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“Cows have a close affinity with humans”

Agronomist Martina Schmid specialises in interpreting cow signals. She is not a cow whisperer. Her rule of thumb: look after the cows properly, so both animal and farmer benefit.

JÜRIG STEINER

Martina Schmid (31) is a cow signal trainer. As she always has to point out when discussing her role, that has nothing to do with some sort of mysterious hocus pocus, the humanisation of animals or some unworldly romanticisation of farming life in the Swiss mountains. Quite the opposite, in fact.

The welfare of cows is Schmid's business. But she says she is always mindful of a farm's business situation. She is also quick to dismiss the myth that 'a high-yielding cow milked by robots can thrive.'

Martina Schmid's chosen area of expertise emerged 25 years ago in the Netherlands. Her role in a nutshell is to recognise the signals sent by cows: are they apathetic or do they want to make contact? Are they standing instead of lying, which is what they would normally prefer to do?

"You can often gain a lot from making small changes to how you work with the cows," says Schmid. She does not see herself as an activist for animal welfare or as anything resembling a cow whisperer. Instead, she calls herself an advisor who applies her scientific know-how to communicate the needs of the cows and how best to keep them to their owners.

Schmid's own two feet are planted firmly on the ground of agricultural reality. Having trained as a nurse, she then went on to complete vocational agricultural training followed by a degree in agronomy. She now works for the cantonal agricultural department in Zug and on the family farm in Menzingen. She has also built up her own business, i.e. her advisory work and instruction in cow signals.

Word of mouth is an effective marketing tool, says Schmid, as more farmers are requesting her services. The fact that there are hardly any other people with her know-how operating independently and free of product advertising also helps. There are people with the same expertise as Schmid; however, they tend to have an ulterior motive, i.e. to sell the farmers something.

Schmid, by contrast, is solely interested in delivering presentations, training or giving advice and she is prepared to travel from central Switzerland to the French-speaking part of the country to do that. Demand from outside Switzerland for online sessions is also increasing, she tells us.

How long does it take Martina Schmid to gauge the mood of the cows when she arrives at a farm? Before she enters the stall, she always takes the time to have a proper talk with the farmers who are in charge. She wants to know where any problem areas may be. Farmers in Switzerland are under a lot of pressure to be efficient (see



Martina Schmid understands our bovine friends, but a 'cow whisperer' she is not. Photo provided

"Swiss Review" 4/2024). They have a high workload, often have to contend with lost income or unmanageable bureaucracy, not to mention personal issues, planning whom to leave the farm to, for example.

"Cows have a close affinity with humans," says Schmid. They react to whether the people who work with them in the stall everyday are upbeat or weighed down by worries. And it also works the other way round, she says: "If the cows are thriving, it also benefits the farmers." And that includes financially: advice based on cow signals also has a pre-emptive effect, so the animals don't need antibiotics when they fall ill.

Cows usually feel at their best when they can behave the same way in the stall as they would when out in the fields. Regardless of whether they are in large cowsheds or tie-up stalls, both of which are allowed in Switzerland. The cow signalling trainer works on the basis of this fundamental principle.

"If I see cows in the stall who are lying down and chewing the cud, that is a very positive sign in itself," says Schmid. That after all is what they spend most of their time doing. One could say that cows love nothing more than a quiet and consistent routine without too much variety. Martina Schmid says that cows like to lie down for 14 hours a day and graze for seven hours. Two hours



are for milking, leaving some time for social contact. That more or less equates to an ideal day's work for a cow.

By the same token, that means when cows are standing when she enters the stall, or if they are unsettled with a rough coat or dry muzzle, "these are all signs that something is wrong," says Schmid. Her job is to make suggestions as to how conditions in the stall could be improved to give the cows a better quality of life.

"It is not trivial: the small things can make a big difference," explains Schmid. The last thing she wants to do is suggest that the farmers make improvements for the cows and, in doing so, make their work more complicated and time-consuming. That just increases stress, which would in turn impact the cows' well-being.

When working with their cows, farmers perform individual actions again and again. If these actions suddenly become even slightly more cumbersome, it will take so much longer to do everything. That is why farmers who plan ahead involve Schmid to advise them when renovating or building new stalls. In older, narrow buildings it can be challenging but not impossible to find solutions. "It is just a fact that healthy, happy cows are more productive and give more milk," says Schmid. So, a farmer could benefit from her input by perhaps keeping one cow less and saving effort without losing money. On average 20 cows

are kept on each farm in Switzerland, which is small by international standards. It's logical, says Schmid, that smaller farms often have a closer connection to each individual cow. However, that does not mean that her work revolves around cow welfare for average-sized farms by Swiss standards.

Her customers also include large holdings, "which aim to get the best from their cows". It's very important for them to have healthy and productive cows: "Cows bred for milk production can really prosper if they have light and air and a nice spot to graze and lie down."

Technical innovations, which don't really fit the traditional image of manual farm labour, can be good for cows. Take milking robots as an example, which enable the cows to decide when and how often they want to be milked during the day. There are cows that prefer to be milked three or four times a day rather than just two times, which is what farmers normally do. This helps them ease the burden on their udders and avoid the stress of having to wait for milking every day.

At the same time, Martina Schmid is keen to stress that this doesn't mean robots are suited to every stall. Observing the cows' signals is what really matters.

Cows that feel comfortable spend 70 percent of their time lying down. They don't like excitement and change. Here a herd of cows in the Swiss Jura.

Photo: Joseph Haas