

# Talk, Listen, Look, Learn

BY STEVE SUTHER

**A**s far as you know, everything's fine. You maintain a healthy cow herd of improving genetic potential and give the usual calf shots at branding and weaning. Calves either top the market or sell to the same order buyer every year. Are you ready to feed? As far as you know, yes — but why would you?



PHOTO COURTESY OF B&B CATTLE CO.

The market is studying your calves, so it will pay you to know more than the market. You're ready for a new level of education. Like any higher learning, it could be the key to more income if the lessons are applied. In this school of hard knocks, teachers and pupils are partners who trade places frequently. The only constant is communication.

Meet the teacher-classmates: quality-focused custom cattle feeders who want to feed your cattle and to earn your repeat business. There are hundreds of "schools" from which to choose — including 70 Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) licensed feedlots in 18 states — from farm lots to huge complexes on the Plains, one to fit any need.

"The central theme is communication," says McLean Feedyard Ltd. manager Neal Odom, McLean, Texas. "And it's



a two-way street. It's not just a feedyard that has to ask all the right questions, but the cow-calf guy also has to tell the feeder every detail about the background on those cattle."

It pays both sides to get involved in discovery if they aim to be partners, adds Derik Bohr, manager of B&B Cattle Co. Inc., Holdrege, Neb. Unless there is knowledge about your calves, they are among the millions of commodity cattle, he notes.

"There are a lot of good cattle on good programs," Bohr says. "It's not so much that we need

to change a program as to coordinate with it."

Farther north and east, on the Minnesota-Iowa border south of Harmony, Minn., sits Corn Beef Ltd., a 2,000-head custom feedlot where manager Chuck Feldman wants to diversify with retained-ownership calves this fall. The last time he tried anything that young, they were weaned at the yard. *Bawling calves*, he called them. This year he hopes to find customers who will coordinate a vaccination schedule and wean four or five weeks on the farm before shipping to the feedlot.

## Relationships wanted

Feldman wants to know all he can about those calves and their owners. He knows about the 20-cow owners who sell to backgrounders at local auctions — his buyers currently

purchase many of those to fill yearling orders. "Having a coordinated vaccination program is huge, but the cow-calf guys interested in retained ownership know that. We just need to know more about each other," he says.

Those customers may be in the same county or across the country, he figures.

"No matter where they are, if the potential is there, I'll drive out to see their place and invite them here to try and establish a relationship," Feldman says. "Communication will take care of little things like, 'Well, I assumed you were going to do that.' But the big thing is knowing how the cattle were brought up, if they've been on lush pasture or in brush, how they were handled — that all helps."

For New Mexico cattle feeder Fred Poling, the three most important areas that could benefit from feedlot-ranch coordination are vaccination, mineral and breeding programs. CAB quality control officer and assistant manager of Double A Feeders, Clayton, N.M., Poling says involvement in breeding decisions is the next target for his company. "We haven't gotten into that yet, but that's where we want to be," he says. "We see more and more people going with black Angus bulls, and some are better than others."

Bohr says some customers ask them to pick their bulls, but more common is coordination in the vaccination and mineral areas. In fact, all the custom feeders mentioned mineral balance on the farm or ranch as a key to successful feeding.

Steve Bohr, Derik's partner and father, began working with B&B's Montana customers and Montana State University animal scientists several years ago, looking for reasons why excellent quality calves from the area didn't live up to their potential on feed.

## Copper lessons

Forage, soil and blood tests, and liver biopsies traced the problem to mineral

antagonisms that tied up copper. Though the cattle had enough of the trace element, bonding with other minerals made the copper unavailable — which compromised their immune systems and made vaccination ineffective.

Spike Mikkelsen, Hobson, Mont., attended a meeting where Bohr spoke. “I liked what he had to say about getting a little more value out of these cattle by getting everything balanced,” Mikkelsen says. “Montana had some of the best cattle in the country, but when they got to the feedlot, they fell apart. Bohr wanted to get together to find out why and what we have to do to prevent it.”

After the meeting, the two talked, toured each other’s facilities, and have been doing business for the three years since.

Copper can be critical in many areas of the country, Odom says. He keeps track of those areas and digs deeper when potential customers call his Texas feedlot. That’s after enduring a health wreck related to copper.

“About the time I think I have a list of questions that will uncover all I need to know about a set of cattle, somebody throws me a curve,” Odom says.

Too often, calves show up at the yard, “allegedly” having been through Odom’s recommended Vac-45 health program, “but we hit a snag,” he relates. “We follow up and find they missed a step and were still pulling and treating cattle at 45 days but went ahead and loaded them on the truck. Those situations just don’t get better when they arrive here.”

It was a similar case of rushed preconditioning earlier this year that was the copper wreck in the making. “They were still treating a few when they shipped but didn’t think it was too severe,” Odom recalls. “Three days after they got here, it was just a wreck — we can usually salvage it, but these never would come out of it.” After battling death and disease for weeks, Odom wondered about copper deficiency; blood tests



PHOTOS BY STEVE SUTHER

**Prewaning vaccination and nutrition will set the stage for how cattle will perform in the feedlot.**

confirmed that and marginal selenium.

“Those cattle had two modified-live four-ways [viral bovine respiratory disease (BRD) vaccines] before coming here and another two at the yard, but the blood work came back ‘marginal’ to ‘no titer’ for those vaccines because of the mineral deficiencies,” he recalls. “You can’t just give copper shots because it is one of the least readily absorbed minerals — that battle has to be won on the ranch.” That was Odom’s first experience with a copper wreck, and he has expanded his inquiries to make sure it is the last.

