

Facility Fix-ups

Animal handling expert Temple Grandin says some quick fixes can make facilities more functional for low-stress livestock handling.

Story & photo by *Kindra Gordon*

“There are a lot of little fixes you can do in older facilities,” says animal handling expert Temple Grandin in talking about creating facilities that cattle are less likely to balk at and that create a less stressful experience for animals.

For more than three decades, Grandin has devoted her career to telling livestock producers, feedlots and packing plants how to design animal handling facilities and manage livestock in a low-stress manner.

Grandin, who is autistic, credits her ability to “think in pictures” with giving her unique insights into animal behavior, and the Colorado State University (CSU) animal science professor has earned international acclaim for her expertise in animal handling.

Among the simple fixes, Grandin suggests:

1. Change the lighting. Grandin explains that cattle do not like going from a light area into a dark area, such as from a pen into a dark building. Thus, she advocates installing skylights in existing (and new) buildings to allow more daylight into the space. Likewise, Grandin says moving animals into the direct sun can be a problem. If you are moving the herd or working cattle — do it when the sun won't be glaring in their eyes.

2. Fix the flooring. Grandin says flooring deserves some extra attention, so that animals do not slip. She advocates the use of non-slip mats on loading ramps, as well as in front of chutes so that cattle don't slip as they move out. The mats also help muffle noise. Grandin suggests being cognizant of changes in flooring as well. She says cattle may balk at a change in flooring from dirt to concrete, which can simply be fixed by kicking some dirt across the concrete. A garden hose, a cord or other objects lying on the ground can also be a distraction to cattle and should be removed.

3. Put up solid sides. Cattle may refuse to move down an alley or loading ramp if they see people, cars or other distractions along the side. Grandin says this can be fixed by putting solid sides on alleys and loading ramps. She suggests experimenting with cardboard to see where solid sides might work best, before investing in plywood. If you use a tarp or windscreen to create the solid side, make sure it's tight, so cattle won't balk.



More Grandin guidelines

▶ Keep the color of facilities the same so cattle don't balk at differences in light and dark. “Animals see contrast, so sameness is important,” says Grandin with regard to color. She notes that cattle see yellow, blue and green well. She does not recommend black facilities because they tend to get too hot.

▶ Grandin says a common mistake is building alleys and loading ramps that are too wide. “You only want 1 inch (in.) on either side of a cow; if it's a cow-and-a-half wide, a cow's head can go up by the cow in front of her and cause problems.” Grandin suggests an alley should be 26-28 in. wide; a loading ramp should be 30 in. wide. She adds that loading ramps need to have a level top, saying, “Many are too steep, especially for unloading.”

▶ Grandin is not a fan of stock dogs. She says too often the dogs are allowed to continually nip at an animal when it is in the alley or chute and this teaches animals to kick. Those animals then become dangerous in the feedlot or packing plant because they kick around people. She says if an animal is being stubborn and will not move, the hot shot should be used on it once, and then put away.

▶ Allow animals to settle down. If animals get too excited, Grandin says they need to be given 20-30 minutes to calm down before you try to work them.

▶ Make first experiences pleasant. Grandin advocates that an important livestock handling principle is to make an animal's first experience with a new place, piece of equipment or person a favorable one. “They don't forget,” she says. “An initial experience that is aversive can create a permanent fear memory in that animal.” An experience can be made attractive if the animal is allowed to investigate it on its own. So if cattle are used to seeing a horse and rider, slowly introduce them to a person walking through the herd (or an ATV), and vice versa. Don't introduce them to the new experience the very day you try to move the animals. Likewise, 4-H and FFA show animals should be habituated to flags, strange people, noise, etc., before they go to an event.

▶ Get down in chutes and pens and see what the animals are seeing. “One of the things I want people to do is to become much more observant and remove the distractions affecting livestock,” Grandin says. “Little things like noise and shadows can ruin a well-designed facility because animals will balk and turn back or refuse to move.”

Give them a decent life

Grandin reminds producers to make low-stress animal handling a priority.

“You've got to look at everything you do as if someone were watching. Ask yourself, ‘What would my wedding guests think of this?’” she says.

She adds, “I'm often asked ‘How can you care about animals and eat meat?’”

Her answer: As long as animals have been given a decent life, she has no issues with eating meat. She reiterates, “We've got to give them a decent life.”

This past February, Grandin's life was the subject of the HBO movie *Temple Grandin*, starring Claire Danes. The movie has been nominated for several Emmy Awards (see page 269). The DVD release of the movie hit store shelves on Aug. 17. For more about Grandin's books and livestock handling techniques visit www.grandin.com.

