

ProAgria CowCompass – a novel advisory service pattern for Finnish dairy farms



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Objectives:

In 2012, ProAgria launched a novel advisory service pattern called CowCompass. ProAgria is a Finnish agricultural advisory organisation providing services in milk recording and animal feeding. After this launch, a customer survey was conducted to find out about the following objectives:

- Which changes have our customers noticed?
- Are they satisfied?
- What services do they value most?

Introduction:

With the new CowCompass service pattern, ProAgria wants to improve performance and customer satisfaction. The methods used include:

- Thorough preparation for farm visits and customer meetings.
- Effective and short farm visits, no more than 2 hours: increased weight on on-farm observations, data analysis, practical action proposals, future plans.
- Effective co-operation within ProAgria (with advisors in arable farming and economy).
- Frequent and diverse communication with the milk producer.
- A new web-based application named CowCompass to estimate the feeding, formulate a new diet and predict milk yield.

Materials and methods:

The new CowCompass optimises cattle diets based on present feeding, milk and feed prices and the farmer's business targets. The target group of this survey were the customers who had received at least one CowCompass report during 2012, whether it was made by an advisor or by the farmer. There was over 5,000 such customers but the survey was sent only to those whose e-mail addresses were known.

- A web-based customer survey in November 2012.
- The survey link was sent to 2,900 customers.
- The total number of answers was 429. The response rate was 15 %.

Table 1. The use of CowCompass in 2012. The application was launched autumn 2011.

Cow Compass tool	Customers, at least one calculation or report	Calculations total	Calculations/customer, in average
Feeding monitor	5 821	30 225	5,2
Feeding plan	5 214	14 442	2,8
<i>ProAgria milk recording customer herds totalled 6 776 which is about 70 % of all Finnish herds.</i>			

Results:

Approximately 60 % of all Finnish dairy farms and 80 % of ProAgria customer dairies are using the CowCompass tool for feeding management. In some ProAgria Centres (about 60 % of customers) the CowCompass service pattern was launched late in 2011 and the rest of ProAgria Centres changed their services in the autumn of 2012.

- Generally around 80 % of the farmers are satisfied with the new service pattern in feeding management and the new reports from CowCompass tools.
- Customers who had more experience about CowCompass were more satisfied than customers who were just initiated in the new service pattern.
- The analysis of feeding management and herd observations made by the advisors were the service parts most valued by the customer.
- They appreciate an integral overview on the farm.
- Merely a half of the customers reported having utilised the economic features of the new feeding plans (e.g. differences in milk profits between different diets).
- Small farms were more satisfied with the service than bigger ones. Farms with TMR/PMR have not experienced benefits as much as the farms where feeds are given separately.

