



What informs you?

By Steve Suther

Take another look at your cattle. Get out your records and take a deeper look. You think they're the right kind, but you may have plans to "improve" them through breeding and management.

What would constitute improvement? How do you know you're on the right track?

What informs you on matters of breed type and adaptability? What you do next is up to you of course, but what informs you?

Profit, you say. But your projected profit is filled with assumptions, both near- and long-term. How can you feel confident that your plan will really result in more profit? Or if lifestyle trumps profit in your view, how do you know your plan will really enhance your life? Some people subscribe to professional advisory services or hire consultants.

There is certainly a wealth of knowledge available, mostly free, through the government's Agriculture Research Service and Extension services. It's still the kind of knowledge that is founded on research and empirical evidence. And although neatly summarized, you are free to interpret and apply as you wish.

Much of this information is available online, along with research results and interpretations from thousands of commercial interests. Most of it is valuable, if you can properly apply the pinch of salt where bias may be involved.

No doubt, the information revolution of our time is the internet. An estimated two million times each minute, somebody searches for an answer online via the giant Web presence that is Google.com. Oh, wait. That was a minute ago, and should be recalculated now to be more accurate.

One side effect of surfing the Web for answers is that your request and the answers pass through various filters, some of which return answers that seem better suited to different questions than what you asked. That can help you think outside the box, but keep in mind that most potential answers are simply somebody else's opinion.

In fact, internet user “consensus” often rivals peer-reviewed science in the collection of Google answers, especially in the “wiki” forums such as WikiAnswers and Wikipedia (which now rivals the legendary Encyclopedia Britannica as a reference).

Wiki comes from a Hawaiian word for quick, and is used online to denote a new kind of peer review: the Web-surfing public. The casual observer can interpret what is “chosen as best answer” or not currently “disputed” as hard facts, but many of these are a bit soft or may not serve as something to take to the bank.

If you find answers that don’t hold water in your experience, join the wiki community and propose a better answer. After all, what our society “knows for fact” will find its way into pop-culture, fiction and movies, until it might as well be true.

Make sure the wiki community doesn’t lead you toward fads that are only based on average users who do not understand what is practical on the farm.

Web-based information has another emerging giant, besides Google and the wiki-info base, and that is the “social media” such as Facebook, MySpace, YouTube and Twitter.

If you have not kept up with developments online in the last couple of years, or are in the minority unfamiliar with this type of site, they are worth exploring to stay current with friends, family and, yes, news.

Realizing the power of social media, with its hundreds of millions of users and followers, the business, academic and media worlds have established a solid presence, and that includes most agricultural Extension services. Just try Googling “Extension Facebook” or “Extension Twitter.”

You can find the Black Ink trademark out there, too. For example, associate Laura Nelson coordinates and maintains the site at <http://twitter.com/BlackInkBasics> with “cattle management news, tips, ideas and experiences to profitably improve quality,” in the spirit of this column, to which she also contributes.

Those cattle in your front pasture will evolve according to your informed opinions. The growing resources you can draw upon don’t change where the buck stops. But they may not always include perspectives on where that dollar originates, on equal footing with practicality.

It’s up to you to sort through the most valid results, answers and tweets.

Next time in *Black Ink*[®] Miranda Reiman will look at beef production’s healthy future. Questions? Call toll-free at 877-241-0717 or e-mail steve@certifiedangusbeef.com.

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