



CATTLE SENSE

Information that makes sense helping you make cents

No. 91 May 2008

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// INFORMATION OVERLOAD

Anyone running cattle knows that every day and every season bring new decisions to be made. And the soundness of each decision hinges on the information and thought process that goes into it. With all the changes going on around us, collecting and managing this information is critical -- but it can also be an overwhelming drain on our time and energy. In the “information age” the issue is no longer how to find facts, opinions and recommendations; it’s how to choose which sources to draw on.

Take nutrition, for example. I recently obtained a copy of *Agriculture: A Text for the School and Farm*, published in 1915. In this authoritative and well-referenced book, cattle feeding was covered in a single sentence: “The fattening animal should have a balanced ration consisting of one part protein food for every seven parts of carbohydrates and fats.” Today my bookshelf also holds a volume with 614 (small print) pages covering nothing but minerals. And if I go to the internet and google “beef cattle nutrition,” I get 711,000 hits!

Now, I can’t predict when in my career I may need that exact bit of data found on page 372 of *The Mineral Nutrition of Livestock*. But that isn’t justification for trying to memorize everything between the covers. And even though all those web pages touch on a topic I care about, only a fraction of them would be of real value to me.

When faced with the tidal wave of information coming at us, it makes sense to filter it all through a series of basic questions:

- Does it matter?
- Does it apply to my situation?
- Can I use it? Will I?
- Does it make sense?
- Can I trust the source?

Does it matter? This isn’t meant to downplay the value of learning just for learning’s sake. But when our time is limited, information gathering, whether it is for general knowledge or a specific answer, needs some focus. When business is waiting or a problem needs solving, discipline yourself to move past stories or links that probably aren’t going to contribute anything meaningful to you or your operation.

Does it apply to my situation? When research data, success stories, or management recommendations are based on cattle, feeds, environment, or markets that vary from your own,

beware of comparing “apples to oranges.” An excellent idea for one herd might spell disaster for another.

Can-I / Will-I Use it? Production practices often require facilities, equipment, or manpower. Alternative feeds may need alternative storage or delivery. Management shifts may shift cash flow. Niche marketing only works if you have access to interested buyers. Change calls for willingness and cooperation. By all means, be open to new ideas, but process them realistically.

Does it make sense? Don't be just an information collector. Trust your own common sense to evaluate what you hear and read. If you question a fact or conclusion, commit yourself to finding out more. Second opinions are valuable beyond the field of medicine.

Can I trust the source? Never underestimate the importance of knowing where information comes from. Even experts in a field don't always agree, and--especially with the internet--individuals and organizations driven by everything from personal financial gain to zealous activist agendas can distribute (mis)information that can look just as authoritative as peer-reviewed science. Become familiar with resources such as *junkscience.com* or the Avery Institute that focus on in-depth and factual responses to some of the emotion-driven issues of the day. Again, look for verification of key facts and figures from additional sources.

It also makes sense to make a conscious effort to isolate a set of information sources to routinely make use of. Time and effort can be saved when a search starts with references that you already have confidence in. These might be books, periodicals, web pages, podcasts, newsletters and(or) people. Differentiate between the best starting points for general information, for recent research findings, for broader industry-related news, or for good overviews of specific topics. Try to limit incoming print and electronic publications to a volume you can reasonably keep up with, and to content that has the potential to deliver at least as much value as your time is worth. Reporting and analysis are two different things -- decide, for example, if it is a better investment for you to simply and quickly see what the markets did today, or to follow an expert's discussion of the why's, how's, and what might be next.

For anyone with an inquisitive mind, or a need to make informed business decisions, all the information in the world -- good and bad -- is available at our fingertips. If someone chose, they could spend virtually all their time trying to keep up with the latest news and discoveries. But as a closing thought, I'd like to point out that what is presented as cutting edge may, in fact, have been around awhile. An example: my 90-year-old textbook makes it clear that despite recent headlines, byproduct feeding isn't a new phenomenon: out of just four sample cattle diets presented by the authors, one contained brewer's grains, and another gluten feed.