



Ahead of the curve

From the moment of birth, we learn to breathe and adapt to this ever-changing world, ready for anything. Bring it on.

As breathing becomes automatic, so will walking, then talking, riding a bicycle, and driving a car for most people. Some will learn to swim, rope, ride, type, sew, fly and manage a business. Others will try and fail, but learn something.

The continuous process of trying to adapt to oncoming challenge can be described as a learning curve, with time along the bottom of a graph and knowledge along the side. It goes on as long as we do, with time marching on steadily but knowledge advancing at different rates. There's one overall curve of life's lessons, containing many individual curves.

A learning curve is rarely a straight line, but varies with the challenges we encounter. When something requires a lot of education in a short time, it presents us with a steep learning curve. If we become set in our ways, the curve flattens. One of the keys to success is to keep it steep, but not so steep that we fall back.

Getting into the cattle business can be like taking your first breath all over again. It certainly starts a new and never-ending learning curve. When a family goes into ranching, everyone learns on different slopes. Older members may be way up the hill on business management, but need help from the next generation pulling them up to their level in computerized records or e-mail communications.

If you've been in cattle so long that it has become second nature, you still have to deal with the onrush of change. At the most basic level, there's the weather. The more diversified your operation, the more things can change and initiate new learning curves.

Look up “learning curve” through an Internet search engine and you will find many references to commodity trading and safety training. Both of these can relate to cattle production, but you can imagine several others.

Calving heifers? You’ll learn of the need for facilities, vigilance and scouting reports on the genetics. Retaining ownership after weaning? Health becomes more important, and genetic selection must consider postweaning traits. Dust-free facilities and convenient access to a treatment chute become critical.

Buying bulls? Know as much as you can about the bulls before you buy to avoid a steep learning curve about their performance and progeny in your herd. Many people buy in response to market signals, but experience teaches keeping everything in balance.

Mistakes become teachable moments. The beef industry, like each individual, has a common learning curve comprised of attempts to climb, and setbacks. The industry knows what kind of cattle it needs, but its members must confront change and market signals.

Every fad that has swept through the industry has initiated thousands of steep learning curves. Most fads start from a credible base, but grow out of control until the lessons are learned and there is remission, or a dynamic balance. To the extent that producers over-correct and jump from one fad to its polar opposite, cynics say the industry’s learning curve is more like a pendulum.

Along the many curves, bumps and potholes of learning, success is not always possible. But it helps to imagine that failure is impossible. Psychological studies bear out the wisdom of going into any new endeavor with a positive attitude. Always imagine success, set goals and develop strategies for the specific steps required to win.

Don’t just observe, but analyze what is happening. Participate as fully as you can; engage your ambition with regard to the endeavor. Keep records and rate the effectiveness of your strategies.

Next time in *Black Ink*, we’ll look at bias in the beef industry. Questions? Call toll-free at 877-241-0717 or e-mail cabsteve@aol.com. END