

Black Ink

Gifts That Keep On Giving

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For farm and ranch folks, Santa often leaves leather gloves, shiny new pocketknives or something like the latest grease gun. Husbands opened new toolsets and wives unwrapped wool socks and coveralls during the recent holiday season.

Most recipients think these are fine, practical gifts. It's always fun to get a standard piece of equipment with innovative improvements. With all the fresh gadgets and gizmos you have going into this new year, it might be time to evaluate tools you're not using that could improve your cowherd.

It would be no surprise to find some of last year's gifts still in their packaging under the shop bench, but some of the most significant unused tools are less tangible.

In agriculture, there would be distinct advantages in predicting the future. Unfortunately, you can't be certain when the market is going to spike or how that nice-looking heifer will calve. But you can use more than hunches to estimate how a bull will fit your herd.

Breeders work hard to collect accurate information, and the associations provide you with expected progeny differences (EPDs). Maternal, weaning and carcass traits are all assigned numbers that can predict what a sire will pass on to his offspring, compared to other sires.

If your wish list included higher weaning weights or better quality grades, Santa could only drop some EPD hints in your stocking. Search for bulls with above-breed-average EPDs. Carcass traits are becoming more important if you feed your calves or even if you sell them and want repeat buyers. You can look at specific EPDs to increase your ribeye size or marbling.

Perhaps you've been doing that, but like an old-fashioned grease gun, your methods haven't kept up with the advancements.

The industry keeps generating new tools to help you make money pleasing beef consumers.

Just as youngsters got the latest MP3 player or Nintendo gaming system under the tree, EPDs have evolved.

Many associations make selection indexes available now. By crosschecking that marbling EPD with the bull's index for grid or feedlot value, for example, you can simultaneously include a host of traits in selection pressure.

Other advancements can sneak up on you. While you're worrying about calving, hay harvest and feeding the cows, research and development teams are increasing the effectiveness of everyday products.

Today there are more vaccines and dewormers on the market than ever before. It may be time to reevaluate what you're giving to your cows and calves, and when. Call your veterinarian for a New Year's chat. Depending on your location and environment, this could be the year to try an injectable wormer to attack internal parasites. This fall, you might give your calves that booster shot you've never found the time for.

There are unique marketing options every year, including special sales at the local auction market. You might find benefits to partnering on retained ownership of your calves, or see if a feeder will buy them based on a premium-sharing equation. If you already have a focus on performance and quality, these options can put more gifts under your tree.

Topping the video auction or local market requires a little more homework than it used to. Enroll in some combination of a health-, genetic-, source- and age-verified program or find another way to add information to make those critters worth more to potential buyers.

None of these suggestions are as novel as that battery-free flashlight Santa left, but they could be even more useful. Think of what other tools are still lying on the bench, unopened. You might be surprised at how much value they bring in 2008. Δ

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