

# Survive and Thrive

*Cattle industry professionals share tips and insight.*

*Story & photo by Laura Conaway, Certified Angus Beef LLC*

It's one thing to start, another to survive.

What makes the difference?

That may seem like a trick question with subjective answers, but ranchers will cite common denominators — tricks of the trade that apply.

The rest, they'll say, comes down to faith. You've got to have a lot of that, too.

For the young people just out of college and looking to graze a herd, for the couple who quit their day jobs to do the cow thing full-time, for the family who decided to transition from one breed to another, what's the recipe for success?

Three cattlemen and women give their best advice.

## Have a plan

Have a plan for both day-to-day and worst-case scenarios.

"If you wait until you're in the middle of the drought, it's too late," says Joe Leathers, manager of 6666 Ranch, near Guthrie, Texas. "If you wait until the fire has completely devastated your country, you're going to be sitting there in the middle of smoking ashes."



*From left, Jerry Bohn, Joe Leathers and Lydia Yon offer advice on surviving and thriving in the cattle business at the 25th Cattlemen's College®.*

For the practical-minded, it's about being on the same page with your family and partners, Lydia Yon says. The matriarch of Yon Family Farms, near Ridge Spring, S.C., says that was the case for her and her husband, Kevin.

"People around us were building a new house, and we were building a commodity shed," she says. "Someone was buying a new car, and we were buying a new mixer wagon. Everything we made, we put right back into the operation and avoided purchases of non-tangible things we couldn't pass on to our children."

## The big picture

See the big picture, not just what's outside your door, Yon says. It's the little, everyday things that have been their key to survival. Her family applies that to their role as a seedstock producer, paying special

attention to the genetics they stack in their Angus herd.

"They need to be the right kind of genetics that will provide that end consumer with the delicious eating experience they crave," she says.

"The decisions you make, I don't care how small

your operation is, affect a lot more people than just you," Leathers adds. Be conscious of that.

## Learn from others

"Glean from those who have survived in the past; go talk to them," Leathers advises.

The Yons listened to people who were older and wiser and who wanted to bestow advice to the young couple when they got started. They haven't stopped.

"The very smartest day of our lives was the day we graduated with our animal science degrees," Yon jokes. "Ever since, we've learned how dumb we can become."

## Relationships

Jerry Bohn, owner and recently retired manager of Pratt Feeders, Pratt, Kan., ties it all back to the men and women he's worked for,

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alongside and hired.

"It's the people," he says. "People, relationships, being a part of the community, that's really what it's all about and what made my career successful."

For Yon, relationships and the awareness that people may be observing from afar drive her toward success. Both led to land offered for lease and owners' willingness to finance cattle.

"People are watching what you do," she says. Because of those relationships, "we expanded without a lot of huge investments."

### Think outside your fences

With decades under his hat, Leathers encourages young people to "be an independent thinker. Too many people aren't."

Yon credits youth and passion for success in starting something from scratch.

"To us it didn't feel unusual that two people with children under the age of 5 would start a farm with 100 acres and basically nothing," she says, looking back. People told them they couldn't.

"We got experience, got involved and got busy," she says.

### Choose good partnerships

"What can you do to be different?" Bohn asks. He credits partnerships with *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) and U.S. Premium Beef (USPB) as some of the best Pratt has made. With CAB, "our involvement caused us to do a paradigm shift," he says. Prior to 2003, Pratt was selling more commodity cattle. "We began to look at high-quality cattle, producing for high-end markets."

Today, Bohn says, close to 70% of the cattle in their feedyards are destined to sell on a grid.

Get experience, manage for risk, figure out your strengths and outsource your weaknesses. Those

and more can take a person from merely surviving to thriving.

It's about being realistic with every decision you make, Leathers says, and there will be plenty. As young people, "it's easy to have rose-colored glasses. Survival has a definite connotation of bruises and a little blood. It's not always going to be fun, and you're going to have to weather the storm."

It's all worth it in the end. On that they agree.

The three presented at the 2018 Cattle Industry Convention & NCBA Trade Show in Phoenix, Ariz., Jan. 30, in a Cattlemen's College® session titled, "True Stories of Beef Business Survival." 

*Editor's Note: Laura Conaway is a producer communications specialist for Certified Angus Beef LLC.*

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