

Replacement parts for beef cattle

Have you ever noticed that some things just stay the same in the beef system? Why is that? I think it is because that's the way we like it. Some call it tradition, but I think it is part of our culture. Take the word "agri-culture" apart once, and you'll see what I mean. The traditions and lifestyles that we enjoy are part of our culture. We just need to realize when to leave the old culture behind and find the new.

Ingrained early

We all grew up learning what the acceptable rules were in our homes and in our communities. This was dictated by the culture of our heritage and the principles of our parents. If you grew up in agriculture, you began to see culture show its face if you tried to question the way something was done.

Think about the way we taught consumers to eat beef products. We taught them that beef comes in white Styrofoam™ trays with cellophane plastic over the top. Well, maybe we didn't teach them that on purpose, but we did teach them to expect it.

We taught consumers that beef really tastes great — but only once in awhile, when you get lucky and find just the right cut and when you get even more lucky and cook it just right. We taught them that we are going to label our product the way we like, thank you very much, and that includes a subjective measure of quality using a grading system that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), not consumers, chooses.

We taught consumers that beef is really

good and that they need to try it again, even if the last steak they bought was tough and chewy. "Trust us," we taught them, "the next one will be better." Well, we tried to teach them those things anyway. That *was* our culture.

Systemwide

The system has taught cow-calf producers that they are doing a great job if they get a good — whatever that means — price at the sale. We taught them that a single price given to them on a single day for a year's worth of work is a signal about whether they had the whole system right or wrong for the year. We taught them that a buyer who sees their cattle for 30 seconds as they run by knows best when it is time to place a value on their cattle.

Well, maybe we didn't teach them that on purpose, but we did teach them to expect it.

Now our culture is beginning to change, and the way we think about providing beef to the market system will change as well. We are beginning a cultural change that will take us from, "Here is the meat we made for you; how much will you give us for it?" to a

system where we ask, "How much do you value certain characteristics in the beef that you eat?" In this second system, we will find the money that we have left on the table. We will begin to think just like the business people who provide replacement parts for cars and trucks.

Changing the rules

Consider the oil filter in your truck. When it is time to change the filter, you go to the auto parts store and search a computer database for the filter that fits your truck. They provide these computers to help us find our way through the maze of available filters so that we ultimately find the one we need.

The designers of my truck had certain specifications in mind when they made the oil filter that works best, and this computer system forces me through the process of making the match. Of course, the parts store stocks many different types of oil filters, each one intended for a specific vehicle.

Wouldn't it be a strange system if oil filter manufacturers made filters with whatever set of characteristics they wished? Imagine if they decided how big an opening the filter would have, or if they decided the size of the threads that the filter would screw into. The manufacturers would simply put filters out on the market, and we would have to live with them.

Likely, a secondary market would evolve in which middlemen would buy the filters and either add fittings or make changes so that they would work with each of the many kinds of customer vehicles.

Do you see where I am going with this? The beef industry, specifically the cow-calf and seedstock sectors, is parallel to the oil filter manufacturer that has been putting out the products it deems appropriate, rather than the products the user may ultimately need. This is exactly what we have done in the beef business for years.

I hope you can imagine a system in which all the players who want to make money up and down the beef system communicate the characteristics of the replacement parts they need and the marketplace delivers those parts. If you can't imagine what that might look like, don't stop and look for it, because it will likely pass you by. The culture of agriculture is changing, and the beef system is finally on board. Are you?



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