

BeefTalk 487: A New Year's Resolution - Apply What We Know

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By Kris Ringwall, Beef Specialist
NDSU Extension Service

Have you ever been around someone who knows everything? However, in this case, I mean those people who actually do know a good share of stuff.

Granted, this is not a question concerning memory recall but an inquiry into how, as beef producers, we seek to obtain the answers we need to stay in business. Information overload may lead to a memory crash, but one does not need to simply rely on memory because there certainly is a lot of room in how each of us approaches problems and finds solutions. The bottom line is that there are answers, but it is important that we make some effort in understanding these answers.

As the New Year approaches, beef producers should stop and ask what we know today that we did not know at this time last year. Wow, health, nutrition, genetics, management, etc. The list is long and not simple. In fact, almost all of our newer technologies came about because of advances in laboratories that study, but do not feed, the beef cow.

As humbling as it might be, many who have a strong influence on the future of the beef cow seldom see cattle. Instead, these are dedicated individuals who enjoy making a living in the fields of study involving math and chemistry.

If we travel back in time, most would agree math and chemistry or perhaps many other biological applications of math and chemistry were difficult at best. Anyone who has taught math or chemistry will need just a second to recall the numerous examples of trying to get students to understand a basic concept.

Having been at the receiving end, as most of us have, the frustration mounts as a fellow student tries to explain what to him or her is a simple answer but leaves us in a fog.

Why the discussion? Most of the changes that occurred in the past or will in the future involve a better and more complex understanding of biological systems that were or will be converted to some form of math or chemistry that we can apply to our lives.

For example, turn to any beef breed Web site and start browsing for information. What used to be a fairly simple effort of reporting data or printing a form or bulletin now is stacked several layers deep with numerous opportunities to do something.

Since breed organizations are the repositories of data involving the cattle they register, it is only natural that they expand on the genetic opportunities that the database offers. That database keeps expanding and contains the answers to the many often asked questions.

The point is that those answers are available through a properly maintained, organized and analyzed data set.

Now we have the first point of this article. There are people who do know a lot or at least a very good share of what is known. They may not have a total recall of all things, but they do know how to ask data sets the right questions to get the right answers. If we fail to capitalize on the wealth of information contained within a data set, then we will fail to move forward.

A very good example is the use of expected progeny differences (EPDs). The concept of EPDs is laden with so much math that most of us have long since given up trying to figure out just how all these numbers come about. That is not

necessarily a bad thing provided we come to trust the people who have painstakingly spent the better part of their careers building the mathematical models so we can make sense of the data and answer our questions.

The news becomes even more exciting. As the knowledge of DNA and other molecular genetics advances through chemistry are added to the mathematical models, the answers we seek will become even more clear and concise.

Perhaps a good New Year's resolution for the beef industry and producers is to revisit the trust we have in the numerous tools we have available to improve beef production. We then should resolve to implement something we did not know last year.

May you find all your ear tags.

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