



# Outside the Box

► by Tom Field, University of Nebraska–Lincoln

## Make the most of your 40 opportunities

When Warren Buffett made the decision to invest his wealth in philanthropy, he asked his family this question: “If you had the resources to do something great, what would you do?” I don’t think the question, “If you could do something great, what would it be?” is reserved for the immensely wealthy. Rather, it is a question that resonates in nearly all phases of our lives — faith, career, community, family and personal journey. It is indeed a question worth answering.

### Take every opportunity

In Howard Buffett’s book, *40 Chances: Finding Hope in a Hungry World*, he describes a journey to answer his father’s question by addressing global agricultural and food issues through the lens of a farmer, who by Buffett’s reckoning affects some 40 growing seasons in the course of a lifetime.

As the next breeding season approaches, the owners of cow-calf and seedstock herds will select the genetics to influence one of the limited number of calf crops that will be born in their lifetimes. Do we understand the magnitude of the opportunity? Do we approach the process from a holistic perspective or from a place of convenience and habit?

Consider the impacts of genetic decisions: profitability of the cow herd and all those throughout the supply chain who will own the results of our choices; the experience of a consumer who purchases beef initiated by our breeding program; the stress or lack thereof experienced by family and employees based on performance metrics such as calving ease, soundness, docility and longevity; the ability of the cow herd to be in harmony with our grassland and ecosystem; and the list goes on.

The next round of 40 chances for a rancher involves the breadth of management decisions applied to the cow herd, landscape and business enterprise during the course of a year. The combined effects of genetics and management define the merit of each calf crop.

Moving beyond the cattle, what of the

choices made that influence landscapes? The timing, duration and intensity of grazing decisions impact the future, as do our choices about improvements to waterways, watering systems that impact both livestock and wildlife, fence

placement, disease prevention, parasite and predator controls, marketing channels and risk-management decisions. Taken in total,

do we consider the power and impact of those choices made during each of the productive years of our lives?

### Timeliness

It occurs to me that the 40-chances philosophy might not be confined to the realm of a year’s time but might be worthy of consideration in both longer and shorter periods of time. Perhaps the purpose of an individual ought to be to search for the 40 most important decisions or actions within the scope of a lifetime. It

that context, the 40 most important decisions most certainly involve our choice of spouse and decisions about education, business partners, children and finances. In this realm, it is far beyond the question of what we do, but with whom and with what motivation.

Then again, what if the mission is to find our 40 chances within the context of a month, a week or even a day? What might be the outcome of 40 opportunities to affirm or coach another person in a meaningful

manner or 40 chances to refrain from texting while driving?

To vaccinate 40 calves in a day using the tented technique instead of via an intramuscular route of administration most certainly impacts the eating satisfaction of a host of consumers. The power of 40 notes of appreciation, 40 letters to Congress, or 40 cold calls to potential customers is immense.

While my hat is off to the Buffett family for putting their fortune to work in a quest to answer the timeless question — what would you do to make a difference, to contribute to something great? — the responsibility to answer the challenge lies within us all.

Cattle producers are blessed with the privilege of seeing the outcome of “40” breeding seasons as each

calf crop is born and develops, to bear witness to the subtle shifts in landscapes through time, and to be affected by the outcomes.

We have the information and technology to vastly improve the effectiveness of our genetic and breeding decisions if we choose to use the tools. The same can be said for management decisions related to nutrition, cattle health and well-being, grazing systems, marketing and risk mitigation.

There is great opportunity that lies within the process of examining the most important 40 chances we are given within the context of whichever time frame is most relevant. It might well be that the person with the least wealth who seeks to maximize the value and impact of their 40 chances will be the individual who has the greatest impact on humanity in the long run.

We are all given the opportunity to have influence; having the wisdom and courage to act on these opportunities makes history.

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**OPPORTUNITIES**