

EVALUATING

What you read and hear!

Larry Connor

Beekeepers are exposed to a great deal of information with the combined effects of bee journals, bee books, Internet sources, mentors, and speakers at meetings. Every day I see or hear something that concerns me, sets off an alarm, or otherwise is just not right. People ask me about an Internet postings I have not read or a speaker I did not hear and ask what the person meant in their material. It can be daunting.

For new beekeepers, the challenge of pursuing new information is enormous. There are tens of thousands of beekeepers in the United States and they all have different experiences and different stories. Each has many stories: they had one result one year and a conflicting result the next. How is a new beekeeper to learn the best way to keep bees with so much conflicting information?

With this in mind we will concentrate on some of the bits of advice that over 40 years of keeping bees and working with beekeepers might offer.

Consider the source

I appreciate magazines like *The New Yorker* that include a short biographical sketch of each person writing articles since the topics are varied and range from solid fact or opinion or fiction. Editors have different policies about running biographical information, and many times they do not. This creates an enormous need to do some work on your own. I am at a place in my life to send an email to the editor and ask about the author. Is this a professional writer who has put together something for submission? Is this an undergraduate student who wrote a nice paper for the beekeeping course? Is this an experienced commercial beekeeper or a first year beekeeper who is handy with words?

Check out the author

Check with friends or the Internet about a particular author. Look for experience and education for starters, but see what else you can find about a particular writer. First time writer or a regular contributor?

A few of us writing for *Bee Culture* have Ph.Ds. That is an indication of extensive training in our respective fields. Jim Tew and Clarence Colison have retired from one career, but are not

retired to a golf course or a resort island, although both might not turn down the offer. Others, like Jennifer Berry, work at a university and keep bees on the side, so there is a sharing of both personal beekeeping and scientific experience in her articles.

There are always writers in this magazine who I do not know, personally or professionally. They are new to me. Unfortunately, at my point in my life, I tend to overlook these articles until someone asks about the points they have made. Or I finally meet the author at a meeting.

I have seen copies of this and other beekeeping magazines being thrown across the room by beekeepers who consider an article or a point in an article to be rubbish. I try to duck if aimed at me. This may be a matter of disagreement in technique, or a generalized putdown, that the author does not know what she or he is writing about. Most editors look for a certain mix of opinions, to appeal to a broader audience and contribute perspectives to public discussion – this magazine-throwing behavior may indicate that such ploys were successful.

Unfortunately, there are certain groups that rarely write for the bee journals. In spite of their experiences, few commercial beekeepers are authors in these pages, although they are often written about in interviews and site visits. There have always been female contributors to the bee journals, but that could be increased considerably. We don't see much in print by minority groups, same-sexed partners who are also beekeeping partners, or non-traditional beekeeping activities.

Look for an agenda

When a commercial beekeeper writes an article in a bee journal, there is often a political or influence-changing agenda in their words. This is good, and we need more of it. Bee magazines rarely reflect the political intrigue that takes place at meetings of beekeepers, especially at the national level. As I just said, these authors rarely write in these pages, but when they do, and the editors agree to publish their contributions, there is often an attempt in changing opinion and promoting an agenda or program. These solo voices in the verbal wilderness need to be heard,

- **Consider The Source**
- **Check Out The Author**
- **Look for An Agenda**
- **Experience vs. Research vs. Opinion**
- **Surveys & Polls**
- **Sample size**
- **Location & Bee Stocks**
- **Statistics**

and their messages carefully considered. But always consider the source.

To be fair, you can make the same argument about research reports. While scientific articles (as in recent issue of this magazine), which are subjected to the peer-review process, some scientists are known to take the bully pulpit to preach about a favorite opinion or project. Learn to sort out the facts from the opinions, which may be difficult to do.

Experience vs. research vs. opinion

The experience of the beekeeper should be considered when looking at an article. As a boy I grew up around bees and as a graduate student I studied honey bee pollination. That was four decades ago. This should be taken into consideration when compared to a new, first year beekeeper who has answers to questions I cannot complete.

Surveys and opinion polls

We are seeing more surveys of beekeepers and their colony losses. These surveys may include data about queen and bee stocks, chemical treatments, and other variables in beekeeping. Surveys are interesting constructions of data voluntarily offered up by individuals that may or may not reflect fact. First, not all people respond to surveys, so the absence of a large percentage of beekeepers, or a small number of large beekeepers, puts the results into the Suspicious category. When there are enough participants, and from all parts of the country, the data may have some validity. But a survey is only a slice in time, often by design: What percentage of your bee colonies were alive on March 1st? My answer might be 60%. But by May 1st there may have been even more loss, but the survey does not ask for that data.

