

What is CowSignals?

All dairy farmers suffer to some degree from "owneritis": they don't see their own management mistakes anymore. A level of blindness occurs. It happens in any industry, and vets are no different: how much time is spent treating problems rather than preventing? I think everybody is trying to do things right, but are we doing the right things?

For example, how often do we try to solve the wrong problems? Perhaps you can envisage the case of a farm changing the ration over and over until they realise that the nutritional problem basically comes from poor access to feed due to small passageways, aggravated by massive hierarchial stress (and sorting) due to limited availability of feed.

The CowSignals approach looks for the *secrets of success* in dairy farming. Cows need a high amount of Feed, Water, Light, Air, Space and Rest. If you give it to them, they have little reason to become ill anymore and are strong, happy, healthy cows.



On every dairy in the world, one of these points will be the most critical for cow health and welfare - and for the farmer's income. Often, 3 or 4 of these items can be improved.

Strong, healthy, happy cows:

- lie down for ≥ 12 hrs/day in comfy beds
- have one feed space and lying space each
- enjoy 16 hours light, and 8 hours dark
- stay cool! between 5 and 15 °C
- have milking times ≤ 2 hrs/day
- have access to tasty feed and water 24 hrs/day

...and if they have "special needs", they will be on super soft, super spacey beds, with minimal stress and extra special care!

Investment in animal welfare pays back. Dairy farmers everywhere say one thing: I have no time and I have no money. So do those things that bring you time and money: for example, one hour extra lying time gives you one extra litre of milk per cow per day. Healthy cows save a lot of time and money.

Check for success factors...

Too often we do not see the big picture, or we focus too much on details. Dairy farming is about cows and 80% of our success comes from 20% of our efforts. This 20% is about meeting the basic needs of the cows. The cows will tell us whether we are doing this well or not, but first we must improve our skills at detecting their "signals". CowSignals training helps first in powers of observation, then in thinking about the causes of what we see, and finally what we can do about it. It's the Look, Think, Act principle.

Owen Atkinson, vet and CowSignals trainer.