



*Plan ahead to sell  
what the market wants*

Get 'em in the truck, slam the door, wait for the check. How much planning goes into your cattle marketing? Across the country, it varies from long-term contract holders to those who cut out a few head now and then to pay bills. Either extreme can leave money on the table.

Jumping from one sales outlet to the next every year won't build your reputation or tell you if you're selling what that market wants. But you can get in a rut, too. Selling to the same buyer for 10 years or hauling calves to the same auction for 20 years doesn't say enough. You may have good reasons for maintaining that marketing channel, but don't let tradition lead the way.

In most cases, you can't be sure you got a fair price, and you don't know if a simple adjustment in breeding or management could increase profitability. Does the repeat buyer recommend a health program and share subsequent cattle performance information with you? Some do; start asking for it.

Most producers sell at auction without knowing if they have the kind of calves that make money for buyers. If you only have a few calves to sell, it's tough to rise above just "getting rid of them" at weaning. One way to gain control is to organize a pool of similar genetics and management, working with your auction manager, Extension agent and seedstock supplier.

If you sell enough good-looking calves to fill a feedlot pen or more each year, you might top the auction with no other word but your name. That can be a source of pride as well as income, but you can do better by adding today's most valuable commodity-- information.

What information does the market value besides appearance? Selling calves to or partnering with a feedlot could be the best way to find out. While all information is worth something, sometimes it doesn't work in the cow-calf producer's favor. A cattle feeder may breathe a sigh of relief that he didn't "get stuck with" the calves you wanted to get rid of, if he learned they were from the same place that produced poor performing calves in the past.

You want to be able to state positive information, and it takes planning to create a set of marketable facts. One way to do that is by making sure your beef genetics and management conform to the requirements of an existing producer alliance. That's especially helpful if the health program is based on stated requirements of regular buyers or allied feedlots

If your cattle don't have the genetic background to fit well in any alliance, take a step in the right direction with your next bull selection. Meanwhile, make the most of what you have by following a health and weaning program favored by several feedlots and buyers who pay more for knowing management background.

Feedlot surveys from Colorado and Oklahoma indicate cattle feeders will pay more if they know the details of your calves having gone through any veterinarian-approved vaccination schedule. Implant history and nutritional management also ranked high. On the genetic side, they would pay more for knowing calves' registered sire

numbers, providing those numbers supported both performance and carcass value. Past carcass data was prized at least as highly as past feedlot gain performance in these polls.

Cattle feeders would like to know everything about calves before bidding, but for most of them, reality is knowing a fair amount about fewer than a third of the cattle they feed. Virtually all feedlots see more value in taking it a step beyond knowing to coordinating.

Little things like knowing you gave the implant they recommend (if any), when the first respiratory disease vaccine was given, when the boosters were and whether they were killed or live vaccines—all according to recommendations. Increasingly, ranchers hook up with feedlots and let their veterinarians get together. The result is a unified health and weaning plan that maximizes calves' opportunity to realize their potential.

In the next edition of *Black Ink*, we'll take a closer look at the folks who send us the signals—consumers. Questions? Call toll-free at 877-241-0717.

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