

Unlocking The Data Stronghold Fuel the Fires

BY STEVE SUTHER

If knowledge is power, data is fuel — gathered and converted by the fire of analysis into information and harnessed to provide that knowledge. Seasoned Angus producers know that the “Information Age” has been building up to evermore complex layers for decades. So why the renewed sense of urgency today to distill the mounting oceans of information into strategic action?

For one thing, producers without adequate information on their cattle are in danger of having a sustainable future pass by them. From retail and foodservice giants to major packers and feedlots, the concentration and consolidation that has transformed other livestock industries is at work in the beef business.

These forces are driven by economic efficiencies, and the most effective way the cow-calf sector can compete may be to employ some of the same strategies. As long as this is producer-directed, the beef industry stands apart as the one livestock industry that took control of its own destiny.

Take stock

As a plan of action, take stock of what you need to know. That should include the latest consumer trends, along with retail and foodservice product specifications. What is demand telling you to produce? Is it an important, growing and stable portion of overall demand that your cattle can be profitably adapted to satisfy? What are the risks and the rewards along the way?

Part of the answer is simply keeping up with beef industry news, but that’s only the start. You can’t make progress until you know more about your cattle. That’s true whether you have had registered cows on Angus Herd Improvement Records (AHIR) for 30 years, just enrolled your commercial herd in Angus Beef Record Service (BRS) or just put the first numbered ear tags in your cows this spring. The important thing is to move forward with knowledge.

Technology has provided the tools you need to advance quickly and accurately.

The new Angus BRS offers every producer using Angus genetics the opportunity to gain a complete understanding and profile of their commercial herd. Without that knowledge, bull selection is a guessing game. Your competition doesn’t guess.

You may be excited by industry changes, the rapid change that is possible by using expected progeny differences (EPDs), the growing premiums associated with producing high-quality yet lean beef. But be patient while measuring what you have. Consider what happens if you make changes before you have information.

One of the most promising keys to effective marketing is cooperation with neighbors, your seedstock supplier and feedlot.

Say that you have really gotten into Angus BRS, joined an alliance and developed a great working partnership with a feeder in the Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) Feedlot Licensing Program (FLP). Your feeder assures you the gain performance and individual carcass data can be transferred electronically for use in Angus BRS. But you need replacement bulls before you know anything beyond weaning weight. What should you do?

Take small steps

Take only small steps toward greater balance. Ideally, some of next year’s calves would be sired by the same bulls for year-to-year production comparisons. If you make big changes in the dark, few of next year’s calves will bear a resemblance to this year’s, and you still will be at square one in trying to determine where to go.

You must use individual identification, but even the electronic systems still require human initiative to match calf with cow. After you have the pairings recorded, be sure you have a plan for gathering all other data needed to gain the information you need.

The calves won’t weigh themselves in most systems, either, though a few innovators have nearly achieved in-line automation. Record product used, batch numbers and location for administration of vaccines, and treatments for any postweaning illness. Conduct these operations in coordination with your intended buyer or feeder to add value and to enhance beef quality.

Market your cattle in a way that is consistent with your growing need for individual information. Auction-market operators are finding innovative ways to address these needs, and feedlot steer tests offer a glimpse of what some calves will do in the next industry segments.

One of the most promising keys to effective marketing is cooperation with neighbors, your seedstock supplier and feedlot. Many service-oriented feeders, including those partners in the FLP, will feed comingled pens of individually identified cattle. That’s an open door for producers and forward-thinking auction-market managers.

Through this higher level of service, combined with a little investment, what were once unknown commodity “sale-barn cattle” can return valuable data to fuel those analytical fires, sire progeny groups can be evaluated from several producers, and larger producers can evaluate different management techniques by group.

You can’t get something for nothing, but by working together, the investment in gathering data can be minimized. If you invest nothing and make no progress toward knowledge of your herd, don’t expect a bright future in beef production.

Remember, a little information can be dangerous. Value-based marketing is something on which to build over years — seedstock, commercial and postweaning segments working together in partnership toward consumer-focused targets established through packers.

Don’t try to analyze the data that can bring light while remaining in the dark — you need other eyes with other perspectives to weigh in and help build your future. Once calves are weaned, fed and harvested and the data is in the bin, further advice usually costs nothing. But its value can be priceless.



Editor’s note: Steve Suther is director of industry information for Certified Angus Beef (CAB) LLC.