



*Testing, one, two. . .*

If you've ever been a party to some hysterical research—no, I don't mean historical—you know the feeling that starts with sudden bad news and demands tough decisions now. As you fall back to “Plan C,” then “D,” and so on, you realize there must be a better way.

You have to plan for anything and manage to avoid as many nasty surprises as possible. Still, ranch life throws enough curves to keep some producers at batting practice, looking for the way to win.

While those cattlemen see themselves as innovators in the field, others see wisdom in watching them succeed or fail before taking action. Virtually everyone conducts at least some little “experiments” on the ranch every day, but they may not see it that way.

The producer who is so bound by tradition that he runs a ranch by habit rather than active management is a rare exception. Such a ranch may look good for a while, because there's a lot of common sense tied up in tradition. But without a willingness to try new ideas, the potential for profit erodes.

You may hear about or read about something that interests you, often because it seems like it could save you time or money, or allow you to make more money. Maybe a

son or daughter has recently joined the business. Young people inject new ideas, many worth exploring.

Salesmen want you to try something, almost always backed by research, but look at where, under what management and with what kind of cattle. Think about anything and everything that could go wrong, and also what could go right. If you decide to try something new, it should be with reason to believe that at worst, your bottom line will be the same as before.

What stops you is usually some element of risk, so look for ways to hedge. If torn between two plans, try it one way in one pasture, or on half the cows.

Try the latest technology or idea in a controlled experiment. Don't guess but investigate to fill in the blanks on what were unknown factors. That way you can really measure a "dependant variable" such as pregnancy rate, or adjusted weaning weight as you vary something relating to nutrition.

Varying conditions over time, you can build a kind of database, or record of what works best on your place—you might even call it "historical research." This is the kind of work that has led some producers to shift calving seasons or feed, or settle on a particular type of cattle.

If you've done the on-farm research you may say, "I tried that; it doesn't work here." But did you give it a fair trial? It takes time, commitment and focus, with unbiased advice and interpretation. Watch out for unbiased but uninformed analysis, too—people who don't know enough to advise sometimes do so anyway.

Get to know the Extension beef specialist in your area, and talk about things you'd like to find out about your ranch and cattle. Many times, after enough discussion,

you'll find an opportunity to cooperate with the University on some truly scientific research that will get at what you want to know.

It's hard to run a cowherd without a little trial and error as you choose bulls, but one alternative is that of becoming a "test herd" for a seedstock operation. You can get in on the best genetics, sampling some new and promising bulls along with some of a breed's best as reference sires. Meanwhile you will have help from the seedstock operator and perhaps a breed association in building your database as you contribute to a larger one.

Genetic trials take especially long-term commitment and focus on long-established targets. You might aim to fill demand for a leading premium brand, or aim for the area of 70% Choice and 70% Yield Grade 1 and 2, in addition to improved cowherd production. You'll need to chart your progress over time..

In the next edition of *Black Ink*, we'll look at the thermometer. Questions? Call toll-free at 877-241-0717.

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