Colony loss surveys are an excellent way to document trends in bee colony death, but they are only as accurate as the number of beekeepers who contribute honestly to the survey.

Sample size, region of investigation, and stock of bees

There is no standard honey bee. Genetic stocks vary in their behavior, and thus their management based on underlying gene-based programming for buildup, response to incoming food, shortage of food supplies, drone production and elimination, as well as wintering.

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Because of these variations, it is hard to compare a Italian with Russian colonies unless managed in a scientifically controlled procedure. For a new beekeeper, speaking to an Italian-stock beekeeper may result in a different set of management suggestions compared to those of a Russian-stock beekeeper. Neither is wrong, just different based on different stocks. Add a Carniolian-stock beekeeper, and the conversation may become quite confusing.

There is no standard beehive. Today my bees are in eight-frame deep hives. Four years ago they were in ten-frame medium depth hives. Who knows what I will have in the future – all polystyrene hives? Keeping bees in different equipment is likely to contribute different results, although subtle.

Micro- and Macroclimate differences. I have bees in two locations. Here in Kalamazoo, MI the bees are subjected to warmer temperatures and an urban floral diversity that is different from the colonies at the farm in Galesburg, MI. While only nine miles apart, there are differences that make colony comparisons different. The bees in Kalamazoo are in the shade while the bees at the farm are in full sun. That changes things, too. All my colonies will experience a far different season than someone like Jennifer Berry in Georgia. Will one bee type work in both locations? Perhaps. Or there may be subtle advantages of one stock over another in each of these climate types.

Unintentional lying with statistics

Dr. Marshall Levin was a bee researcher at the USDA, and conducted extensive pollination studies during his career. He was in a position as laboratory coordinator for all the government bee labs at the end of his career and handled requests from the general public as well as members of Congress and the White House. If you wrote to your state senator about government research programs, chances are that Levin wrote the letter the senator signed.

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Levin once saw the following statistic: that 80% of all the bee pollination done in the United States was done by honey bees. The remaining 20% of the pollination was done by non-*Apis* or native pollinators. He wondered where this little factoid had come from. Using the network of the U.S.D.A. laboratories, the National Agricultural Library, and other resources he traced this down to a single research paper done on alfalfa pollination in a western state. The key author was a researcher by the name of Marshall Levin. He, himself, had conducted this work in a single state, on a single crop, and the results were reported in a single research paper. But through the USDA and other research organizations, this 80-20 ratio had been actively promoted and stuck, and was part of the Facts About Bees in the American beekeeping community.

Every time I see a statistic used by a bee club, in a fact sheet, or a talk given by a new beekeeper, I see statistics that are most likely taken out of context. How many floral visits does a bee need to take to contribute to a pound of honey? There cannot be one answer to this question, since flowers vary enormously in their ability to produce nectar from species to species and even within species from day to day or from season to season. Those factoids are fun but quite often wrong! The research report was accurate within the range of the study, but extrapolating that information to a wider viewpoint was dangerous and inaccurate.

As I write I am forced to constantly self-edit. There are points or factoids I have made that may not be 100% accurate. The challenge of any elf-respecting writer is to make sure that the facts are as clearly and properly

presented as possible. It is all too easy to be influenced by other writers, other scientists, and other beekeepers, which results in an opinion that may not be entirely accurate.

When an agenda is added to the discussion, beware. Efforts to sell a piece of equipment, a method, or an idea are often biased toward one viewpoint. Keeping an open view on debates of the day is difficult. Are Langstroth or Kenya Top Bar hives better than the other? Are small cells better or of no consequence to bee colonies? Should you harvest all the honey in a hive and feed back sugar or should let the bees keep the honey to insure winter survival? Is one particular mite control better than another?

These contentions are the essence of the debate in beekeeping, for they are often formed and inspired by the nature of the beekeeper, not the nature of the bee. A Kenya Top Bar hive may be very good for a small-scale beekeeper in Kentucky or central California, but not work for a sideline beekeeper in Michigan or Washington. There are different approaches to beekeeping, and we need to place all management advice into the Unsure category as we do our bee work.

The best sources of beekeeping information help both the new and experienced beekeeper wade through the quagmire of fact, opinion and theory and arrive at a solid footing that is based on good science, experienced beekeeping methodology, and good practices. **BC**

For information about classes in Queen Rearing, contact the author at LJConnor@aol.com. Or visit the Wicwas Press website at www.wicwas.com.

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