

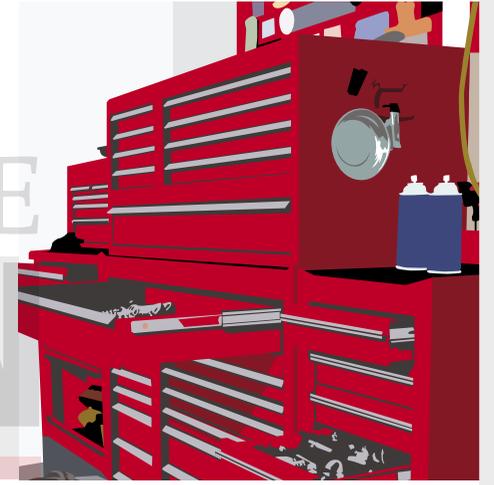
Can I borrow that?

Mechanics Corner By Andy Overbay

PROGRESSIVE

DAIRYMAN

Never, ever should a lender have to come retrieve their equipment from your farm. With the risk of sounding like a curmudgeon, this is a tenet that seems to have been lost the most on society nowadays.



“Helping a neighbour,” my dad used to say, “is the greatest church work you can ever do.” I remember when my wife and I started dating, I explained to her how we would help neighbours get their hay baled or corn picked. She was skeptical, but after meeting Dad, I think she understood.

Often, especially among independently minded farmers, we see asking for help as a weakness, but we all need help now and again. Over the years, I have come to believe that to ask for help is to share a blessing. It shows you respect the person as a valuable and capable friend. The servant is blessed more than the served.

That said, one thing Dad did not do very much was borrow equipment from a neighbour, regardless of how expedient it may have been at the time. “I don’t want to have to fix it if it breaks down,” he would say. Just as with many things, I have grown to be much like Dad, but I also see how asking to borrow a piece of equipment in these days of high costs and low milk prices could be very attractive, especially to young dairy producers with limited resources.

I have also come to realize that some of the beliefs of past generations may not be as predominant as they used to be. So while I don’t want to seem “preachy,” I think it is a good use of time and this article space to discuss the “etiquette of borrowing.”

First, start with the end in mind. It is wise to pay attention to the condition and manner in which the equipment is stored when you pick it up. Replacing the piece back in its place in the shed, cleaned, greased and ready to roll for the owner will not only impress your friend, it will definitely help if you need to borrow

the equipment again.

Also, before you drop the pin, have a conversation with the owner about the equipment you are asking to borrow. What are some “rules” of its use? Does it require special fluids or fuels? When do they need it back?

Does it have any issues? This is what Dad was worried most about with borrowed equipment. You need to realize chances are good that if there is a potential weak link, either by design or simply through years of use, as a less-experienced operator of that particular implement or tractor, you have a high potential of finding that weakness.

This brings us to hard-and-fast rule number one of borrowing equipment: Return it in the same or better shape than when you hooked onto it. If it breaks on you, fix it. If you can’t fix it (either because of a lack of cash or knowledge), don’t borrow it in the first place. This is the great risk of borrowing equipment and, while it may seem harsh, returning a piece of equipment broken is one thing: unacceptable.

An example of this comes from a neighbour. He helped another neighbour who was trying to square bale hay by allowing him to use a few of his wagons. The borrower returned the wagons late one night – with flat tires. Were the tires worn to begin with? Maybe so, but they were holding air when they left the owner’s farm. The lender’s thought on the matter was very simple and straightforward – “I’m glad he got his hay in, but he won’t be borrowing any of my equipment again.”

The cost of fixing a couple of flat tires cost the borrower his reputation. No amount of money will repair that damage.

Hard-and-fast rule number two: When you are finished with the equipment, clean it, service it and return it immediately. Never, ever should a lender have to come retrieve their equipment from your farm. With the risk of sounding like a curmudgeon, this is a tenet that nowadays seems to have been lost by most of society.

In my work, I have some learning tools that I use to teach young people about the biomechanics of the modern dairy cow. It amounts to a two-dimensional plywood cutout of a mature dairy cow attached to a pipe frame and a 5-gallon bucket with bucket nipples to act as its udder. Lots of folks know and love my “no-kick” cow. They borrow it for school activities, vacation Bible schools, 4-H camps or farm field days.

I am happy to loan it out to people, but I have a simple but firm rule: If you borrow it, and I have to go hunt it up and haul it home, the borrower is on my “banned borrower” list. I have even gone to retrieve my property only to find that the borrower had loaned it to yet another user. This gets one on the “permanently banned” list.

Now that I may have scared you completely, one path you may want to consider as a substitute to borrowing a piece of equipment is hiring the neighbour to come and do the task as a custom operator. Sure, that brings an operational cost, but consider the upside. They know the equipment well. If it breaks down, the responsibility of repair is back with the owner. It eliminates the time and cost of cleaning, servicing and returning the equipment, and it gives you an idea of what the opportunity costs of ownership really are – and best of all, everyone parts friends.



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Shakespeare wrote, “Neither a borrower nor a lender be.” In the case of modern dairying, that is a very restraining stance, but it is wise to pay heed to the golden rule of borrowed equipment: Treat others’ property better than you would treat your own. Being a responsible, attentive user of borrowed equipment builds community and respect among your neighbours. To use one last saying to close, always remember, “A good reputation is the result of many actions and lost by one.”

Andy Overbay holds a Ph.D. in ag education and has more than 40 years of hands-on dairy and farming experience.

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