



Old science = dated management

By Miranda Reiman

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Every medicine cabinet in America used to contain a mercury thermometer. Now, the last thing parents want to do when a child feels ill is to stick a poisonous metal in their mouth, even though the danger lies only in a cracked or broken instrument. What changed?

The medical community found new information about the everyday product, learned of its hazards. That challenged scientists to find new ways of completing the same task: glass alcohol and then digital thermometers were born.

For many years, the mercury thermometer was the best way we knew to determine temperature. But the best we know can be wrong. After all, a rain dance was once considered the best way to make it rain. Anodyne necklaces were ideal for curing the gout and radioactive water was the panacea that could cure just about anything.

Scientific knowledge comes from observation and tested theories, which eventually discredited all of the above best solutions.

That's the basis of science in our constantly changing world, which was once known to be flat. Imagine the disadvantage any modern society would face if it refused to believe the world is round.

It's not about knowing everything. Even if that were possible, the most important thing to know is that every "fact" is subject to change with new evidence.

Beef industry research that led to undisputed facts a few decades ago has been revisited in recent years. In fact, new studies and trials are being conducted as you read this that may have a significant impact on your operation, if you let them.

As our society advances, we'll continue to find easier and better ways to do things. Raising high-quality beef cattle profitably will always mean using the best we know—while observing and communicating to find better ways.

Our research agenda is driven by the dollars we think are at stake. Prior to the early 1990s, when almost all cattle were marketed live, few studies explored impacts on carcass merit. Rather,

they focused on how to efficiently increase pounds of red meat—a worthy goal, but incomplete in a consumer-focused modern world.

Anyone who ignores beef quality effects today should be careful walking too close to the edge of their world.

People used to think cattle needed a backgrounding phase to put more age on them. Knowing calves on restricted diets will make up for it with “compensatory gain” in the feedlot, many operators used to rough them through the winter. When grade became more of a factor, research led them to begin targeting higher average daily gains because everyone knew cattle needed more time to grade.

Now, many producers are supplementing to increase gains or skipping the backgrounding phase entirely. They’re finding out that, although the calves may need a little extra T.L.C., pushing their rate of gain can improve their marbling, and cash flow back to the ranch.

Universities and private companies alike now include effect on marbling, or quality grade, in research trials. They are taking it a step further as a response to market demand for premium Choice, the quality threshold to many premium brands. That helps redefine grade-friendly products and practices. Something that simply maintains a level of low Choice may drop you out of the running for higher grid premiums.

Take your implanting strategy for example. Maybe you found something that worked a long time ago and have stuck with it. If you set your potency and timing based on data that’s older than your kids, you may want to revisit it. Think about how much they changed in 20 years. Cattle, products and ideas have evolved, too.

Today’s genetics are much different than those from your starter herd, or the one you took over from your grandpa. Expected progeny differences (EPDs) have revolutionized selection to meet changing needs. Unless you have ignored EPDs, your cattle have more growth potential and efficiency, capable of harvest earlier than those found in pastures and feedlots even a decade ago.

If your management hasn’t caught up to those genetics, you could be doing your cattle more harm than good. For example, you don’t need to start “spring calving” in January, and you may be able to wean much earlier than in the past.

You don’t need to read every study in the latest *Journal of Animal Science*, and you sure don’t want to change sound management on a whim. Just consider from time to time that even age-old recommendations might be adjusted and improved from year to year.

Next time in *Black Ink*, Steve Suther will consider time and timing. Questions? Call toll-free at 877-241-0717 or e-mail mreiman@certifiedangusbeef.com.

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