



Open all channels

To be alive is to communicate. We constantly send and receive messages, often unaware, but sometimes with great purpose. Only part of this exchange is through the spoken or written word, of course.

Some messages inspire shock and awe; others take so long to develop and are so subtle that they go unnoticed. Both types of messages may be of equal importance. A letter of foreclosure makes a dramatic point, but can you spot a change in the number of bidders for your calves?

We can list many levels and means of communication. Statistics are said to speak volumes while a picture paints a thousand words. Computer modems shake hands as the market transmits supply and demand signals. Lies, threats and rumors try to manipulate us. Budgets force us to prioritize; preparations and attitudes reveal our expectations. Secrets, assumptions and opinions are often internal, but revealed by actions.

We use all of our senses to receive communications, even when the sender forgets this and shows other meanings through body language, facial expression or level of formality. When the tone of voice can chill, it's a good thing looks can't kill. But why telegraph these intentions? If you want to convey a message, leave no room for doubt.

When a soldier calls in an air strike, information must be precise, coordinates complete; inaccurate messages will do more harm than good. In a less dramatic sense,

that's true in the cattle business as well. People don't always understand a message the way it was intended, so we should check to be sure and provide a means for discussion.

To be clearly understood, let your actions and words work in concert. Bid or avoid a cattle sale, but let the owners know why so that they may adjust future offerings to better fit your needs. Send data by mail or e-mail, but follow up with a call or visit.

We have many ways to reach out and touch people with communications. Most of the business contacts we seek can be reached by cell phone or e-mail, so there is little reason to wonder what somebody thinks or what advice they may have.

Ask questions, be interactive and volunteer information. Don't be a pest, but don't be inhibited. Do take notes and do respect each other's time. If someone is taking up more than their fair share, provide other means of informing them and politely remind them of your responsibilities to other communication and management obligations. Better to tell them you won't be able to call every week than to leave them wondering.

Taking time to personally visit a current or prospective business partner says much more than any words on the phone. In-person communication also allows for the powerful combination of participation and visual experience. You might hear that your cattle are uneven in their performance, or see the individual weight data midway through the feeding period. But nothing will convince you as much as seeing the cattle and engaging in problem-solving discussions with a feeding partner.

If actions speak louder than words, performance speaks louder than promises. Some things are best kept secret, but these are the exception in the beef industry. When secrets are revealed through nasty surprises bathed in red ink, they do great harm to a reputation.

Your cattle may not be up to the level of quality and performance that you hope for some day, but it won't help to hide the facts. Bull advertising often lists some but not all EPDs (expected progeny differences). When calving ease is questionable or marbling is negative, the facts may go unpublished.

Public communication, even paid advertising, represents a great opportunity to lead. Hiding the truth may result in responses that are subtle but negative, because in today's beef industry, less information says less value.

In the next edition of *Black Ink*, we'll look at how to orient your production to fit a branded beef program. Questions? Call toll-free at 877-241-0717.

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