Nutrition professionals

The science of nutrition is rapidly evolving, and animal production is becoming integrated and global in scope. As animal science professionals working in nutrition, it is more critical than ever to make sure professional networks fully appreciate the consequences of both ethical ignorance and ethical laxity.

By DWAIN BUNTING*

Some years ago, while I was Chairman of the American Registry of Professional Animal Scientists (ARPAS) Ethics Committee, I authored a paper for Feedstuffs (Feb. 20, 2000) about professional ethics and the role of organizations such as ARPAS in professional development and the general importance of cultivating high ethical standards.

No doubt, there is universal agreement that it is important to hold high ethical standards; however, when it comes down to the details of conducting business, it quickly becomes obvious that there is apparent flexibility in how some individuals or organizations define what is ethical.

Business or professional ethics are not complicated. Ethics 101 dictates that we follow the "golden rule" and simply treat our customers, suppliers and industry colleagues as we would like to be treated if our circumstances were reversed.

However, professional ethics, as applied in the business setting, are a continuous work in progress. As professionals, we have to realize that it is not enough to simply want to do the right thing; we also have to know what the right thing is in the context of good science and good business practice.

The science of nutrition is rapidly evolving, and animal production is becoming integrated and global in scope. As animal science professionals working in nutrition, it is more critical than ever to make sure we, our co-workers or colleagues and everyone within our professional networks appreciate the sometimes extended consequences to our industry of both ignorance and ethical laxity.

This article mainly focuses on the sales and application of specialty ingredients as to illustrate why ethical mentoring is critical, particularly for less-experienced colleagues.

Ethical laxity

The feed industry has faced an extremely competitive and extremely high feed input costs that has put tremendous pressure on the entire supply chain. Feed manufacturers, ingredient suppliers and consulting groups are doing everything they can to stay competitive, including re-evaluating formulas and feeding programs and shopping around for alternative ingredients and suppliers.

In addition, most are attempting to handle more business with fewer employees. In this kind environment, we probably expect to see a slight uptick in instances of tangible misrepresentation of nutritional products and programs and some questionable types of corner-cutting.

Clearly, difficult economic conditions will unmask individuals with bad character and organizations with a culture of ethical laxity. However, most of us are highly ethical, and most of our employers actively promote high ethical standards. As such, it is hard for most of us to imagine that we would ever find ourselves (or one of our colleagues or peers) involved in an activity that might be viewed as highly unethical.

Why, then, does it seem that clear ethical lapses have become more prevalent in some segments of the business? Well-established principles of psychology tell us that the road to highly unethical behavior is paved with much smaller instances of "harmless" non-disclosure or corner-cutting. As each of these lesser ethical dilemmas is self-justified or rationalized, it becomes easier and easier to progress to slightly more questionable practices. With time, we can become ethically blind to certain types of rule bending.

Whether a practice is defined as clearly unethical or simply ethically dubious often depends on whether one is a disinterested observer or emotionally involved. Egregiously unethical practices do not turn up that often in our business, mainly because these practices are usually better concealed and sometimes are only quasi-legal.

That said, lesser instances of violating the golden rule, i.e., business and professional practices that would probably pass a disclosure test for fairness, clearly seem to become more common. It appears that some geographic areas in particular are experiencing greater incidences of "ethical carelessness." By that I mean that the pressures of hyper-competitive markets and, perhaps, a lack of collective professionalism in the geography have blinded some individuals and groups to the point that they no longer see, in their standard way of conducting business, ethical dilemmas that would clearly be seen as objectionable by disinterested parties upon full disclosure.

Ethical blurring

The state-of-the-art application of technical nutrition has become highly technical. We now have the additional program goals of fine-tuning immunity, improving gut function, countering mycotoxins and optimizing many other aspects of animal health.

In recent years, the opportunities created by the rapidly evolving field of nutrition and health have ushered into the market many new ingredient suppliers, a vast array of new specialty ingredients (additives) and new claims for old ingredients. Not surprisingly, the specialty ingredient market has become competitive to the point of being almost cutthroat.

Many specialty ingredients are heavily promoted and carry numerous claims of explicit or implied health and performance benefits that often seem to overlap with many other products in the market. This has created a great deal of technical "noise" in the market relative to the best strategies for accomplishing various nutritional goals.

Many feed sales organizations have come to rely heavily on specialty ingredients both to differentiate their feeding programs and for margin generation. Thus, for many sales groups, a major component of the competitiveness and profitability of their feeding programs hinges on their ability to position and sell specialty ingredients that are often highly technical in nature.

Unfortunately, one does not have to spend that much time in the field to appreciate that the technical capability of many people involved in the sales process may not be adequate enough to convey the technical sophistication of some of the specialty ingredients they are trying to promote, both separately and within their programs.

