

Beef Business



Matt Woolfolk | director of performance programs

Performance and Data in Your Marketing Plan

If we have come to expect anything this year, it's that schedules and plans are always subject to change. This was no different for the ASA Annual Meeting. We had a program planned for the usual 2-day format, but logistical issues forced us to condense to a single Saturday morning program, which forced us to cut some of the educational program (my speaking time slot included). Since that decision was made, the board made the call to postpone the Annual Meeting to a later date. When I was slated to speak on the original schedule at the original December 4 date, I was planning to discuss performance programs, data, and how it relates to marketing. Instead, I will try to bring some of my thoughts on the topic into this article. It's hard to condense a 30 minute discussion into a few hundred words, but I will try my best.

While they may not seem related, I believe performance, data collection, and marketing of seedstock go hand in hand. Collecting and using data is important to breeding more productive cattle, but it doesn't matter how productive your performance program made your herd if you can't convince a potential buyer to write you a check for them. Whatever you do in your operation for performance testing, it is important to be able to explain to a potential customer why you're doing it. It sounds great that you're collecting all this information on your cattle; if you can't explain to that buyer the "why" behind it all, they may wonder if you're just putting on a show to make a sale. It's important that a customer knows that you collect weights, carcass ultrasound, or genomic information for a reason: to track genetic progress and make more informed breeding decisions towards a better product.

Collecting performance data can benefit your cattle marketing by identifying your top performers and giving the customer an idea of what

animals might best fit their needs. Say that a commercial cattleman wants to look through your yearling bulls. You learn that he retains all his feeder calves and sells them on a quality-based grid, so carcass traits are obviously important to his selection process. If you don't have carcass ultrasound data on those bulls, it might be a hard sale to make to this customer. Yes, EPDs would be available on carcass traits, albeit at very low accuracies. Adding carcass ultrasound data would improve the accuracies of those predictions, and genomic testing would do so even more! With all the uncertainties that come with raising cattle, we all need our genetics to be as predictable as possible to mitigate that risk and keep calf crops consistent (and consistently high-quality)!

Data collection and having a plan in place for documenting animal performance on your farm is important for genetic improvement, but also for your reputation and commitment as a breeder to raising better cattle. If the same bull buyer from the previous paragraph values carcass quality in his genetics but you never collected any carcass or ultrasound data, they may get the impression that end product quality is not a focus in your herd. If that's the case, that buyer may go look elsewhere to fill their bull needs. If that isn't your focus and they choose to look elsewhere, that's ok! There are likely other customers who value the direction of your herd and your program. If you're not trying to make progress in this business, you're going backwards and not just sitting still. I guarantee someone is doing everything they can to breed better bulls and can pass you by.

Data has to be a part of the marketing effort of the entire breed to the cattle industry. A slogan like "Performance with Purpose" has to be backed up with information on what Shorthorn cattle can do in a commercial setting. The National Sire Test program has been a good source

of this type of data for our breed. Seeing that Shorthorn-sired calves can grade at over 90% Choice should open some eyes to the genetic capabilities of our cattle. Additionally, the heifer development feed efficiency project with Iowa State and the Genomically Enhanced Female Project help us to gather more information on emerging technologies in the genetic improvement sector of our industry. We try to develop opportunities to collect more data on our beloved Shorthorns, but it ultimately takes breeder buy-in for any of these programs to reach their potential. At ASA, we own and breed zero cows every year. It takes teamwork between us and those with the cows (you!) to make these projects work and gather more information to showcase Shorthorns to the American cattle industry.

It's difficult to breed cattle for the commercial industry without documentation behind them to make genetic progress, and it's equally difficult to market any seedstock without a plan and a program. Let your performance data and your marketing plans work together to move your operation forward as far as it can go.

One last thing to ponder: I have been asked before what is the best available tool for herd improvement. While weights, measures, ultrasound and genomics are all very beneficial, one could argue that the tools that can move a herd forward the quickest are a cull pen and a sharp knife at weaning! It's hard to improve productivity of the herd as a whole by keeping unproductive cows, and only the best male calves deserve to be herd sire candidates.

I want to wish a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year to all of you. May you remember the reason for the Christmas season, as well as take a moment to find something positive away from the year that was 2020. And, no, "2020 is over" doesn't count as the positive! 📷