

# Making Dairy Farming The Career Change of Choice

Irene Nolan

Technical Manager – On-Farm and Promotion

Dairy InSight

## Introduction

It is no secret that the New Zealand dairy industry, like others, is struggling to project the right image to ensure the country's largest and most successful industry gets the recognition it deserves.

In the past few years the industry has suffered from a barrage of negative publicity and poor public perceptions, particularly about animal health and welfare, the environment, and HR practices. Many of these perceptions are generated by the media, where dairy farmers are portrayed as laid back, gumboot wearing cow cockies. The media has also played a role in tagging the industry as 'dirty dairying'.

The industry is working to counteract these perceptions successfully, with a major spin-off being a better ability to attract the skilled people with the right attributes into dairying. These promotional programmes are seeking to attract new recruits into the industry, both more mature people considering a career change and school leavers.

Positive perceptions of the industry will be reinforced when dairy farming is highlighted as the attractive career option it really is. On top of this, considerable work is being undertaken to arm these people entering the industry with information and advice on what to expect and support and training opportunities available.

Some challenges do lie ahead, as most young people no longer have the once commonplace early opportunity to experience life on a dairy farm to recall at a later stage when considering a career. Meanwhile as dairy farming evolves, the lifestyle attraction may be lost as farms get larger. This may impact on the industry's ability to attract people in the future.

---

Notes:

## **Kellogg Rural Leadership Programme 2003 – Career change from urban background to dairy farming**

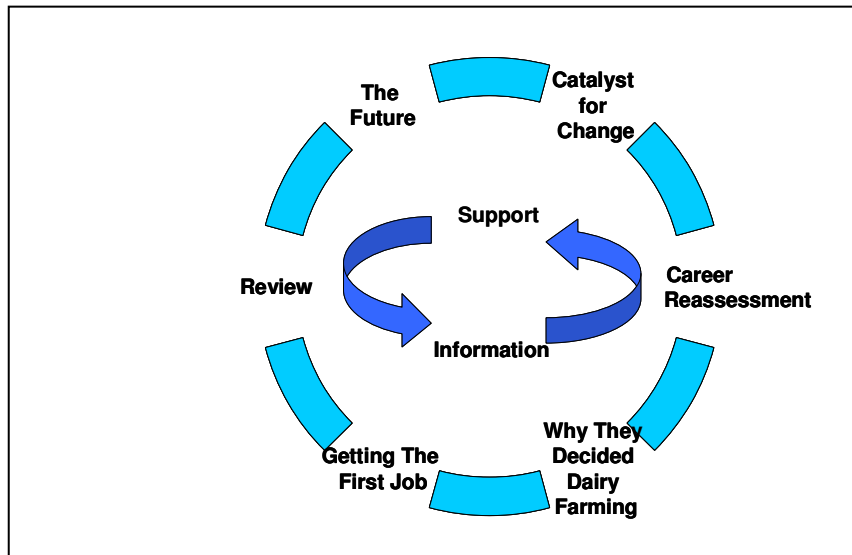
As part of the 2003 Kellogg course I looked at what was attracting career change people into the dairy industry and what the future drivers will be. Specifically the research aimed to:

- identify what drives and motivates people to change careers from an urban background into dairy farming with little or no farming experience
- identify what attributes these people have to make them successful in changing careers
- Establish what attracts these people to dairy farming as a career choice and how they go about making that decision
- Establish what will assist people to make that career change in the future.

A total of 17 people who have changed from an urban background into dairy farming with little or no farming experience were interviewed. While these people ranged in age, location and background, their stories were all similar. In general, they looked to change careers because they were unhappy with their current situations – their family lifestyle was being impinged, they had bad debtors or they were working long hours. They decided that changing careers was the best way to overcome their undesirable positions.

Figure 1 illustrates the process each career change interviewee went through to get to where they are today. People may revisit the process to varying degrees throughout their career. It involves eight steps:

- Catalyst for change. What caused them to change career?
- Career re-assessment. What do they now want to do?
- Why they decided on dairy farming. Why dairy farming was the best choice.
- Getting the first job. How they went about it.
- Review. What do they think of their career change now?
- The future. Where do they want to be?
- Support. A key success factor.
- Information. Played a key role.



**Figure 1** Career change process and themes

## Attraction to dairying

Often a childhood memory on their grandparents' or relatives' farm, a love of animals and the ability to work within their own business led them to consider dairying.

This memory of farm or country life led many to farming as the ideal choice. Most importantly, they all believed dairy farming would also offer a better lifestyle for them and their families.

