

THE DEER VETERINARIAN'S IMAGE

Trevor Walton  
Managing Editor "The Deer Farmer"  
Managing Director WHAM Group Ltd




Image is often seen or portrayed as something shallow or lacking in substance. But take away the emotional connotations and image becomes one of our most important assets.

In a business or professional sense our image is our reputation. And nothing is more important to our businesses than the "reputation" we have among clients or customers.

A poor reputation normally means a declining business and in a small rural community, may mean social ostracism. A good reputation normally means a flourishing business and a clientele who sing our praises to potential customers.

As every consumer product marketer knows, humans respond powerfully to reputations and images. They form the basis of buying habits and our views on topics about which we know little.

Most of us have favourite brands of footwear, without having any objective information on the merits of competing brands. Most of us have strong views on topics like punishments for violent criminals, or the government's health reforms without the benefit of specialised knowledge of such topics.

Most of our views and preferences are based on images, perceptions and reputations. Some of them are carefully crafted by advertising and public relations professionals for the benefit of their clients. Others just grow out of our life experience.

In my case, I have strong views on veterinarians, even though my animal health expertise is limited to say the least. The images I have are no doubt strongly influenced by my dealings with a few veterinarians under not very typical circumstances.

Since I am not a member of your target market, I will not burden you with my highly subjective views. Instead, when preparing this paper we decided to survey your market to find out what deer farmers think about vets and the services they provide.

We took a randomised sample of 100 names from the TDF mailing list, eliminated obvious non-farmers and then left one of our telemarketers to ring 50 of the rest.

A sample of 50 obviously was not going to provide statistically precise findings. However, this was of the nature of a pilot survey, intended to define issues. Also, when it comes to market research I am of the view that the exercise is worthless if you have to analyse the findings statistically to find out whether they mean something or not. Either the findings scream at you or they don't say anything.

The results of the survey meet this requirement. The findings for most of the major issues are very clear-cut. They enable me to venture a few opinions which will now be much better informed than they otherwise would have been.

Here is the summary of findings:

### FINDINGS

#### 1. Years spent deer farming:

< 5 years	28 %
6 - 9 years	20 %
10 + years	52 %
Average	9.42 years

Note: Correlates well with TDF survey of all deer farmers (Sept 1993) which revealed 87 % had been farming deer for 5 or more years. (Average 10 years).

#### 2. Deer farmed:

< 199	30 %
200 +	70 %

Note: September 1993 survey showed TDF subscribers comprised:

< 100 deer	20 %	Average herd size this survey: 367 deer
100 - 199	51 %	Average Sept 93 survey: 326 deer
200 +	87 %	

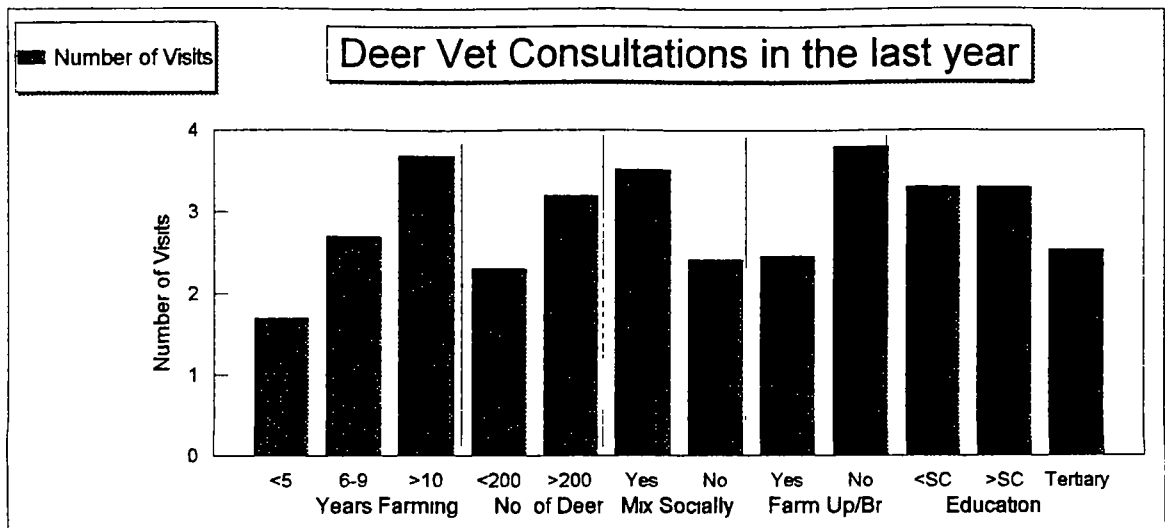
#### 3. Breeds farmed:

