

What's Wrong With This Picture?

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There are the four questions that every beef cattle producer should consider when they read, view, or talk with anyone about cattle management, production practices, or new products.

1. Compared to What?
2. At What Cost?
3. What Hard Evidence Do You Have?
4. What is Your Motivation?

This level of evaluation applies to any of the aspects associated with beef cattle production or any other application of management and dollar expenditures. This level of evaluation (or skepticism if you will) also needs application to the messenger regardless of the source (i.e. university, industry, consultants, veterinarians, or fellow cattlemen). Logic and common sense should apply in all aspects of decision making regarding the beef cattle enterprise. Unfortunately, shiny paper, catchy slogans, and presumed authority mislead and beguile cattlemen at times.

Compared to What?

Valid comparisons are the key to true evaluations; lack of a comparable product or claim or faulty comparisons obscure any true difference, or lack thereof. Comparing “apples to apples and not apples to oranges” is critical during the evaluative process. Most any product or claim can appear better or have an advantage if allowed an uncompetitive comparison. Likewise, narrow definitions of application or evaluation limit the validity of comparisons. The context that the comparison is just as important; utilization of a product or differential applications invalidate comparisons.

For us in Florida and the Southeast that means comparisons in our environment with our resources. Our environment will challenge comparisons of time, particularly relative or production cycles and seasons, sustained high temperature and humidity, sporadic rainfall, and

unique growing conditions. Likewise, our production environment of different soil and forage conditions, feed resources, and makeup of the cow herd mean that for comparisons to be valid and valuable to us some aspect of the production challenges must be addressed. Conduct a thorough evaluation of any methodology and practices that have been solely developed or adopted in one region. Things work in a region for a reason and transfer to another region requires careful evaluation. Consider all of the factors that make your current situation successful or not; will these same characteristics be applicable with the adopted methodology?

At What Cost?

This question should be obvious. No change in product use, application of technology, or management comes without a cost. The value of application or adoption comes in that the output out-weighs the input. However, all too often incorporation of products, technologies, and management philosophy occurs without adequate consideration. Not acknowledging, knowing, or understanding what the input costs of a production practice puts the beef cattle producers at a financial disadvantage. Likewise, calculation of breakeven costs or return on investment can't occur if the true or even apparent cost of a something is not considered.

Input cost advantages may be region specific for production/management practices. Accessory costs for the adoption of new technologies or products often are not fully revealed. The accessory costs are not identified because they are inherent within a different system. So many products, technologies, and methods are available that span the spectrum from feedstuffs and grazing systems to castration equipment and working facilities. Put pencil to paper and do the math that determines whether adoption is feasible and sensible. Just because “it” is good does not make it right for every producer.

What Hard Evidence Do You Have?

This is where the rubber meets the road. What proof is there to back up the claim that is made? If proof is available, what is it; where and how was it generated (see question one); how repeatable are the results are they validated by multiple trials? These questions do not make the people representing good products uncomfortable, but they do expose less validates or worthy products. As a producer, you should be able to look at the data that is provided and see a direct relationship and application to your operation. If you have to use your imagination then reconsider adoption of the product, technology, or system.

Many products, technologies, and systems have been validated, but outside the state of Florida. So then consider, how robust the information that you are provided with is. What will the results be under Florida conditions, with Florida cows, within your management skill set? Research and demonstrations are conducted for a reason to validate and explore the limits of a product or system. This evaluation is valuable to both the purveyor and you the adopter. Robust evaluation provides a measure of confidence that should be evident. Look for the limitations of the application. Also understand that only so many variables can be controlled in a research or demonstration setting, but they better have been the right variables.

What is Your Motivation?

Obviously everyone in business is in business to make a profit, without profit it is a hobby. However, the other motivating factors should be easily definable. Many individuals and companies what to and work to cultivate a relationship with a customer to develop a long-term beneficial relationship. This relationship is the foundationally developed by addressing the prior three questions. The agriculture community is fortunate to have many entities that do truly want to improve producer enterprises and producer bottom lines. Healthy, happy beef cattle enterprises make for successful commercial entities. Work to identify these entities that want your enterprise to succeed.

Below is a list that we developed just looking through several issues of multiple popular press magazines and emailing. This list is not exhaustive, but is not meant to ostracize any particular industry. Rather it identify places were careful, evaluative thought needs to be applied.

- Breeding and Genetic Selection
- Crossbreeding and Hybrids
- Genetic Testing and Genetic Markers
 - Marbling
 - Tenderness
 - Stayability
- Measures of Efficiency
- Pest Control
 - Deworming
 - fly control
- Nutrition
 - Feeds
 - Forages
 - Minerals
- Grazing management
 - Systems
 - Forage species
 - Fertilization
- Health products
- Sustainability
- Process Verification / Natural / Organic
- Management
 - Castration
 - Other Technologies

As you view popular press magazines, direct email sources, and industry literature keep in mind the four questions for critical evaluation. Apply each one of those questions to the next magazine ad you read. Read the next article with those four questions at hand and consider what the message is.

There is no lie that is too big, that told boldly enough and repeated loudly and often enough, that will not be believed by a significant number of people.