



The Angus Link

by **MATT PERRIER**, former director of commercial programs, American Angus Association

Seeking more than just a way of life

Adios. By the time this column is published, I will no longer be employed by the American Angus Association. On April 30 I departed from the Commercial Programs Department to return to my family's ranching and farming operation in Kansas.

After my wife, daughter and I announced our planned departure, I was flattered by the number of Angus breeders, commercial producers and other industry counterparts who wished us well as we embarked on this new chapter in our lives. However, it was intriguing to witness the vast array of outlooks and opinions that many folks had regarding this decision. While most were supportive of the choice, I was surprised at the number of people who questioned my sanity for leaving an ag marketing job to return to a job in production agriculture.

Lines such as "Have you gone nuts?" and, "Don't you understand how tough it is out there?" were used on many occasions by many individuals. I even had a few folks go as far as to question the move because, they reasoned, as one producer I could not make a significant impact on the entire breed or industry like I could in my position with the American Angus Association.

While I may be a little crazy, I think I do understand how tough it is "out there." (Although, I am sure that I will get reminded of it on a more regular basis in the future.)

And, yes, I do believe that individual producers can make significant impacts. In fact, they're the fundamental part of any decision made in our industry.

Producers make the selection, management and marketing decisions. Producers ultimately determine the supply of our product. Through the beef checkoff program, producers collectively influence demand for our product. Any producer involved in managing, raising or marketing beef cattle *makes a difference ...* in either a positive or negative fashion.

I firmly believe that we need as many folks "out there" as possible who are willing to dedicate their energy (both mental and physical) to improving beef cattle production and marketing. Without them, the future of all of our businesses and ways of life will look grimmer with each passing generation.

Way of life

As long as I can remember, people working in the beef cattle industry have been viewed as working harder and longer hours than most of their urban-dwelling counterparts. For this hard work, they have usually been "rewarded" with near-poverty-level

wages and low (or negative) returns on their assets and investments. In defense of their occupations, they usually state that, "We keep doing it because it's a great way of life."

While this is certainly an advantage of living off the land; my altruistic attitude begs the question, "Why can't we have both?" I'm not sure how many future generations can continue by solely passing down a "way of life." Sound economics and business fundamentals must enter into this equation at some point.

Be creative

For the past three years, I have dedicated nearly every presentation, article and conversation to the topic of change. Whether in regard to new selection, management or marketing tools, new approaches toward industry policy and paradigms, or different forms of communication, I often hear some form of this reaction: "We can't do it that way because we've always done it this way."

Most folks (me included, until now) suggest that this type of response is primarily motivated by tradition. It has been repeatedly stated that, "We need to do away with a lot of these traditions." I must admit, *I like* traditions. I don't want to do away with them. I have decided that the traditions are not the true cause of our industry's aversion to progress.

The real culprit, in my opinion, is a lack of creativity.

Richard Florida, Carnegie Mellon University, surmised in his book, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, that, "workers in the creative class earn nearly twice what members of the service or working classes earn." While many of Florida's views were difficult for me to concur with, this one about "creatives" intrigued me. It caused me to ask myself, "Who makes up this creative class?" They are not simply artists, architects and ad agency executives. In fact, I would guess that you could list several creatives of your own.

This creative class is simply a demographic consisting of people who find new ways to approach current issues. Thomas Edison, Albert Einstein, Warren Buffett, Bill Gates ... the list of these creatives is endless. Consider individuals or businesses that are viewed as successful. How many of those achieved success by doing exactly

what those around them (or before them) did? Very few, I presume. They were creative.

We can even find a few creatives in the production sectors of the beef industry. I hope that you fall into this class. Those who formed and promoted our system for genetic evaluation of beef cattle and created the Certified Angus Beef (CAB) program were creative. Those who invent new value-added beef products and design easier-to-use livestock-handling facilities are creative. Producers who find more effective ways to use their land, equipment, labor and other resources to maximize long-term profit are creative. You can likely name even more examples of this creativity at work.

Unfortunately, I would presume that you may find many more "anti-

creatives" within our industry. Since you do not likely fit into this category, look at your neighbor.

He resists tagging his calves or cow herd or keeping accurate records for his herd.

He would not think of weaning calves earlier, even though his weights are 100 pounds (lb.) heavier than they were 15 years ago, and his pastures look worse with each passing year. He takes issue with most new ideas

and even shows jealousy toward others who try these advancements with successful results.

His "marketing plan" consists of loading a trailer with calves, dumping them out at the local livestock market, then heading for the hills without informing anyone about the health, management or genetics of the cattle.

You know the kind.

He operates in this habitual manner because "that's the way it has always been done." He does not have time (or "take" time) to be creative.

Then he asks why he is not being paid more for his marketed product — be it weaned calves, carcasses or registered bulls.

Sure, we all know that creativity can be taken too far. The negative consequences presented with this type of extremism can be devastating and sometimes dishonest. However, for those who can walk that fine line between strategic creativity and unabashed recklessness, success often awaits.

Get out of the box

In November 2000, during his initial speech as president of the American Angus Association, Howard Hillman stated that, "We cannot just think outside of the box. We need to live there." Those words struck me then, and

they are even more powerful today.

As an industry, regardless of the sector(s) in which we operate, we must be creative.

Creative in our dealings with our customers and consumers.

Creative in the ways

we tackle environmental challenges.

Creative in our political actions and policies.

And, creative in our selection, management and marketing of cattle.

One last request

As I depart from my position at the American Angus Association, here is my request:

Be creative.

Whether it is finding a new source of nontraditional revenue for your operation; adjusting calving, weaning or other management scenarios; making better use of production and financial records to improve profit; or finding better-suited marketing dates or plans, a bit of creativity can sometimes go a long way toward improving your operation's business.

Most beef producers have a near-perfect setting for this type of thinking. How many song writers or artists pay millions of dollars to purchase a "place in the country" where they can go to be inspired? Farmers and ranchers walk out the door each morning into a haven of creative energy, and many times we do not even realize it.

Why?

Maybe we take it for granted.

Maybe we focus too much on the daily duties and tasks, and not enough on the big picture.

Or maybe it is because we in production agriculture tend to focus on the short-term negatives — difficult market situations, weather patterns or power struggles — instead of seeing the long-term opportunities that can be created with a bit of ingenuity.

Instead of focusing your mental energy on the negativity that seems to be infused into nearly all sectors of our industry, channel it instead toward creative uses. I contend that with a cooperative effort of creative energy, our industry can offer future generations a favorable way of life *and* a profitable business climate to boot.

"We cannot just think outside of the box. We need to live there."

— *Howard Hillman*

"As an industry, regardless of the sector(s) in which we operate, we must be creative."

— *Matt Perrier*