The question becomes: How often are these products misrepresented simply because those involved in the sales process do not fully grasp the technical background of the products and how they relate to competing products? Perhaps more importantly, if one does not appreciate the nuances of field application of a class of ostensibly similar products, it becomes much easier to rationalize undisclosed product substitutions, dose reductions or other questionable practices. After all, why bother disclosing an action one views as harmless?

Scrutinizing practices

With the golden rule as a guide, determining whether a certain practice is unquestionably ethical is as easy as answering this simple disclosure test: "If I fully disclosed the technical and business background surrounding this practice to all affected parties, how would I feel if I were in their position?"

Many of us probably take for granted that most people in our industry understand culture and what is considered fair in the manufacturing and sales of feed products and in providing nutritional services. However, is this really true, particularly with regard to the usage of specialty ingredients in the more technical applications of nutrition?

Listed are a few practices that are, unfortunately, not completely uncommon in some segments of our industry. As professionals, we all have a responsibility to make sure that our less-experienced colleagues understand that these and other conceptually similar practices should be scrutinized closely:

* Use caution when window dressing products and programs. Although this practice probably never rises to the level of being wholly acceptable, it is a common tool for maintaining the proprietary nature of various nutritional strategies. The ethicality of the practice critically depends on the implicit or explicit claims being made.

A simple thumb rule for the ethicality of window dressing includes asking: Would either an ingredient's present or formula or on the label or one of the ingredient product claims create logical expectations by an end user for related benefits? For example, if a claim is made for the metabolic effects known to be caused by a therapeutic amount of a certain vitamin, then that vitamin should be included in the formula at a level that will yield the range established by known science. Similarly, if chelated minerals are listed as ingredients, then their levels of inclusion should be consistent with what is scientifically accepted for improving various aspects of animal health.

Scrutinize departures from recommended feeding rates. Although technical ignorance is sometimes to blame, there is also a great deal of ethical blindness in how the recommended feeding rates are handled for many specialty ingredients. Depending on the technical skill and experience of those providing the nutritional service, there will always be a discretionary aspect to modifying the feeding rates of non-adding ingredients either above or below recommended levels.

Far too often, however, feeding rates are freely rationalized to meet cost and other competitive objectives. As an ethical starting point, it must be assumed that the client understands that the particular feeding program is receiving the recommended level of the ingredient. Although convincing the client of the perhaps questionable benefits of a feeding rate that is outside the

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biofuels Buzz

Biodiesel plant
The Tri-City Energy glycerin and biodiesel plant in Keokuk, Iowa, will be brought back on line after being idle for nearly three years. In January, Enerva Advisors purchased the 5 million gal.-per-year plant. The adjacent glycerin purification facility inacia runs on a million gal. per year at full capacity and should be running by March. The company has begun retrofeting the facility to use more than just soybean oil for processing.

Alabama plant bought
Canadian-based Clean Power Concepts Inc. said it has executed a letter of intent to acquire the assets of Alabama Bio Energy LLC and its subsidiary Eagle Bio Diesel Inc. of Bridgeport, Ala. Alabama Bio Energy founder and chief executive officer Dr. William J. Freeman has agreed to join the board of directors of Clean Power Concepts and become president of its General Bio Health division.

The Bridgeport facility has an annual production capacity of 100 million liters of biodiesel from a variety of feedstocks. The closing date is set for March 15.

Biomass bales
Farmers are now delivering bio- mass bales to 22-acre storage site in Emmetsburg, Iowa, the future home of the company's 25 million gal.-per-year cellulosic etha- nol plant dubbed Project LIBERTY. Area farmers harvested 56,000 tons of corn cobs, leaves, husks and some stalks last fall but had been waiting to deliver the biomass to POET while guidelines for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Biomass Crop Assistance Program were final- ized. The farmers began completing the application process on Jan. 26 and started delivering bales soon after that. The program provides matching funds of up to $435 per ton to an individuated farmer for a maximum of two years and is meant to offset start-up costs for developing the feedstock market for cellulosic ethanol and alterna- tive energy endeavors.

The 2011 deadline for bales is used primarily to test procedures for delivery, receiving, quality assurance, storage and handling at the stackyard. Once operational, Project LIBERTY will use about 300,000 tons of biomass annually to produce ethanol.

Biofuel genetic road map
The first rough draft of a "genetic road map" of prairie cordgrass is giving scientists an inside look at the genes of a biomass crop that may help produce the next generation of biofuels. South Dakota State University plant geneticist Jose Gonzalez said the study already has produced the species’ "transcrip- tome," which is somewhat like a map in that it records the genes the plant uses to reach certain goals.