This raises an important consideration for the dairy industry as more and more people live in the country's urban centres and do not have the opportunities to gain a rural or dairying experience. The dairy industry needs to consider how it will give all New Zealanders an insight into life on a dairy farm, no matter their family or location.

### **Quotes from interviewees on why they chose dairying**

*"As I was evaluating all the options, farming came up as something I wanted to do."*

*"I always had in the back of my mind that I would like to go farming one day."*

*"We went through all the things that I liked to do and he suggested farming – I had never considered it before even though heaps of my friends are farmers."*

*"When we made the decision to go farming we decided we wanted to really give it a go."*

---

**Notes:**

*“We were attracted to dairy farming due to a desire to get out of the city – the traffic rush hour and bad debtors.”*

*“We initially thought it was risky, but it was a calculated risk.”*

*“I was missing a lot of time with my son and we always joked about a house in the country.”*

*“I had been thinking about the move for a while and looked on the internet to get information.”*

*“We halved our income to do it, but we knew we had to go backward to go forward.”*

*“Dairying offers the best all around balance of lifestyle choices that include financial reward and family.”*

*“I think you have to be an open minded person, you don’t have to be strong physically but you do mentally.”*

## **Dairying opportunities**

The people interviewed were all able to enter the industry easily. They simply responded to positions available in newspapers.

Once in the industry they started to realise the potential equity growth that could be achieved and the business nature of dairy farming. A bonus that many people pointed out was that they were paid on a monthly basis and the company had to buy what you produced. As many had run their own small business in the past, these new conditions represented luxury.

All were keen to learn as much as they could as fast as they could. They worked long hours, asked questions and spent time with vets or attended local discussion groups to see other farms and other ways of doing things. All have also taken some form of formal training, mostly through an Agriculture Industry Training Organisation course.

## **Career change successes**

A key factor in the success of these peoples’ career changes was the support of partners, where having a supportive partner was vital and occurred in all cases. Both partners had to really want to make the change work.

The other key factor was choosing the right job first. It was important to the success of their dairying career that they had a positive experience in their first dairy farm position. It is important for the industry in attracting people that farm employers upskill their human relations practices and offer good working environments.

These people are now all committed to the dairy industry. They enjoy the lifestyle it offers and the rewards for the hard work. They believe dairying offers the ability to progress unhindered by colleagues or company structure, to enjoy family lifestyle and to be more financially secure.

Nearly all (90%) have the goal of owning their own farms and believe that will be possible in the next five years, even with the current shortage of sharemilking positions, forecast

low payout and high land prices. Lifestyle remained their highest priority and they would not sacrifice family and lifestyle to achieve their ultimate goal.

### **Successful dairying attributes**

These people all had similar attributes, which gives an idea as to what kind of people can make a career change to dairying succeed. The people are:

- successful in their previous careers
- motivated
- focused
- driven to obtain success
- open to adapt to new experiences
- keen to learn to make their goal a reality
- active
- keen on the outdoors, being their own boss and working with livestock
- goal setters.

### **Dairying challenges**

As outlined earlier the dairy industry has some challenges to overcome in order to attract the right type of people. Specifically, dairying needs to:

- counteract the negative public perceptions of the industry
- create an opportunity for young people to experience life on a dairy farm
- continue to offer a lifestyle, regardless of farm scale.

So, what is being done to overcome these challenges? The dairy industry, through Dairy InSight, is currently investing about \$2 million each year on promotion projects aimed at countering some of these challenges and attracting, retaining and training people in the industry. Table 1 is an overview of these projects.

---

**Notes:**

**Table 1:** Dairy InSight levy investment into promotion activities

<b>Dairy Insight Activities</b>	<b>Audience</b>	<b>Service Provider</b>
Let's Talk Dairying	General public, farmers	Verdict
Window to Dairying	High school children and career advisors	ATR Solutions
Employment Document Programme	Employers and employees	ATR Solutions
On Farm Roles	Will be used for all audiences	AgResearch
Benchmarking Practices	General public, farmers, service providers	AgResearch
Future Dairy Farm Employment Needs	Service providers, farmers	Lincoln University
Kelloggs Rural Leadership Course – Intensive leadership course for farmers	Farmers	Lincoln University Primary Industry Council
Nuffield Scholarship – Overseas travel and research trip for farmers	Farmers	Nuffield
50 undergraduate scholarships to Lincoln University and Massey University	Potential dairy students studying agriculture	Dexcel Education
Taratahi and Telford Scholarship	Potential dairy students studying agriculture	Taratahi and Telford rural polytechnics
Career Expo Events	General public, potential students, careers advisors	Dexcel Education
HR Tool Kit – A manual with templates on HR practices	Farmers and employees	Dexcel Extension
Visits and communication with school careers advisors	School career advisors contacted	Dexcel Education
Cows to Champaign – Evenings for parents etc. to learn more about dairying as a career option	Parents and career advisors	Ag ITO
Ag/Hort HR Capacity Consortium – Aimed at coordinating and conducting projects that benefit the agriculture and horticulture industries	Currently industry representatives, also projects aimed at end users from public to farmers	Various

