



## *Quality is no accident*

By Steve Suther

If you see the word “quality” alone, it implies something good. You can emphasize that by adding “high,” or negate it with such modifiers as “poor” or “low.”

No need to obsess over a definition of beef quality, because it just means putting the consumer first. High quality is no accident; it’s intentional. The opposite is not usually true.

Millions of cattle are produced at least cost and sold at market-clearing prices without a care for consumers. Many of those cattle make money today at the expense of tomorrow, bleeding away beef demand. Their owners mean no harm.

Still, it takes a lot of intentional quality to make progress for the industry. While 26 million fed cattle go to market each year, only about half are USDA Choice, and most of them are barely over the Choice-Select line. The most recent National Beef Quality Audit concluded the greatest need is for more high Choice and Prime quality.

The market rewards you for quality, which often goes hand in hand with feedlot performance. But the market also rewards by the pound, and it is easier to produce pounds without regard for quality. That’s why the market keeps trying to bid more quality into the meat case.

As a beef consumer, you can relate to the problem. Unless your retail store offers a premium brand, you might figure somebody is messing up that good home-raised beef that you sold on the hoof. The lower half of beef by quality grade is hard to convert into satisfying meals.

The store may have simply underestimated its customers’ demand for quality.

Billions of pounds of beef are sold at “special” prices with no mention of grade or a quality eating experience. Store managers may think they are serving customer interests while doing a service for the beef industry, but they’re probably doing more for pork and poultry demand.

Again, they mean no harm, but beef can’t compete on price alone—it takes value.

Value is a function of time and money, and only one side of that equation relates to quality. Money is a commodity, and one dollar is like any other. It can buy things, but those things have value based on quality.

Of course, price is often one of the top considerations because unlike some commodities, money doesn't grow on trees. However, if you can afford it, you want food and drink that does more than keep you alive. You also want equipment that works and lasts a long time. You want legal advice that will stand up in court. Whether you are buying goods or services, you want quality.

Selling commodities is no fun when you're stuck with a supply as prices fall. Selling quality can lift you above the base market, to a level where craftsmanship and reputation make a difference in price because they make a difference in value.

A quality focus is a gift to the future. It puts others first, and aims for more than "acceptable." It keeps a balance sheet that includes the value of building the market and winning more customers. The gift of quality is rooted in the Golden Rule, and leads to a world where everybody wins.

As a beef consumer, what can you say when you cut into a tough steak or chew too long on a bland roast? If you cooked it right, you might wonder where it went wrong. The truth might have more to do with a lack of quality intent.

Take new steps next time around and move beyond production that simply meant no harm. Become a force for higher beef quality, from genetics to health and management, transferring information so the next partner in the chain can help deliver more beef that exceeds consumer expectations.

Next time in *Black Ink*, Miranda Reiman will look at the tools available to help you do that. Questions? Call toll-free at 877-241-0717 or e-mail [steve@certifiedangusbeef.com](mailto:steve@certifiedangusbeef.com).

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