A transcriptome is the small por- tion of the DNA of an organism that is transcribed into molecules of RNA, enabling the organism to carry out instructions about building and maintaining cells. Scientists can use those instructions to determine what particular DNA sequences do. Gonzalez said the plant's transcriptome enables plant breed- ers to use marker-assisted selection techniques to introduce beneficial traits.

In a September 2010 article in the Plant Genome, Gonzalez and his col- leagues discussed one of the first studies of the transcriptome of prai- rie cordgrass, which yields well in which we practice nutrition today. Unfortunately, most feed sales professionals and ingredient suppliers have very limited formal training programs. In addition, management structure is often very flat, territories are very large and supervision is limited time and resources to oversee the training and development of their reports. As many feed sales organizations are beginning to discover, it is becoming more difficult to walk around this weakness by simply hiring experienced people.

Arguably, the North American feed industry is beginning a slow transition to a younger workforce. As these less-experienced professionals move into different segments of the industry, it is critical that we not lose sight of the importance of ethics coaching in the training and development of their reports. Because of the contextual nature, ethics make for a poor pro- spective subject. One’s framework for ethical decision-making is going to develop almost entirely by observing the culture of one’s company and learning from one’s peer network. As experienced nutrition professionals who understand the culture of our own companies and the ethical expectations of the industry, we have an obligation to lead by example and to stay actively engaged in mentoring our colleagues relative to the more nuanced aspects of ethical behavior.

Extended consequences
It is not enough to simply ensure that our business and professional activities will stand up to ethical scrutiny if fully disclosed. We must also make sure that we conduct our business with a level of professionalism and transparency that prevents all of our activities from even appearing to be ethically questionable. Rarely are the consequences of negatively viewed professional and business activities limited to just the offending individual. More egregious activities do more than just damage a suppliers’ organization’s credibility with its customer base; such activities may also undermine the trust of key suppliers and parties that are critical to that group’s business success. Specialty ingredient suppliers in particular are usually heavily invested in the development and promotion of their products. Technical misrepresentation or misrepresentation of the products undermines the credibility of both the product and the company and may cause customers to shun the credibility of whole classes of similar technical products.

In the end, the North American feed business is small and close knit, and the ethical breaches of a single group or individual often reflect on whole segments of the industry.

Most of our plan on working in the industry for a long time. As professionals, it is critical to make sure that we, our company colleagues and everyone within our professional organizations are aware of the sometimes extended consequences to our industry of both technical ignorance and ethical laxity.

Ag needs more efficient disease screening tools
The National Center for Foreign Animal & Zoonotic Disease Defense (FAZD Center) has released a new report that highlights the screen- ing tools the U.S. will need to more quickly and efficiently detect highly contagious diseases in its livestock, milk and other agricultural products. The report resulted from the Agricul- tural Screening Crop Biofuels Workshop held in November in Washington, D.C. The FAZD Center and the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service sponsored the workshop, which at- tracted 40 representatives from DHS, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, major research universities, animal disease diagnostic laboratories and agricultural industry associations.


FAZD Center director Tammy R. Beckmann said the ability to screen the nation’s agricultural products for infectious diseases while enabling agricultural industries to maintain business continuity remains among the major challenges for homeland security research.

“This report is an important step,” Beckmann said. “It is needed to develop practical but effective tools that meet the needs identified in the report.”

Beckmann expects that the “report’s findings will guide future discussions about screening tools for other high-priority diseases.”

In addition, workshop participants were asked to emphasize technolo- gies that would minimize the disruption of daily business practices as well as to prioritize technologies that could improve national security plus industry resiliency and continuity.

Among the report’s findings, experts concluded that the U.S. should:

• Enhance current diagnostic tests to include a wider range of samples, species and diseases.
• Establish procedures to pool mul- tiple sample types.
• Improve diagnostic tests to more rapidly and accurately identify ani- mals that are free of disease.
• Create rapid tests that may be quickly differentiate between infected and vaccinated animals.
• Invest in detection tests that will de- liver on-site results at the farm or ranch with greater speed and accuracy.

Locally at Iowa State University, the FAZD Center focuses on research, education and outreach to prevent, detect, mitigate and recover from diseases that affect the livestock industry — foreign, emerging or zoonotic — that may be introduced naturally or intentionally.

Training, mentoring
Ethical behavior is a learned skill. If feed business is to be conducted according to the golden rule, then professionals and ingredient suppliers to work in the have be to taught the nutritional value of the feed business in the context of the technical manner in which we practice nutrition today. Unfortunately, most feed sales professionals and ingredient suppliers have very limited formal training programs. In addition, management structure is often very flat, territories are very large and supervision is limited time and resources to oversee the training and development of their reports. As many feed sales organizations are beginning to discover, it is becoming more difficult to walk around this weakness by simply hiring experienced people.

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