

Veterinary Link: Marketing healthy cattle

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Seedstock producers market genetics as bulls and replacement females to their customers, while commercial cattlemen market calves or yearlings with growth potential to their customers. One area all cow-calf producers have in common is that buyers of their cattle

are interested in the health of their purchases.

In the past, I've written (see April 2013 *Angus Journal*) about developing a health program that establishes plans for disease treatment protocols, biosecurity, sanitation, parasite control, use of

performance-enhancing products, minimizing calving difficulty and evaluating the herd's performance. This month, let's consider how to communicate with customers about that health program as one component of a marketing plan.

Role of records

One key tool for maintaining a healthy herd is to keep and evaluate health records. It is important that ranchers and veterinarians can compare records from one year to the next, tracking the number of animals that get sick and what disease they are fighting. In addition, any deaths should be recorded with information about the age of animals that die, the month of death and any other helpful information about risk factors for serious health problems. Finally, productivity measures such as the percent of cows that become pregnant and the weaning percentage provide valuable information about overall herd health and can be important indications of health problems that need to be addressed.

Another aspect of keeping health records is to document all the veterinary services utilized in the

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health program. These will include disease-prevention efforts such as use of screening tests and quarantine of new arrivals, vaccination of all ages of cattle on the ranch, as well as deworming and fly-control strategies. Health records should also include all treatment protocols and results of production evaluations such as breeding soundness examination (sometimes referred to as BSE) of bulls and pregnancy check of cows.

Keeping the customer happy

All businesspersons must keep customers in mind in all management decisions. Cattle producers have two customers to please: the owner of the cattle once they leave the ranch and, eventually, the beef-eating consumer. Any drug or physical adulteration that will carry through to the consumer, or injection blemish that becomes an issue to the next owner, should be an important concern to ranchers and their veterinarians.

The consumer wants a product that is safe, free from drug residues, free of injection blemishes or abscesses, and flavorful. It is every producer's job to ensure that every steak, hamburger and roast that comes from cattle raised on his or her ranch can meet the customer's demands.

A commitment to keeping beef

with drug residues off the consumer's plate means identifying and delaying the marketing of animals treated with a drug until such a time as they have been untreated for the minimum number of days stated on the label if the drug was used exactly as specified on the label, or for an extended period of time, as determined by your veterinarian, if the product was used in any extra-label fashion.

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In addition to being assured that the beef they purchase is free of residues, consumers have every right to expect their meat to be free of injection blemishes. By following simple standards of sanitation and animal handling, the incidence of injection-site blemishes should be extremely small. Animals should be properly restrained, and the syringes and other dosing equipment should be clean and functioning properly.

Needles should be changed every 10 head or more frequently if the needle develops a burr or becomes dirty. No more than 10 cc should be administered in any one site. Any product labeled for subcutaneous (sub-Q) administration should be given by that route, and any products labeled for intramuscular (IM) administration only should be given into non-prime cuts, such as the neck muscles, utilizing a clean needle.

Cattlemen, their employees, veterinarians, nutritionists and any others involved with the ranch must each examine what could go wrong in the delivery of a safe, wholesome and desirable product to the consumer. Once potential problems are identified, strategies or production practices are put into place to prevent those problems from ever occurring. A well-planned Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) program is designed so that everyday working techniques act to eliminate the potential for problems.

Veterinarians can play a number of important roles to ensure that you have a healthy herd and that you can communicate that fact to your customers. Encourage your customers and their veterinarians to talk to your veterinarian about the specific disease-prevention and treatment strategies employed on your ranch.

Many times, veterinarian-to-veterinarian conversations can be very helpful to make sure that both the cattle arriving at the new operation and the receiving ranch's cattle are protected from diseases that can occur

when cattle are commingled. In addition, the timing and description of any health problems that arise shortly after cattle are purchased and delivered should be conveyed to the source herd and its veterinarian.

Even if you do not receive any complaints from your customers, knowing the health status of cattle that you raised after they leave your

ranch provides important information about the effectiveness of your health program. Actively asking your customers for feedback about the health and productivity of the cattle you sell is a final step to ensure that your customers are happy with their purchase and can be an early indication of problems that need to be addressed.

There are many aspects to a successful

cattle-marketing plan to ensure both the seller and buyer are satisfied with the transaction. Creating, documenting and receiving feedback about the health programs that you implement on your ranch should be one component of that marketing plan.