Inconclusive from this survey, but from September 1993 survey:

Fallow	4 %
Elk	5 %
Hybrid	14 %
Red	77 %

#### 4. Number of veterinary consultations about deer in the last 12 months:

(Average 2.78 visits a year)



The following sub-sets are most likely to consult. Those who:

- a. Have farmed deer the longest
- b. Have the larger herds (strong correlation between a & b)
- c. Mix socially with vets
- d. Not brought up on farms

**5. Number of vets handling deer work for farmer?**

Average 1.42 vets

0 vets	17 %
1 vet	48 %
2 vets	23 %
3 or more	12 %

**6. Number of practices (Not including assessing vets)**

All but 10 % used only one practice

**7. Services and satisfaction**

(1 = highly competent. 5 = totally incompetent.)

	% using service	satisfaction score
Tb Testing	52 %	1.42
Velveting	90 %	2.1
Fawning problems	8 %	1.75
Vaccination programmes	18 %	1.22
Internal & external parasites	26 %	2.07
Sick or dying animals	20 %	1.4
Breeding programmes	4 %	1.0
Trace elements	34 %	1.58

**8. Farm profitability advice**

Veterinarian	10 %	1.8
Farm Consultant	12 %	1.66

9. Your last urgent deer health problem requiring vet attendance.

- a. Prompt service: 96 %
- b. Arrive when promised: 90 %
- c. Understandable explanation of problem: 100 %
- d. Competence:

- 1 = 50 %
- 2 = 36 %
- 3 = 12 %
- 4 = 2 %
- 5 = 0 %

e. Follow up:

- Y = 57 %
- N = 22 %
- N/A 8 %
- N/R 13 %

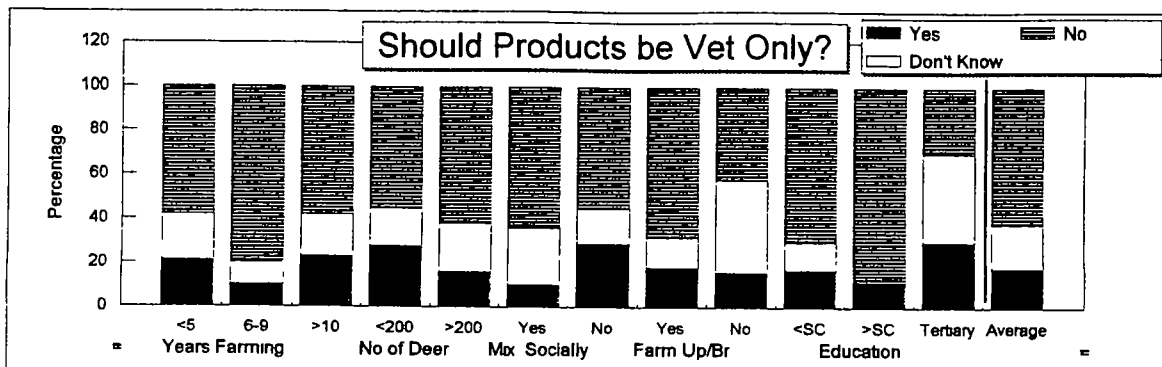
f. Cost:

		Average	Couldn't Remember
Excessive	6 %	\$60	66 %
Expensive but worth it	14 %	\$164	42 %
About right	67 %	\$83	48 %
Cheap at the price	13 %	\$70	40 %
Average		\$101	

(Notable that two of the three who thought the cost of their last consultation was excessive, couldn't remember what it cost them.)

