



Outside the Box

► by **Tom Field**, professor of animal science, Colorado State University

Don't believe everything you hear

There are lonely stretches of I-80, especially at 1 o'clock in the morning. Seeking a tonic to the boredom of the drive with the radio tuned to an obscure station, a voice intoned through the darkness that due to a computer glitch, civilization was in for a serious setback at 12:01 a.m. on Jan. 1, 2000.

Doomsayer

The radio show host speculated that credit cards would fail, bank records would be lost, power would shut down and electronic communication would cease. Not exactly the kind of message designed to bring cheer or confidence. However, the sponsors of the midnight message offered a solution in the purchase of emergency supplies, generators, how-to books and a host of other products designed to assure survival when the virtual world ceased to exist.

To be honest, it seemed like a lot of news to digest. For the next 100 miles or so, my prevailing thoughts centered on the wisdom of purchasing one or two generators, the advantages of canned vs. freeze-dried foods, and the nagging memory of having been a pretty average Cub Scout with less than impressive wilderness skills. Then the words of Sir Francis Bacon hit me, "read not to believe or disbelieve, but rather to weight and compare."

Overwhelming volume

Jan. 1, 2000, arrived without any of the dire predictions coming to pass. However, as the new millennia dawned, modern civilization was still faced with the challenge of understanding and managing an overwhelming volume of information, plus the task of determining the veracity and value of each.

The Internet has opened the floodgates of information creation and the speed with which it is delivered. The information superhighway is open to all with a nearly limitless number of web sites, blogs and virtual communities competing with traditional information sources in a free-market environment to capture readership. Special interest groups compete to create 'true believers,' while the Wikipedias of the world have blurred the lines between verifiable and statistically significant results and popular opinion. Never before has more

information been available or has it been so difficult to discern fact from fiction.

Narrowing the picture

Business leaders do not have enough time to consume, much less digest, the available information, and thus it becomes critical to establish an intentional approach to information management complete with a sufficient filter, a listing of trusted sources, and the discipline to depend on only the most credible of information upon which to make decisions.

Informational needs must also be stratified into appropriate classifications within two basic categories — enterprise-specific and business externalities.

Business-specific information utilized as a tool to make better decisions within the enterprise should focus on those components over which managers can exert control. The dimensions of this information are bounded by financial, biological, climatic, geographic and human needs. Examples of informational categories of value to an enterprise include:

- decision-making tools that depend on internal data and industry benchmarks;
- genetics with particular regard to evaluation of sires;
- biosecurity and animal health management;
- financial management;
- human resources with a focus on training and improvement; and
- forage and environmental resource monitoring and enhancement.

Big picture

While staying current on topics that directly affect the bottom line, the beef industry does not have the luxury of functioning inside of a vacuum. We need information that assists us in the interpretation of the world around us and puts societal signals into a context upon which we can develop proactive responses

to these less manageable forces. Securing knowledge about those realms outside of a specific enterprise might include:

- marketplace changes in both the domestic and foreign arena;
- economic trends with a particular focus on those affecting consumption and competition for resources;
- infrastructure shifts that affect the beef industry;
- social issues affecting consumer behavior;
- governmental policy and regulation; and
- technological changes.

As important as determining what information should command precious time resources, establishing a connection to credible and trusted sources is of equal value. It is easy to fall into the mode of making decisions because of emotion, erroneous information or incorrect assumptions. These mistakes seem to be heightened when conditions are stressful as the result of economic, political or social change. Negotiating the tides of chaos and upheaval requires discipline and access to a network of trusted advisors and information sources. Accessing, evaluating and applying good information is critical to developing the confidence to make rational choices.

However, knowledge founded on sound information and applied within the context of a clear vision goes far beyond enterprise management. The ability to learn and to wisely apply knowledge, experience and wisdom is the basis for creating jobs and wealth, uncovering new opportunities, driving the engine of innovation, adding value, and growing communities and industries. Those who prosper in the future will have the ability to sift through the volumes of data based on sound standards of evaluation and a network of trusted sources.

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