Below are some of the promotion projects that Dairy InSight is supporting to change public perceptions and ensure the dairy industry continues to adopt best practices, to help cement this perception shift. For more information visit the Dairy InSight website [www.dairyinsight.co.nz](http://www.dairyinsight.co.nz).

## **Industry promotion**

### ***Let's Talk Dairying***

Last year Dairy InSight led a promotion programme titled Let's Talk Dairying to counteract the negative public perceptions, raise the profile of dairying and improve dairying's image. Let's Talk Dairying aimed to promote dairy farming to both urban and rural audiences and used television, newspaper advertising, billboards, a website, [www.letstalkdairying.co.nz](http://www.letstalkdairying.co.nz) and media releases. It focused on career change people and aimed to deliver messages that dairying is hard work and offers the opportunity to be your own boss, balance work and family and care for the environment. It used the byline 'Dairying – you're not part of the herd'.

An evaluation survey has found that the first stage of the programme has been a success in raising awareness of the industry and informing people of the inherent values of the industry. It has identified that more work needs to be done to provide a pathway for those interested in considering dairying as a career. The second stage of the programme is currently being developed and is due for release later this year.

### ***Window to Dairying***

The Window to Dairying programme has been operating in the Waikato since 1997 and is running in four regions in 2004. The programme aims to promote a career in dairying to high school students and careers advisors. It does this by providing a one-day event on a farm designed to show the opportunities available and the quality career dairying offers. In 2005, the programme intends to expand into further regions and is also looking at opportunities to address parents' perceptions.

Window to Dairying highlighted the need to ensure the industry met the expectations of new entrants, particularly in relation to employers providing a quality workplace and employment relationship.

### ***Employment Documentation Programme***

The Employment Documentation Programme is aimed at retaining people in the industry once they choose dairying. It focuses on identifying current HR management practices and then

---

**Notes:**

isolating where possible changes or improvements could be made and directing employers to the appropriate resources to achieve those changes, such as the Dexcel HR tool kit.

### ***Benchmarking Dairy Farm Practice***

The focus of this project is to collect robust information on dairy farmers' current practice. This would be in the form of proportions of farmers who undertake various management practices.

The knowledge of what farmers' current practice is, enables the establishment of:

- benchmarks
- a baseline for future assessment of changes
- targets for industry support

The findings will also be able to inform future industry policy and resource allocation. The first practices to be quantified will be human resources and farm planning/business management as the focus of the first of two surveys.

### ***Human Capability in Agriculture and Horticulture***

This project is aimed at maintaining the competitive advantage of New Zealand's agriculture and horticulture sectors by attracting the right people with the right skills. It is focused on attracting people from a young age into agriculture and intends to develop packages for each of the farm sectors.

It will undertake a stocktake to provide a comprehensive database of all initiatives to attract, retain and train people. The project will also seek to:

- provide resources to assist farmers to increase their professionalism as employers
- provide information about existing pathways and roles
- remove duplication of resources by creating a curriculum library
- develop a framework for induction and leadership programmes within the sector
- develop a schools strategy
- review issues surrounding immigrant workers to rural New Zealand.

## **Workshop Summary**

### ***Discussion points***

- Career changes from an urban background to dairy farming are motivated by a requirement for a lifestyle change
- Dairy farming was the chosen career change option due to the perceived lifestyle opportunities

- Career change people who chose to change to a vastly different career tend to have been very successful in their previous careers and highly motivated with particular personality characteristics
- Getting a good first job is critical to starting people's dairy career on the right path
- Once in the industry people realised that the industry had huge equity growth and business opportunities and they moved through the industry quickly
- The dairy industry and the primary industries in general are working hard to coordinate a programme of promotion activities.

## **Conclusions**

- Giving the general public a chance to have a positive rural experience is key to continuing to attract career change people in the future
- A coordinated approach of promotion to change public perceptions and encourage industry best practices is essential in attracting the right people to dairying
- The Dairy Industry needs to highlight the career opportunities available while continuing to enhance employment practices.

---

**Notes:**