

Easy Does It

Low-stress handling benefits cattle, cowboys and bottom line.

Story by
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Cattlemen often analyze practices based on the return on investment (ROI), but usually they're only talking about money. Tom Noffsinger, veterinarian and low-

stress animal handling specialist from Benkelman, Neb., says working cattle can prove an old equation: Investing a little more time can have significant payoffs down the road.

"People can enhance the genetics in these animals, but we can have caregiver impact that actually takes away from that potential," said Noffsinger, who spoke at the Feeding Quality Forum in November. Feeders and industry representatives gathered in Grand Island, Neb., and Amarillo, Texas, to hear the 37-year industry professional speak.

Noffsinger said animal handling affects many determinants of profitability, along with employee morale and safety.

"Our goal at a feedyard or ranch is to empower caregivers to be dedicated and make every human-to-cattle interaction a positive one," he said. "When we have dealt with issues in caregiver training, all of a sudden turnover at most of my [consulting] feedyards is zero."

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Use natural behaviors

He shared videos and examples of how to use natural animal behavior to improve weaning, sorting and processing.

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"We used to worry about harvest quality at the end of the feeding period, but we have to worry about harvest quality every day of the calves' lives," said the Nebraska veterinarian.





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It starts on the ranch, and even subtleties like frequency of nursing can make a difference.

“We have found that a calf that nurses 20 times a day has a lot less risk compared to a baby that nurses twice a day,” he said, noting producers can promote nursing in a variety of ways. “Cows should never go through a gate without their babies by their side. You can fix that.”

Noffsinger gave examples of prepping cattle for weaning by separating pairs for a couple hours and then letting them match back up. After a few days of this, they already know what to expect when weaning day arrives.

“We will never process calves until they’re willing to leave their favorite corner,” he said. “Because until calves trust every corner of their pen or pasture, what else don’t they trust? The water trough. Cattle that don’t drink much, don’t eat. Cattle that don’t drink, don’t rest.”

That all ties back to that initial ROI, Noffsinger said. “The way we make money in this industry is by maximizing intake and conversion.”

Handling also affects the ability to ward off sickness and respond to vaccines.

“We’re starting to understand that stress actually sends very important white blood cells on vacation. They cease to function,” he said. “When people understand how to get a calf to volunteer to travel through a system and stand voluntarily in a chute, the vaccines have a greater chance to work.”

Breeding herd benefits

The benefits of instructing an animal, rather than “hollering at it,” are magnified in breeding stock.

He shared an example of training replacement heifers.

“We asked them to go through the processing facility three times before we even started weaning,” he said. “We ran them through and timed how long it

took, and we kept running them through until it took half the time it did the first time.

“That changed these animals for the rest of their lives,” he said. “If you’re going to own these cows for 15 years, it’s really fun to have a group that likes you rather than the old mad ones that want to hurt you.”

Noffsinger said studying how animals

communicate will not only improve your business internally, but also your image with the public.

“If we learn some of these inherent language skills, it’s amazing how efficiently we can do this,” he said. “We need to jump on these opportunities to display the skills we have as caregivers, so consumers can embrace that.”