10. Vet-only products (selenised drenches and sheep scabby mouth vaccines)

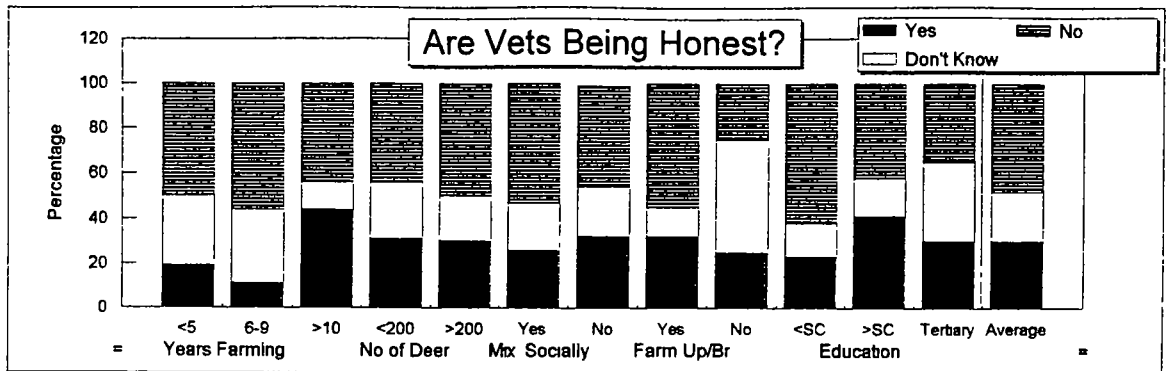
a. Should they have stayed vet-only ?



On this issue, veterinarians do not rate well.

Those who were not brought up on farms and who have a tertiary education are most likely to give the profession the benefit of the doubt, but even in these sub-sets only a minority unequivocally endorse the vet position.

- b. *Are vets being honest about the dangers of Scabivax and selenised products, as an argument for them remaining vet-only?*



This question caused problems. Some respondents clearly thought vets were dishonest if the vet's opinion was different to their's.

Nevertheless, many of those who thought vets were being honest, also saw them as having mixed motives.

56 per cent of respondents ventured an opinion on this issue. All cited either "monetary gain" or "protecting their business" as being either the whole or partial reason for vets wanting these products kept vet-only.

Look at the high scepticism rating for those who mix socially with vets.

### 11. Deer velvetting code of practice

a. *Are you accredited?*

Yes: 38 %

< 200 = 25 %

200 + = 44 %

Interestingly, analysed by educational qualifications:

No SC = 33 %

SC + = 33 %

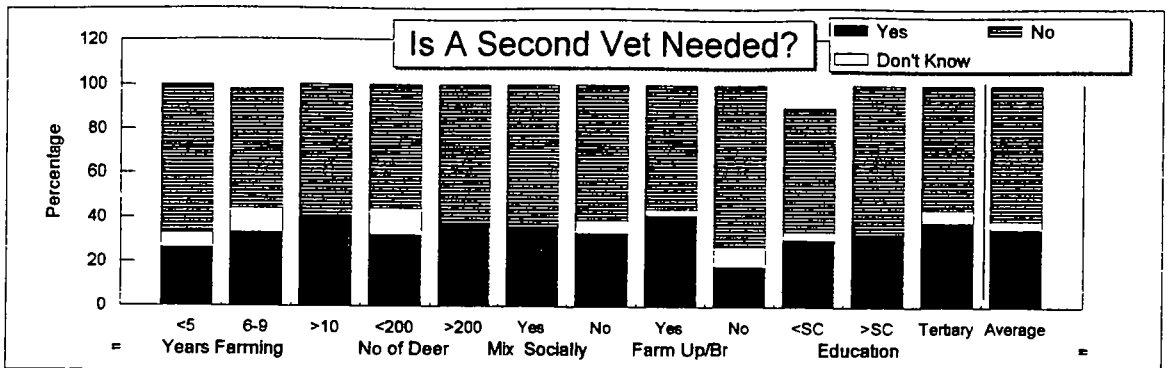
Tertiary = 47 %

b. *The need for an independent second vet to assess farmer velvetters:*

Yes = 35 %

? = 4 %

No = 61 %



This issue is much more highly polarised than the selenium/scabby mouth one, which is not surprising given the deer focus of our readership.