### **Anything for prevention**

Odom warns new customers about the risks of unknown mineral levels and health program shortcuts. “We might point out where they are opening themselves to trouble, but they have to decide if they want to take the risk. Most of the guys who talk about retained ownership are very receptive to doing things right. They want their cattle to do well and relate to anything on prevention,” he

says. Unfortunately, some prospects put off calling for the first time until a few days before they intend to ship.

That’s obviously too late for preweaning management. Odom says it takes the producer equivalent of long-range planning — “180 days” — for a successful retained ownership experience. It takes years for both sides to discover most of what can be done for prevention.

John Grande, Martinsdale, Mont., has retained ownership of calves from his 500-cow commercial Angus herd for 10 years, the last five with B&B Feeders. “We coordinate the health program, talk every year about what worked last year and whether we want to do anything different,” Grande says. The program combines outright war on BRD with a miserly approach to some other threats.

“We give everything a clostridial at birth and a four-way viral in May,” he says. The latter is a modified-live vaccine (MLV), fit into the window before breeding cows, which are also on a BRD vaccine program. “We’ll come back with another

four-way and clostridial at weaning and boost that with a third four-way after weaning and the IBR/BVD (infectious bovine rhinotracheitis/bovine viral diarrhea) [two-way] when they hit the feedyard. The fourth shot may seem like overkill, but those vaccines are relatively inexpensive, and it’s worked for us.”

Indeed, the record shows a marked reduction in medical treatments and processing costs at the feedlot. Over the first three years of adopting this program at B&B, Grande’s total for those costs fell from \$22 to \$9/head, including the two-way and two implants. “If we can keep it below that, we feel we’re doing pretty good,” he says.

This year he didn’t give any implants at the ranch. “We may get more bang for our buck at the feedyard,” Grande says. “At least, that’s what we’re trying.”

Grande tries other money-saving ideas and stays with what works. For example, he no longer includes a pasteurella vaccine, feeling well-covered by the heavy assault on basic BRD. The biggest money-saving idea

CONTINUED ON PAGE 224



goes back to mineral supplementation, however.

“We really stress getting the mineral levels in balance on the ranch, especially in the 30 days prior to weaning and the 50 days between then and shipping calves to the feedlot,” Grande says.

He has seen the proof in performance over the years. “When we sent calves that

hadn’t had the good vaccine program, the feeding record was poor. If we gave them a good vaccine program, things improved; if we gave them a good vaccine program, plus a good nutrition and mineral program, things improved a bunch more,” he continues. To ensure uniform daily intake, Grande feeds mineral in a pelletized ration.

**Investigating the cause of a wreck in the feedlot often reveals shortcuts during preconditioning, says Neal Odom, manager of McLean Feedyard Ltd., McLean, Texas.**

### Learn from records

“Once we get a turn of cattle under our belts,” Odom says, “then we have baseline data on which to make decisions and places to tweak. We might suggest weaning a little earlier, at a time when you have better nutrition and can still make an acceptable harvest date. And always have a Plan A and Backup B to work around the

weather. As we get several turns, there’s lots of conversation as to whether a problem is management, procedural or a genetically related health issue.”

After 10 turns, is there anything left for Grande to learn?

“I’ve been doing this long enough that it’s a whole lot more bewildering to me than it

CONTINUED ON PAGE 226

**Corn Beef Ltd. feedlot manager Chuck Feldman, Harmony, Minn., wants to diversify this fall with prevaccinated retained-ownership calves.**



may be to a new guy," he laughs. One thing that strikes him is the many old cows down to short teeth with only three or four progeny carcass records.

"It takes a lot of years, particularly on carcass data," he notes. "We don't often get data on heifers, so by the time a cow is 8 or 9 years old, you might only have data on three or four

calves. That's the least you can have before it gets meaningful — we're just getting to that point." More than half of the Grande Ranch Co. calves are sired by artificial insemination (AI), but that varies with the cows over time, so he places heavy emphasis on cow indexing.

The first year or two, Grande

settled for group data because he didn't have good enough records to tie individual information back to the cow. But not knowing worked on him.

"When you can see the hundreds of pounds of difference, then translate into hundreds of dollars, you want to know the cow that had the calf that was worth \$200 less," he says. "If nothing else, you want to manage that cow differently. If she weans one of your biggest calves, but it's a Select Yield

Grade (YG) 4, you don't want to cull her, but you want to manage her calf differently in the feedyard and not keep heifers from her."

Grande opens his record book to the Bohrs, but this is almost exclusively a ranch concern. Cattle feeding partners from Nebraska to Texas and from Minnesota to New Mexico just like to see the group-data trend improving.

To make that happen, Grande must make sense of individual

records that may be “all over the board year to year or cow to cow. You pick through the herd and find those that are the worst in everything and those that are the best in everything,” he says.

Down the road, these elite cows may be the focus of a sexed semen or embryo transfer (ET) program, Grande says. “If we find the cow with four or five

progeny with above-average 205-day weight, carcass weight, ribeye area (REA), below-average backfat and yield grade, and CAB® (*Certified Angus Beef*®)-type marbling, it might make sense to do some ET work. I don’t have that cow in my records yet.”



**Derik Bohr, manager of B&B Cattle Co., Holdrege, Neb., says some of his feedlot customers request help with bull selection, but more often he helps coordinate vaccination and mineral programs.**



PHOTO COURTESY OF B&B CATTLE CO.