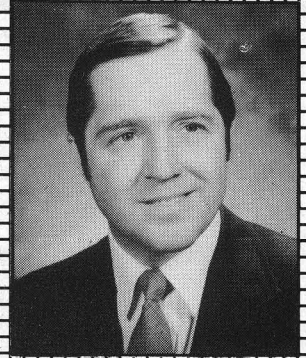


# LEAD IN

*Richard L. Spader*

Executive Vice President, American Angus Association



The attitude many cattle people have about the beef checkoff program is dangerous. For example, in a recent issue of *National Cattleman* were four letters to the editor—one supported the program and three expressed dissatisfaction in one form or another. This seems to be about the average ratio, for and against the program, that appears in many publications.

If we keep this up, we could well talk ourselves right out of approving the check-off program next year. Failure to approve the program will dash most hopes for bringing the U.S. beef industry into the 20th century before we are confronted with demands of the 21st century less than thirteen years from now.

Too many cattle producers sit around and carp about the program. They fuss about the cost of hiring spokespersons; they are put off by the tone of the ads, or they just resent the \$1 per head deduction for advertising and promotion.

The problem, it appears, is not the ads nor the movie stars in the ads nor the cost of the program. The problem seems to be that these cattle producers and others like them really don't believe, in the face of all evidence to the contrary, that the beef industry has a problem. If they did, then their attitude would be much different. Most of us, if we were as sick as beef demand has been and still is, would search out the best doctor we could find. We wouldn't worry about what he looked like or whether his wife was nice. We wouldn't care whether he drove a Lincoln or a

Lynx. All we would want to know is how good he is at doing his job. We would demand results, not complain about how he achieves them. But many don't apply this formula to our suffering beef industry.

Instead, what do we get? One lady wrote that her "beef-fed" daughter would work for a lot less than Cybill Shepherd. "No wonder we farmers are broke," she said. Don't bother her with the fact that farmers were going broke long before the checkoff, and that saving \$1 a head on all cattle they sell would have no measurable effect on their ability to pay off their debts. I won't pass judgement on her "beef-fed" daughter's ability to sell more beef than Miss Shepherd.

Another writer said we should have a sports figure or a country singer, or both, pushing beef. Movie stars do get into trouble now and then, but spare us from sports figures or country singers. A third self-appointed critic grouched that he, and other cattlemen he has talked with, "have not been impressed" with the TV ads. His conclusion is "... it will be very difficult to ensure the passage of the referendum." Well, he is right about that, if nothing else.

As far as I could tell, none of these people claimed to be experts in advertising or public relations. They are about as well qualified to evaluate an advertising program as Cybill is to evaluate their cattle management program. They just don't like what they see—a bit like picking their doctor based on his office decor rather

than upon his intelligence and ability.

No one mentioned, for example, that the advertising agency in charge of the beef advertising campaign is ranked among the best in the nation. The critics did not seem to know or care that studies done since the campaign started indicate that consumers remember the ads, like the message, and get hungry for beef when they hear or see them.

Even more important, the shallow criticism ignores the fact that already attitudes about beef are changing. We are a long way from pushing demand back to what it was in the 1970s, but finally we appear to be headed in the right direction. And much of this change has been fostered by programs funded by the check-off. Cut off the flow of money and we'll cut off these programs.

So the next time someone tells you that they don't like Cybill or James, or that we are paying them too much money, or that the program doesn't work, or that cattle producers just can't afford to invest \$1 per animal sold to support advertising and promotion—give them the facts.

We must determine soon how we will conduct our business in the 21st century. In the meantime we can't afford to be held back by those cattle people who still operate with a 19th century mentality.

AJ