



Earn their votes

By Steve Suther

We face choices in November that will shape our common future, for better or worse. We must decide who will lead our government.

Debates serve to educate us and political ads try to score points by pointing out one candidate's good points, another's flaws. Sometimes, convinced that none of the leading contenders will serve, we turn to third-party, independent or write-in alternatives.

Less profound though far-reaching, voting takes place in supermarkets and restaurants every day. Americans may "vote their wallets" on a special Tuesday in autumn, but consumers vote with their wallets continuously.

What's for dinner? The beef industry has a catchy tagline that aims to remind us of the answer. But it takes more than slogans to win the center of more plates each evening.

Certainly, beef is a strong candidate for the plate. Its platform is taste, and shoppers expect it to deliver on each of the planks: tenderness, juiciness and flavor. While other protein candidates like to talk about price, beef cuts to the bottom line: value.

Beef maintains or increases its share in the House of Consumers or the Senate Supermarket by delivering more value. Candidates with less to offer must always accept fewer votes or lower prices, but beef plays that game only at the risk of its market position.

There are niche candidates within the beef party. Some of them run clean campaigns and make a worthy complement for the House or Senate. But others turn on their own party to get ahead, using emotional appeals not backed by science to gain the plate.

To be sure, beef has an emotional connection to consumers. There are memories of Mom's pot roast, a summer barbecue at the lake and a candlelit dinner and marriage proposal. But with great power comes great responsibility. Beef marketers do well to keep their claims grounded in the science of taste.

Consumers get enough confusing crosstalk from activists with an ox to gore – a metaphor any vegan candidate should appreciate. Passionate and misleading appeals to stop eating red meat are common tactics on Web sites.

In the face of attacks from outside, the collective interests of beef producers are best served through solidarity, education and product improvement.

We must remember that our public is typically several generations removed from the farm or ranch. If they remember anything about the production side, it is romanticized by the passage of time since that simpler day. Grandpa's few name-bearing cows kept the family fed, "once upon a time," didn't they?

Many consumers believe all cows are spotted black and white, a steer and a cow are the same, and cows with horns are bulls. Some also think that a heifer is a breed of cow.

They trust the big-city media to filter the news for them, but most of those reporters have no real understanding of production agriculture. That's why it's common to find bias toward popular perceptions of beef, regardless of science.

The more any of us disregard science, the more risk of a credibility gap for beef. If producers fail to include selection for traits that add more taste, or manage to ignore marbling, consumers will notice inconsistency in the platform. They will limit their votes to trusted brands that always deliver on a promise, or back away from all beef to a lower value candidate that can take its flavor from whatever sauce is on the plate.

Every day that a beef consumer passes over the category and votes for another protein is a defeat for the platform. You may think that one vote is not important, but there are millions who can follow suit. Collectively, their votes decide what you get paid.

Our campaign to earn their trust and dollar votes must never stop. By adding quality and consistency to the beef candidate, we can rally to win that center of the plate in more homes and restaurants across this country.

Next time in *Black Ink*, Miranda Reiman will look at reasons to keep calves in the fast lane to the finish line. Questions? Call toll-free at 877-241-0717 or e-mail steve@certifiedangusbeef.com.

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