

## Ear tags produce numbers that can evolve into data

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So much of the discussion today in the beef business concerns itself with the application of an ear tag followed by the systematic ability to track the movement of the animal. To avoid confusion, other uses of the tag are deliberately not discussed or simply ignored.

Ear tags are the seeds of numbers that evolve into data. Data trends are what managers look for. In fact, there are large organizations that do nothing but manage data.

Hidden within the depths of most data sets is an answer to a question. The answer may not be very profound; however, day-to-day operations of most businesses are made cost effective by continually going through data. The often overlooked numbers are mined by people who have an uncanny ability to take the numbers apart and put them back together in a better order, with more meaning.

Most of us can remember, perhaps with a frown, the hours spent learning addition, subtraction, multiplication and division tables followed by algebra, geometry, trigonometry and maybe even calculus. These early times prepared us for the heavy task of understanding the world around us through numbers.

For fine-tuning, statistical courses have been added to the schedule, starting with the conversion of simple averages to means and placing with the mean a measure of variation around the numbers. Of course, by this time, the numbers are no longer numbers, but are now data.

The data takes on a life of its own and regression equations began to ooze from the newly created pot based on an understanding of probability and mathematics. All of this, in essence, now runs the world.

For most beef producers, the concept of managerial manipulation really comes in two forms. The first is a more “seat of the pants” approach. The current situation is evaluated and a logical solution or enhancement is pursued. The second approach is to measure the variables needed, return to the office and calculate a solution or enhancement.

Most operations are actually somewhere between these two scenarios. These two extreme examples, however, make the point easier. The answer to the question “what approach works the best?” really lies in the numbers or lack of numbers, whatever the case.

“Seat of the pants” or best-guess approaches are usually considered right because there was no measurable data or numbers going into the decision. Since there is no measurable data or numbers to evaluate the decision, the decision is subjectively evaluated based solely on one’s opinion.

In the number-based approach, not only is the decision itself based on numbers, but the ability to evaluate the outcome also is based on numbers. Accuracy now legitimately can be part of the conversation.

The numbers show us that an opinion is not always right. People making decisions want to know managerial facts, not opinions. Managerial gut feelings remain important, but there is a huge difference between a production change made based on opinion versus a decision based on well-organized and analyzed data followed by a pinch of opinion.

A change may be in the wind, but the wind has been blowing a long time. Standing and watching a group of calves grazing across the pasture is still a managerial privilege, but the ultimate outcome of the operation may well be hidden in the numbers, and the conversion of those numbers to data is a managerial expectation.

May you find all your NAIS-approved ear tags.

Your comments are always welcome at [www.BeefTalk.com](http://www.BeefTalk.com). For more information, contact the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association, 1133 State Avenue, Dickinson, ND 58601 or go to [www.CHAPS2000.com](http://www.CHAPS2000.com) on the Internet. In correspondence about this column, refer to BT0262.

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# Numbers Produce



# Measurable Data