

# Vet Call

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## Animal health, production information on the Internet

I know many people don't use the Internet, so this article probably won't be of interest to everyone. I apologize for being exclusionary, but because the majority of people involved in agriculture have access to the Internet and because of its growing importance as a method of information exchange, I think a discussion of Internet use is appropriate.

Information always has been important to agriculture, especially today. This emphasis is due in great part to the computer.

Computers not only allow veterinarians, animal scientists, engineers, teachers and others to produce a greater volume of work, but they also allow for increased sharing of information through the Internet.

In fact, it could be argued that today information overload is a greater problem than lack of information for many people. This brings me to the question, "How can people in the beef industry use the Internet to find information of interest or value?"

Information only has value if the data, observations or thoughts that went into its development are accurate. Because accuracy is never perfect, all information has some level of uncertainty. In addition, information only has value (except for academic interest) if it can be put to use.

**These statements are meant** to serve as cautions when using any type of information, not only that obtained from the Internet. Because of the vast amount of

information available from the Internet, these cautions are especially important when using Web-based sources.

I have come into contact with extremely valuable Web sites for producers, veterinarians, consumers and others in the beef industry. I also have seen Web sites that contain a great deal of misinformation, mere opinions that are presented as facts and downright deception.

The source of information can be a good

indication of its accuracy. Open letters and editorials usually are one person's opinion, and they may or may not be based on knowledge of the subject.

Advertisements and testimonials are produced from a biased perspective. Even literature from respected institutions (government, academia and advocacy groups) can be biased.

I make this point to encourage you to exercise a bit of skepticism as you read almost anything (even this column). But generally, I place the most value on information generated by universities and the U.S. government.

The accuracy of information can be evaluated best by a lack

of bias, substantiation over time and a logical connection to other accurate information. All sources should be subjected to such a reader review (even university- and government-generated information).

One of the strengths of the Internet is its ability to share great ideas with a large

audience with little expense. Of course, the danger is that unfounded or harmful ideas also can be shared with a large audience. I am most skeptical of information that is not backed by research and information that is contrary to most conventional knowledge.

**Generally speaking**, if you search for specific diseases or production problems on a search engine, you will find few resources. I have found the most useful sites for the beef industry by starting at a university site and locating its animal science department, veterinary college or human nutrition department.

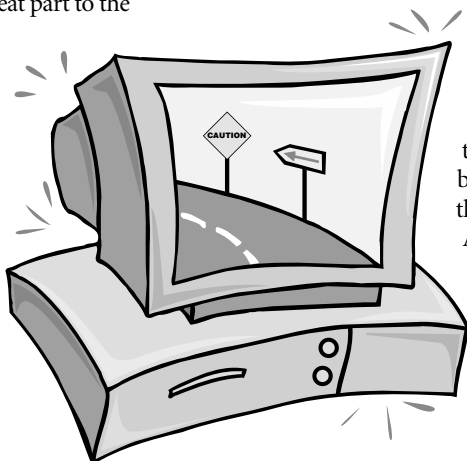
Sites like those of the American Angus Association ([www.angus.org](http://www.angus.org)), the National Cattlemen's Beef Association ([www.beef.org](http://www.beef.org)) and state beef associations can be great starting places when searching for information. Also useful are U.S. government sites, including the National Agricultural Library ([www.nal.usda.gov](http://www.nal.usda.gov)), the Center for Veterinary Medicine ([www.fda.gov/cvm](http://www.fda.gov/cvm)) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture search and help page ([www.usda.gov/search](http://www.usda.gov/search)). Many of these sites have links to others that allow you to find a vast amount of information.

In addition to the free information available on the Internet, information for a fee is available. These include online courses, some Extension publications and books that may be difficult to find locally. Use of commercial book-selling sites is a convenient way to find resources.

As more people access the Internet, agriculture and many other aspects of our lives increasingly will use this technology to share information. How well each of us evaluates the accuracy and usefulness of the information will determine how well we turn it into knowledge and sound decision-making.

Happy surfing.

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