



## *Are you producing widgets?*

By Steve Suther

I wonder where Mack is today. When I knew him, he was a human-resource manager at a big publishing house. He once told me, “Magazines are like widgets. We produce a certain number and sell them through subscriptions and advertising.”

Part of Mack’s job was to fire people who showed too much creativity or tried to break the widget mold, and replace them with more suitable yes-persons. Fortunately, as management also broke the mold, he left publishing. I think he went back to the widget industry, but he could have taken up ranching somewhere.

Too many ranchers think a calf is a widget, albeit a living one that can get sick if you keep it after weaning. That comes from having too few calves to care for, or too many for the time and resources allotted.

In the beef industry, widgets are commodity calves. Nothing sets them apart unless it is something bad, such as sickness. There will always be widget-calf specialists who want to buy such animals, provided the price is low enough.

On the other hand, Mack has no authority over you if you decide to break out of the commodity mold and add value. If you are a small producer, you can think about an earlier time when cattle were valued by individual appraisal. Part of ranching is to understand that you produce them to eat, but it’s OK to name calves if it helps lift them above the ranks of widgets.

On bigger farms and ranches, the market once forced producers to sell as if all cattle were approximately the same, so many dollars a head at first, and then so many cents a pound. But that was a century ago. Reputations based on buyer experience began to differentiate calves by source a few decades ago.

Buyers began to specialize in higher-value cattle, for which they always paid a price higher than the widget base. We have the genetics and technology today to deal individually with large numbers of cattle, adding information and value.

With information, producers see clear differences between cows, and they cull or select replacements accordingly. They know it's not enough to use a bull with a certain hide color. It has to be a bull with certain numbers from a certain breed.

The last stronghold of widgetry had been the stocker industry, and maybe that's where Mack found a home. Though centered in the Southern Plains, stocker country is not so much a region as a state of mind. Some operators there still don't think beyond stocking rates and pounds of calf.

Those who have profitably broken the mold are linked to premium order buyers, cow-calf networks of known genetics and feedlots that contract for their services with incentive bonuses for health, performance and quality.

Breaking out means sharing risk with owners in other segments. That means sharing decisions, too, so there is less backgrounding on maintenance rations. There's less use of growth implants on go-slow diets that will compromise later grading ability. Only widget-oriented feeders specialize in compensatory gain from thin calves these days.

Maybe it helped Mack to think of people as widgets, too—especially when it came to firing. But obviously, people are individuals and he was proof of that.

Flying over farm country, a pilot sees whole communities, forests, fields and herds. But when it's time to land, he looks for specifics and finds his way to the correct runway.

It takes a balance of big- and little-picture focus to get most things done right. To discern quality, you have to look at the people, plants, animals and even widgets as individuals. They have key differences that can help us better appreciate them. The shift in focus adds depth to your judgment ability and, more often than not, dollars to your bottom line.

Next time in *Black Ink*, Miranda Reiman will look at yesterday's science. Questions? Call toll-free at 877-241-0717 or e-mail [steve@certifiedangusbeef.com](mailto:steve@certifiedangusbeef.com).

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