

calves a year before they are finished. Producers can be ready for that day, he says, if they become detail-oriented and work with a feedlot to develop a long-term marketing plan for their cattle.

In the information age, no segment of the beef industry is an island, says Warren Weibert, owner and general manager of Decatur County Feed Yard Inc., Oberlin, Kan.

“As a CAB feedlot, we are a producer’s partner. We will work with them to develop health and marketing programs that work best for everyone,” he says. “We cannot act alone. But, if we work together and get the right mix of people involved, we can survive and prosper together.”

There’s no point in working together without goals, Weibert says, adding that it probably means leaving the middle of the road. “If you have a goal, and measure what you are doing in relation to that goal, and select the breeding stock based on how they are achieving results, I believe a producer can do about anything,” he says. “The goal needs to be specific, however. You can’t be a generalist about what quality traits to promote and measure.”

Mader agrees that trying to improve too many traits at once can stifle progress. Balanced-trait sires are great for maintaining excellence, but those who quantify goals and develop detailed plans may get there by strategic selection to complement herd genetics.

Targeted production

Specifications, such as those required by the CAB program, can be seen as targets. Marston says branded beef programs help producers focus on the food industry.

“CAB-focused producers have a food production mind-set. They wouldn’t be in the program if they didn’t feel that way,” Marston says. “They can get records from other programs. The value in working with CAB is that producers know the consumer they are working for and the product they need to make.”

Branded beef programs could become the marketing mechanisms of the future, says Ron Rowan, Beef Northwest Feeders risk management specialist, Nyssa, Ore. Producers will need to do their homework before they commit to producing for a brand.

“Competition between brands will be intense, and it will be difficult for some brands to maintain a consistent market share,” Rowan says. “Branded beef programs that meet the challenges thrown at them and maintain a reputation for quality with their customers will survive.”

Consumers will dictate which programs fail, survive or thrive, but producers must make educated decisions about whether any one program is worth their commitment.

“We are going to see more interest in tapping into specific consumer preferences,” Mader says. “If the consumer is willing to pay for it, the industry will produce it.”

Commodity beef will still have a role — filling the generic supply void in the

market and satisfying consumers who have no preference beyond the beef category. “The commodity beef producer will be the shock absorber in the industry,” Marston says. “He will feel like a shock absorber, too. Sometimes he will make money and, at other times, he will not believe how much money he is going to lose.”

The biggest step in the transition from calf producer to food producer is adopting a long-term marketing view, Petz says. “It is tempting for cow-calf producers to take advantage of the immediate gains offered by strong cattle markets at weaning, but perseverance will be rewarded in the future.”

On the ranch as in the feedlot, profitability will always be the locomotive driving any change, and information will fuel it.

Preparing for the change

Marston says educational and program opportunities can help produce higher quality beef at a lower cost.

“Producers can implement programs and management systems that reduce stress or take pressure off of their operations to make a profit,” he says, listing government programs, American Angus Association \$Value indexes and risk management as ways to lock in profits.

Nobody can afford to produce quality at a loss. “Efficiency should drive every aspect of the production system from beginning to end — from picking out bulls to how cattle are handled to the feedlot phase,” Marston says. “The producer needs to make each one of those phases efficient in a way that pleases the consumer and still maximizes his profit on each unit of production.”

Continuing education is a necessity for the future, Marston says. Understanding the issues that affect other areas of production will help producers see the changes ahead of them. Knowing the dynamics of home herd and ranch resources can also improve efficiency.

Peterson says keeping detailed records at the individual cow level will help producers understand what to do when change is needed. Evaluating each cow’s input costs and comparing them to her calf’s net return will point out the profit potential of each individual.

“I encourage guys to weigh their cows. Some people think that is crazy,” Peterson says. “But, you can relate that back to how many pounds of calf are produced to see if maintaining that cow is costing too much. It offers another way to improve efficiency.”

Producers who take the long-term view maintain profitable partnerships; they are the ones who keep everyone’s best interests in mind, Peterson says.

“The cattle industry is fun, especially when you can help producers succeed,” he says. “That is what makes it fun, and that is what business is all about. Economics, yes, but the relationships you build and seeing people prosper makes it fun.”