



Truth can be inconvenient

By Steve Suther

“Rrrringggg . . . rrrringggg . . . rrrringggg . . .” Hello?

“Yes, I was calling to let you know there’s a calf out on the road over here and we think it’s yours.”

Don’t you just hate that? Especially at dawn or worse, dusk? For a minute or two, most of us harbor negative feelings for the caller. Sure, they saved a whole lot of trouble, but we hate to deal with it right then and admit our fences are that poor, our calves that clever.

Say you worked for years to get a few heifers that seem bred to start a new foundation herd. The first test comes as Doc Jones closes his eyes and frowns after a long minute, announcing, “She’s open.” When he says two more of those darlings are merely feedlot heifers, you might want to hit him.

The meteorologist on Channel 2 says it looks like rain, but your hay is down. Change channels, quick. Maybe the local weatherman will downplay those chances. If not, turn off the TV and walk away under your own cloud of gloom.

Whether your summer help tells you a brockleface calf is limping or reports the fatal result of a lightning strike, you can’t help your initial reaction. Most news is either good or bad, but how we react to it can make it better or worse.

Nearly 2,500 years ago, a Greek play noted our natural tendency to hate the bearer of bad news. Shakespeare used “shoot the messenger” as a plot device 400 years ago because it rings true. The bearer may also be compared to the scapegoat metaphor: an easy target for blame, sometimes applied to electronic scales, your dog or an auctioneer.

People cuss “the media” for calling attention to problems, forgetting that’s why we have a free press. Good news is what is supposed to happen, only better. We have a right to know, even a responsibility to know some things. Yet, human nature makes us recoil at news that paints an unwelcome reality.

In the cattle business as in life, we constantly make assumptions. If we try to live up to our responsibilities, we constantly test them, or sometimes hire Doc Jones to test them. He takes no pleasure in finding open heifers in a breeding herd, but he may take satisfaction in knowing he helped you test some theories.

Say that, during a fit of blaming the salebarn for your calves' price, you decided to feed them all the next year. There is much potential for good and bad news, and even more for finding scapegoats.

Cattle feeders who pioneered the constructive policy of sharing all data with producers will tell you they lost a lot of customers that way. It was easier to blame the feedlot for ruining good cattle than to accept that a big share of the blame should go to the ranch.

There are often good reasons to switch feedlots, but don't include the willingness to help you improve your cattle and mutual profitability. If you keep feeding the same basic cattle at different feedlots each year hoping for different results, it's like changing TV channels hoping for a different forecast on the same storm. Some folks might even call it crazy.

After the feedlot, cattle must pass through the most often-blamed sector of the beef industry. If you have ever looked at carcass data on your cattle, your first reaction may be that a couple of those Yield Grade 4s should have been 3s. Or maybe you vowed to send cattle to a different packer next time because of poor quality grade.

Human error is still part of the system, packers and USDA graders admit, but with few exceptions, carcass data is a useful tool for herd improvement. The silver lining in any bad news is that it can help guide your herd selection and management.

Next time in *Black Ink*, Miranda Reiman will look at the finer points of feeding food animals. Questions? Call toll-free at 877-241-0717 or e-mail steve@certifiedangusbeef.com.

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