

Do you really know what you are feeding your horse?

As a New Year's resolution, I would like to see feed companies start to be a little more straightforward with their customers. Maybe I'm getting a little older and more cranky, but it is time to stop the confusion and just be straight with the people who keep us all in business.

First, using terms such as **superior**, **extreme**, and **ultimate** do not make a product better than another. Look at the tag guarantees. Are they extensive or limited to just a few nutrients? Look at the ingredients, are they collective terms like "Processed Grain Bi-Products" and "Plant Protein Products" or are they specific ingredients? How can some companies justify using collective terms on most of their products and then specific terms on products they want you to pay an extra \$2.00 to \$4.00 more per bag. Does the formula stay consistent or are they reducing ingredient costs by changing them weekly?

Second, I feel a feed company has the obligation to tell the customer all they need to know about the feed they are using on their horses. If a company determines that a particular product is **safe** or **low carb**, then they should be prepared to tell you the actual lab tested NSC (starch and sugar) levels of those feeds and the ingredients used, not a calculated value. If the customer wants a complete nutrient profile, then it should be made available. What does it say about a company if the sales people responsible for selling the products to the consumer don't even have access to this information?

Third, comments on advertising and brochures like "controlled energy release" bother me. What does that mean? While it makes some sense and there is some research to support the theory that lower soluble carbs will have some effect, a diet will not make a crazy horse calm or a lazy horse spirited. A great analogy I heard the other day is if you take a lazy person sitting on their easy chair (the lazy horse) and offer them a Krispy Kreme donut (higher carbs), that person is not going to then jog around the block. Likewise, if you take a hyper personality and feed them nothing but fiber, I don't think they will then turn into couch potatoes. It is misleading to elude customers to think that feed will make horses more manageable to any great extent.* It is a combined function of feeding a balanced diet, management and training.

Fourth, the sales people that represent the feed companies should be well-rounded and knowledgeable horse people. They should be able to answer any feeding question or situation you or your veterinarian may have and give you reasons as to why they make a particular feeding recommendation. If they cannot, they should have access to get that answer in a very short period of time. This involves continual training and certification as equine experts, such as the American Registry of Professional Animal Scientists (ARPAS).

Fifth, research isn't any good unless it is used or used properly. While there isn't nearly as much research on horses as we have on cow, pigs and chickens, there is enough out there to use in formulations to improve the health of your horse. Yeast cultures are a good example of where there is overwhelming independent research on the benefits of improved fiber digestion and utilization from yeast, yet some companies dispute the information presumably to reduce ingredient costs.

As feed companies, we have done a lot over the years to cause confusion on how to feed horses from protein levels to tag wars (who has the highest level) on other nutrients. We have been helped along the way by articles and website information written by people more interested in expressing their opinion than on actual research. Feeding most horses is not that hard and the choices you have today are twice that of 10 years ago primarily because feed companies have maintained the old feeding choices in combination with new products.

It may be hard to distinguish which feed company to use when comparing similar products. The information discussed in this article should help you make an educated decision on the best feed company along with the proper product for your horse.

*At Virginia Equine Research we disagree with the underlined statement. We have seen countless improvements in personality through a clean, and balanced diet.