The polarisation also applies across all sub-sets.

Of those who stated a reason or a reservation about the NZVA policy on this issue (and 60 % did), these were as follows:

Monetary gain/jobs for the chaps & chapesses = 55 %

Protect profession = 35 %

Many respondents understood the logic of vets protecting their backs on this issue, but nevertheless disagreed with the policy.

c. *The animal welfare/trade barrier linkage. Is this the main reason for the velveting code?*

Yes = 72 %

This is a very important finding. Clearly, those who opposed the code in principle are in a minority. Most deer farmers see trade and animal welfare reasons for the code.

However, half of our respondents felt vets had mixed motives on this issue.

Motives:

- Monetary gain/jobs for the chaps = 33 %
- Need to improve animal welfare & drug standards here = 33 %
- Need for the vet profession to regain control and to resolve messy drug issue = 33 %

Interestingly, 100 % of those who mix socially with vets believed their veterinary friends on this issue, even if they keep their own counsel on vet-only products.

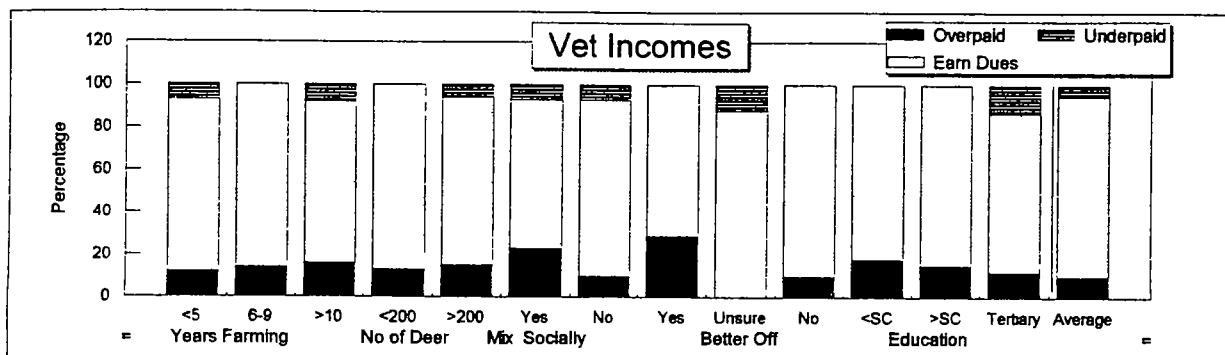
12. **Do you mix socially with any veterinarians?**

Yes = 34 %  
No = 66 %

13. **Does your vet mix well with the local farming community:**

Yes = 94 %  
? = 2 %  
No = 4 %

14. **Financial rewards for vets**



Overpaid = 10 %  
Earn their dues = 85 %  
Underpaid = 5 %

Even when cross-referenced to those who consider vets earn more than themselves, there is a strong belief that deer vets earn their dues.

