



## *Consider the source*

If you're selling, you like to hear people talk about your cattle's past feedlot performance as "fantastic," "amazing" or "incredible." As word gets around to potential bidders, this may change to "unbelievable," "unlikely" or "yeah, right." Buyers have an interest in minimizing the positive record to keep a lid on the price.

The quickest way for a writer to lose credibility is to write with obvious bias. The quickest way to discredit a witness in court is to establish that he or she was paid to testify. Yet, everyone acts out of motivation, be it emotion or money, and that amounts to bias.

Everyone with an opinion has a bias, even when backed by research. To mistrust people with bias is to mistrust everyone. You can't function that way in society, so you carry the proverbial shaker, knowing that every comment must be "taken with a grain of salt."

Since bias is universal in human society, we should allow for it rather than discount ideas because of a supposed taint. Political campaigns are the most obvious example where important facts are served up with large helpings of bias. Some of the bias resonates with our own conservative or liberal ideas, but we must sort out the truth from hundreds of slanted messages to decide who will represent us in government.

Communications media that are supported by advertising have a natural bias in favor of the companies that pay their bills, though professionalism keeps it in check. Television networks and major news media are often accused of a consistent news bias, usually liberal. Those who admit an opposing bias lead the charge: "Consider the source—what would you expect them to say?"

On the playing fields of sport, we employ referees to ensure fairness. Their job demands objectivity, but critics often see bias. Inexperienced refs may try to keep a balance by counteracting when they feel they have erred. Those from a small town may overcompensate at a home game, resulting in bias against family and friends. They soon retire.

Animal scientists know they can't eliminate bias, but their system of peer review and scholarship keeps it to a minimum. Young researchers are cautioned to avoid letting personal contacts or company contracts bias their results, and to maintain a conservative approach in discussing results.

Many texts have been written on experimental design to ensure random sampling and repeatability with blind trials where key facts are hidden to avoid psychological bias.

But another form of bias comes into play that cannot be controlled by peer review: the unasked question. We only make progress in the areas of research that are funded. If nobody with money wants to know, or if they fear an answer, the subject goes unexplored. And in the interest of the "politically correct" ideal, other questions are deemed too hot to handle. Competing interests or ideas may be maintained as tied for first place.

Back on the ranch, you can benefit from the huge body of research that has been done in ruminant nutrition. But who has the time, inclination or technical training to wade through all of the top theories? Bigger operations hire independent consulting nutritionists, but anyone can ask the local "feed company" nutritionist. Remember to apply the grain of salt, but keep in mind these professionals also must act in your interest to build credibility.

You keep trying new things, evaluating ideas and products. You judge them, so keep in mind where bias may cloud your ability. Did the weather give it a fair chance? What other outside factors may have interfered? Extremely negative or positive results are often not realistic in the long term.

Are you an optimist, a pessimist or a realist? Each is a bias, regardless of the self-labeled realist denials. If we think everything will work out for the better, we help make that happen, but we

can be too forgiving of poorly developed products or ideas. The opposite is true for pessimists.

Realists create their own illusion of being free from bias, and in doing so they close their eyes to it.

As you sort through industry, consumer, retail, restaurant, packer, feedlot, cow-calf, breed and regional bias, look for common themes to overcome traditional conflicts of interest.

Next time in *Black Ink*, we'll consider the effect of new beef products on cattle prices.

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