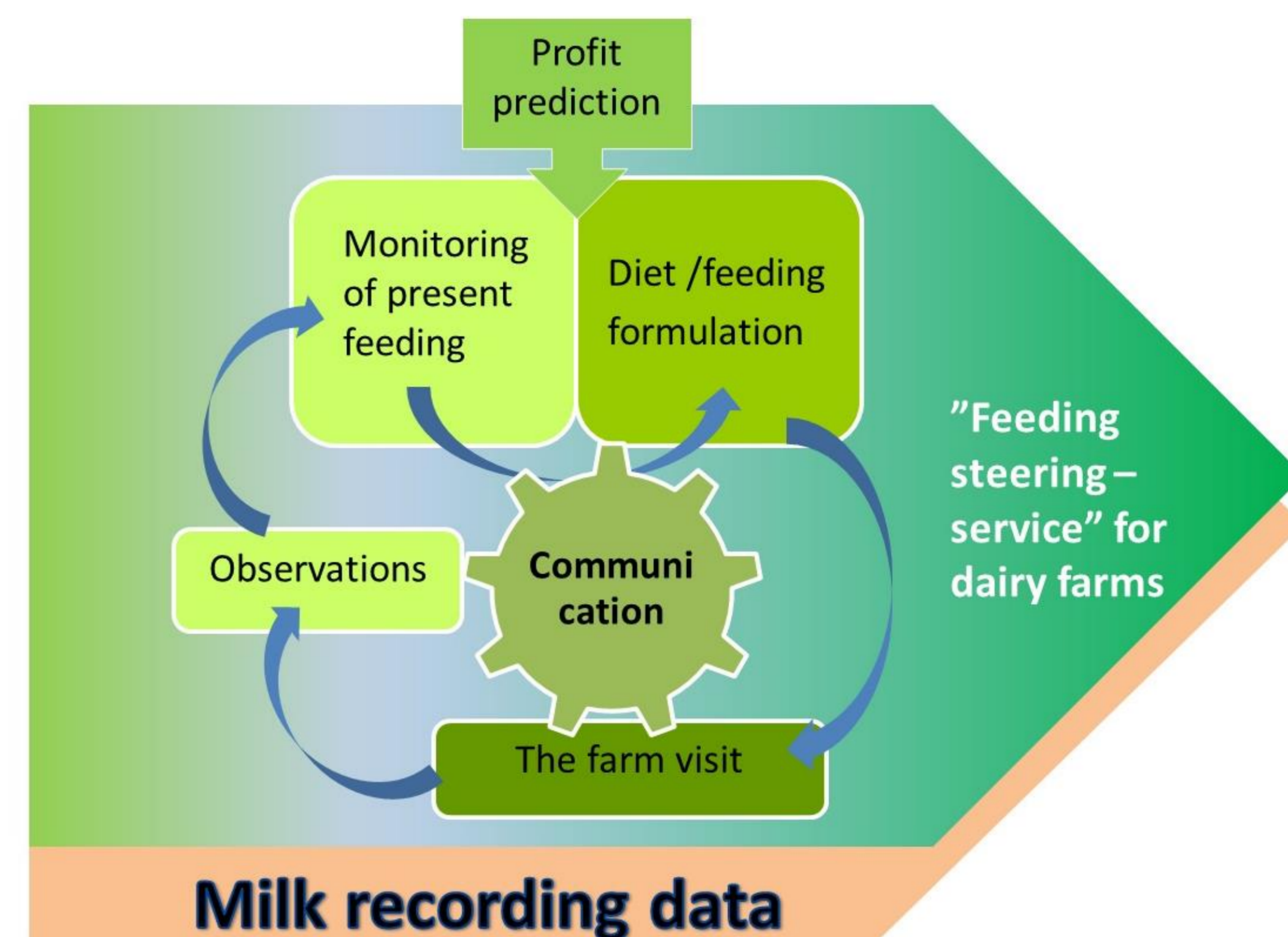
Table 2. The importance of different. The scale is 1-5; 1 = "is not important at all", 5 = "is very important".

	Small farms (< 35 cows)	Big farms (> 50 cows)	Low yielding herds (< 8 500 kg)	High yielding herds (>10000 kg)	All in average
<i>The number of answers</i>	221	93	91	52	429
CowCompass feeding plans and calculations	4,31	4,40	4,34	4,24	4,32
Feeding knowledge of the advisor	4,58	4,65	4,43	4,56	4,56
Ideas and suggestions of the advisor	4,34	4,34	4,19	4,34	4,31
Diet formulation under price changes	4,16	4,12	4,10	3,96	4,11
Integral overview on the farm	4,27	4,37	4,26	4,22	4,29
Farm visits	4,08	3,87	3,94	3,92	3,99
Barn visits	3,82	3,96	3,70	3,74	3,83
The activity of communication	4,0	4,18	3,93	3,96	4,02

Conclusions:

The customer survey gives us many improvement targets.

- Advisors and customers should be more efficiently segmented which requires improvements also on the operational level.
- A specific effort must be made to create more added value through advisory service to farms with TMR/PMR feeding.
- CowCompass tools will be developed also for plant and economy sectors, which allows more efficient co-operation between different sectors of farm advisory work.
- Advisors need to concentrate on:
 - communication skills
 - monitoring results and future plans
 - on-farm observations e.g. feeding routines and conditions, body condition scoring etc.
- A new survey is needed when the advisors and customers gain more CowCompass experience.



The Feed steering process begins by estimating present feeding which is used as the basis of the new diet formulation. On-farm observations and communication between the customer and the advisor are crucial for its success.

Table 3. Customer satisfaction for different parts of ProAgria service. The scale is 1-5; 1 = "I totally disagree", 5 = "I totally agree".

	Customers with more CowCompass experience	Customers with less CowCompass experience	All answers
<i>The number of answers</i>	211	201	429
CowCompass feeding plans and calculations satisfy my needs	3,72	3,59	3,66
Feeding knowledge of the advisor is good	3,90	3,92	3,92
Ideas and suggestions of the barn visits are useful	3,54	3,45	3,51
Farm entities are taken well into consideration	3,65	3,52	3,59
Advising has helped me to find the most profitable alternative	3,34	3,08	3,22
My advisor contacts me actively	3,48	3,22	3,36
I am satisfied with the ProAgria advising services	3,67	3,55	3,61

The aim of CowCompass is to be an effective tool in advising feeding management on dairy farms and to create added value to the customer while considering farm business as one whole.