15. Is your vet better off financially than you?

Respondents weren't comfortable with this question

Yes = 44 %  
Unsure = 35 %  
No = 21 %

16. TDF's farmer readers ...

a. 72 % were brought up on a farm

b. Education

No SC = 44 %  
SC + = 24 %  
Tertiary = 32 %



		Years Farming			Number of Deer		Mix Socially		Farm Upbringing		Education			
		<5	6-9	>10	<200	>200	Yes	No	Yes	No	<SC	>SC	Tertiary	Average
<b>RESTRICTIONS</b>														
<b>Should Products be Vet Only?</b>														
	Yes	21	10	23	28	16	10	29	18	16	17	11	30	18
	Don't know	21	10	19	17	22	26	16	14	42	13		40	20
	No	58	80	58	55	62	64	55	68	42	70	89	30	62
<b>Are vets being honest about dangers?</b>														
	Yes	19	11	44	31	30	26	32	32	25	23	41	30	30
	Don't know	31	33	12	25	20	21	22	13	50	15	17	35	22
	No	50	56	44	44	50	53	45	55	25	62	42	35	48
<b>ACCREDITED?</b>														
		38%			25%	44%					33%	33%	47%	
<b>Is a second vet needed?</b>														
	Yes	26	33	40	32	37.5	35	33	41	18	30	33	38	35
	Don't know	7	11		12			6	3	9	4		6	4
	No	67	54	60	56	62.5	65	61	56	73	56	67	56	61
<b>Is Welfare and trade the reason for the code ?</b>														
	Yes	66	66	80	69	75	100	52	78	73	52	92	82	72

## Discussion

As I said earlier, the findings of this pilot survey are very clear-cut; very revealing.

On the positive side, if you are a deer veterinarian you should take a bow. Your client satisfaction scores are very high, even where your services involve a degree of legal compulsion like aspects of velveting and Tb testing.

You turn up on farms when required, on-time and normally do a good job. You don't forget to follow up on the job and you charge fairly. In fact, a few of your clients think you undercharge.

You mix very well in the local farming community and many of your clients number you as a friend. Indeed, you socialise with a wide range of farmers and not just those who -- like you -- have a tertiary education.

But just because farmers socialise with you, think you are professional in your work and believe you charge fairly, it doesn't mean they can't think for themselves. And to put it simply, even your best friends don't believe you when it comes to issues where you are perceived to have a vested interest.

In a society where Adam Smith and his buddy the good Doctor Friedman have taken over the playground, farmers are highly sceptical of professionals who try to muscle in with jobs and products for the boys. And in my view, there is nothing you can do to change that. Society itself would have to change first.

So what then should vets do?

You want good incomes like everyone else. You feel you are entitled to them after spending goodness knows how long failing Chemistry I and learning to spey cats at Massey.

And you probably suspect that Walton is about to suggest that you do away with every vet-only product line. Well, you're dead right. That's exactly what I would suggest, but only as part of a new marketing strategy.

In my view, vets are under-paid and under-utilised. Hardly any of your clients use you in the capacity of a management consultant. Instead, they get you to come to their dusty yards and Tb test and velvet their deer. For this and emergency call-outs, you charge less than the garage charges to service my car.

Is this really what you trained for?

In my view, if deer vets are to step up the income scale and to create more rewarding careers for themselves, then they need to take a leaf out of Intelact Nutrition's book.

That company has identified cow nutrition as being the key factor limiting dairy production and profitability in New Zealand. Our dairy cows are genetically among the best in the world, but our pasture-based diets limit them to only 50 per cent of the milk yields achieved in North America.

Intelact is a dairy nutrition management consultancy. Its consultants earn a basic fee plus a bonus, but the client doesn't pay the bonus unless he achieves at least a 25 per cent increase in profitability from the advice provided by the Intelact consultants.

Imagine this concept applied to deer. From work by Laurent Audige and Ollie Turner there are strong indications that on many deer farms profitability is not what it ought to be. In all industries there are winners and losers -- the efficient and the inefficient. But in deer farming, the extremes appear to be wider apart than in other livestock industries.

If I was deer vet today at my ripe old age of 46, I think I would take a leaf out of Intelact's book. To improve my credibility I would phase out my vet-only drug business to the local pharmacist.

I would then go and offer my animal production skills to a selection of my clients on a no-gain no-pay basis.

Does it sound brave? Not really. For many major livestock production indicies, a 10 per cent increase on the ground means a 20 - 30 or even 40 per cent increase in dollars in the bank, because of the high fixed overheads on many farms.

Mr President, you asked for a provocative paper. Well, that's it. You don't have to agree with my conclusions. Everyone will draw their own. But you can't really argue with the findings of our survey.

It is very clear that as deer veterinarians you are playing to your weaknesses rather than your strengths. What you do about it is over to you.

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