

As a Beef Producer, Are You “Marketing” Your Product or Are You “Selling” it?

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As a beef producer, are you “marketing” your product or are you “selling” it? This is a question that all producers should ask themselves and then act on management strategies that will enable them to add value and “market” that valuable product.

With each operation being different we all know there is no cookie cutter solution. Everyone needs to take a critical look at how they’ve been managing their operation and search for ways to make some changes they can live with that will be of benefit in the end.

So – where does one start? Developing a marketing plan first makes some sense. If you develop a plan you can work your way back to breeding, tweaking your management here and there, to end up with a calf that will be more marketable and valuable.

What and how do you market? If you market weaner calves; there are some options you can take advantage of that will add value.

- Shorten the calving season – Data from Wyoming shows that calves born in the first 21 days of the calving season were 10% heavier at weaning than those born in the second 21 days and 17% heavier than those born in the third 21 days.
- Source and Age Verification – Data from Montana in 2007 on 600 pound calves shows that Source and Age Verified calves brought \$12.83/hd more than non-verified cattle.
- VAC 34 and(or) VAC 45 protocol – Same data source as above shows that these calves brought \$14.81/hd more.
- Selling semi-load lots – The same Montana data shows that calves sold in load lots averaged \$12.65/hd more.
- Niche or specialized markets - Specialized markets have, historically, provided premium prices to those who are able to fit the market.

Let’s take a look at these options and explore a little how you might take advantage of them.

Shortening the calving season:

While estrous synchronization has mainly been a tool used in Artificial Insemination programs it is possible, and has been done successfully, in natural service management systems to increase the number of cows that cycle in the first 21 days of the breeding season . There are several protocols that have proven to be successful; each requiring different levels of cost and labor.

Pre and post partum nutrition and body condition score of the cow can also shorten the calving season. By having the cow at a BCS of 5 by calving time, and maintaining that BCS through

breeding, a lot of good things happen. Post partum interval is shortened, pregnancy rates go up dramatically, calving intervals decrease, the calf's average daily gain increases and weaning weights obviously increase.

Source and Age Verification:

Source and Age Verification has been floating around the edges of the cattle industry for several years. More and more producers are Source and Age Verifying and there are more feeders looking for verified cattle. The process is fairly straight forward and, depending on how you as an individual keep calving records, doesn't require a lot of extra effort or paperwork on the producers' part. There is some expense involved, usually around \$5 per head.

VAC 34, VAC 45 protocols:

Vaccination protocols that are verifiable or documented have proven over the years to add value to weaned calves. If you don't currently have a weaned calf, or preconditioning, vaccination program you should investigate the different protocols and see which one will best fit into your operation and your marketing plan. You will also want to explore how you can document and verify the protocol you are using.

Selling load lots:

Everyone has known forever that small lots get discounted at selling time. So how do you avoid the discount? There aren't too many options if you aren't willing to take advantage of some of the opportunities that have already been discussed. Shortening the calving season will cut down on the number of calves that get sorted out by size. Co-mingling with other producers who have similar types and kinds of calves may help in putting load lots together that are more appealing to buyers. You have to be willing to communicate with other producers, or work through an organization or association to find someone else in a similar situation.

Niche or specialized markets:

Niche or specialized markets can be a good option provided proper research is done to ensure that major management changes won't have to be made for you to fit into the market. For instance: Might your operation be able to market "natural" calves? Are you raising cattle that could fit into a "lean beef" marketing system? What about Certified Angus or Hereford programs?

If you've been thinking that some changes might be in order now is a good time to start planning. Here are some items that, if you're not already keeping records, it might be a good idea to think about doing:

- Calf birth dates, especially first and last calves born for basic verification.
- Medication records; who was doctored with what, when. Lot and serial number of medication should also be recorded.

- Vaccination records; what was used, lot and serial numbers, and where the injection was given.