competitions among the milkers to see who could milk the cows with the least number of dung in the pit and the yard.

The Crafer brothers were instigators of the large square yards emptying into either herringbones or rotary sheds. The Australian guy also explained that in a circular yard the cow is confused. She is being turned, squashed and never sure which way to go until she sees the entrance to the milking area. Conversely, in the square yard

the cow just keeps walking forward through the barn and out. She never changes direction. This is a logical order.

A farming client of mine was recently having trouble with his cows going into their herringbone shed to be milked. A quick observation by the writer revealed:

- The bale extended into the yard with no roof over it
- The yard was off-centre and the cows were confused
- There was no lead in rail to the pit
- There was no pick up gate for the main circular gate
- The cows could see down into the milk room area
- The variable speed vacuum pump was blaring.

I wrote a report to this client. To his credit he rectified all problem areas and all is now well. There was just too much going on for the cows before they entered the shed. There was a change of light, no guides, strange noises, poor yard configuration and so on. The cows simply did not like it. They got confused and disorientated, and voted with their hooves. When this is all happening they will most probably refuse to go into the milking area.

SO:

- The milking shed should be quiet and steady (not rushed), consistent and relaxed. This will allow the cow to move quietly into the bale and out again. It will encourage her to release plenty of oxytocin from the base of her pituitary gland to give full and free milk let-down for you to harvest
- Drafting cows can be a problem particularly at the head of the herringbone cow shed. People jumping out of the pit quickly to draft cows can cause cows to fall. They usually fall over on their side or smash their mouths on the concrete and so on. It is most unpleasant for us, so imagine how it hurts the cow; and does she want to come in for the next milking?
- Spend some time and a little money to make up a drafting gate that can be operated from the pit with a string. Who cares if you draft up a few extra cows that do not belong in the AB mob?
- When you are drafting animals in yards make sure you move slowly. Do not tear around. Cows get upset with sudden movement and they will panic. This can cause various accidents, usually with disastrous results and not just to the cows
- Watch out for cows screwing their feet on the concrete. Pushing them too fast into the milking area in either a herringbone or rotary shed can be a problem. Reversing out of a rotary and then turning to go back down to the

paddock can also cause foot problems. Would some rubber matting help here?

Then of course there is calving and breaking in the heifers.

- Are you 'breaking them in' and are you encouraging them to come into and out of the shed quietly? There is a big difference in approach here
- Knocking a newly-calved heifer around in the bail will most likely make her jumpy and grumpy for much if not all of her life
- Handling cows and heifers quietly at calving, when they are under the highest stress in their lives, is absolutely essential
- When getting the cows and heifers in after calving, use the calves to encourage them up to the cowshed rather than getting into heavy drafting and forcing them to do things they do not want to do
- Try to use the cow's natural flow rather than forcing her against her natural inclination.

IN SUMMARY:

- We need to think like a cow
- We need to think about how we can manage the cow better within her temperament and the way she moves
- We need to work with her natural flow, not against it
- We need to look after her well-being
- Cow shed design needs to include the cow's ideas
- Cow psychology does mean more thought and more understanding of the way the cow moves, what she accepts and may be how she thinks.
- As my daughter once said: "Maybe we should be introducing more integrity into the area of the cow"
- Maybe this article should be called 'Cowtegrity'.

These are the opinions of Don Fraser of Fraser Farm Finance. Any decisions made should not be based on this article alone, and appropriate professional assistance should be sought.

Don Fraser is the Principal of Fraser Farm Finance and a consultant to the Farming Industry.

Contact him on 0800 777 675 or 021 777 675.