



Angus Stakes

► by *Shauna Rose Hermel*, editor

Can't we all just get along?

*I never expected it to be the most worthwhile session at the 2003 Cattle Industry Annual Convention and Trade Show in Nashville, Tenn. Yet the more I think about it, the more I think Ron Hanson's presentation during the Cattlemen's College was **the** session every cattleman, every industry supplier, every executive committee of every organization in the conception-to-consumption beef supply network should have attended. I propose that his lessons in preventing farm-family failures could be applied industry-wide to help prevent the failure of our beef cattle industry.*

Family focus

Hanson is the director of the agribusiness program at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources (CASNR). He also has 20 years of experience in counseling farm families who are either trying to avoid or who are dealing with family disagreements in a farming operation.

"Low farm prices often force many farm producers to leave agriculture. That cannot be stopped," Hanson says. "But the real tragedy is that many farm-family relationships will be destroyed during this process ..." It's sad when farms fail. It's a tragedy when farm failures become family failures.

Much of Hanson's discussion focused on potential areas of disagreement among family members working together, common mistakes that lead to family failures and ways to avoid those mistakes. I'll let you visit our real-time coverage Web site (www.4cattlemen.com) to read the full

proceedings of his presentation, but I wanted to point out one central theme that just as easily applies to our industry relationships — we in agriculture communicate about as well as a bunch of fence posts. And, sad to say, we are the ones it hurts the most.

Fence-post talk

Farmers are notorious for not communicating — we don't want anybody to know our business and, by golly, we don't want anybody to know that we might be hurting (financially, physically or mentally). So it all builds up inside until the dam bursts, and then there's no holding back.

But by the time we're ready to vocalize, we've forgotten that communication is a two-way process. As Hanson says, "Everyone is talking to each other, but no one may be listening." Have you ever heard the expression, "Talking to you is like talking to a fence post"? Well, the next time you participate in or watch the discussion of a hot topic at an ag meeting, see if it doesn't

remind you of a bunch of fence posts talking at each other.

Our industry wastes a lot of time and money opposing each other. Throw out a topic — be it country-of-origin labeling, sibling bulls or frame size — and watch people scurry to one side or the other, then take inventory of who's for and who's against.

When are we ever going to learn that we're on the same team? Our money would be a lot more effectively spent if we could communicate to derive the best solution, and, with as much unity as possible, press forward.

As an industry, we really need to take to heart Hanson's 10 skills for good listening:

1. Do not pass judgment until you understand what the other person said.
2. Do not add viewpoints or change what the other person said.
3. Do not permit your attention to drift away while the other person is still talking.
4. Do not interrupt or change the subject.
5. Do not close your mind.
6. Do not finish for the other person.
7. Do not permit wishful listening.
8. Do not rehearse your response.
9. Do not put the other person off.
10. Do not rush the other person.

We need to listen — really listen — to all viewpoints so we can make informed evaluations. I most respect the opinions of those who listen to all aspects (notice I didn't say both sides) of an issue — before, during and after they take a stand on the issue.

Hanson says it's not the disagreements that ruin marriages, it's how people handle them. Disputes are unavoidable. The trick, he says, is to learn to have disagreements without being disagreeable. The beef industry had better start taking lessons.

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