

A Handshake Communicates Honesty, Good Luck and Thanks

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As a new calendar brings new hope, I am reminded of the hope connected with a handshake in the beef business. A handshake means “Thank You” or Good Luck” (or many other unspoken greetings) and serves as the consummate physical communication which seals the deal.

As 2001 came to a close, the North Dakota State University Dickinson Research Extension Center has sold several lots of cows and calves. At each sale, I was reminded of the consequences of the handshake.

The business side of the beef business is unique. The paperwork is not excessive; excellent sales personnel listen, note the situation and close the deal, not with a pen, but a gavel, a nod and a twitch of the forefinger. The freshly sold calves or cows are re-penned, loaded and hauled the length of the highway with the ink still in the pen. The trusting nod and a producer’s handshake: the industry demands it.

Why are beef producers so trusting? Perhaps, from conception, cattle producers know the feeling. As a youngster, I wore out pages in the Encyclopedia Britannica, Volume C, where pictures of the cattle breeds were printed. Judging by current breed publications, cattle people never tire of looking at cattle (a picture is worth a thousand words).

For most beef producers, running cows combines a sincere love of cattle with the enjoyment of independence and solitude. On a daily basis, it is the beef producer and the cows. Depending on the size of the operation, there may be more people in the break room or sitting down for a hot cup of coffee, but when the work needs to be done, the tractor cab only holds one person.

The neighbors or extra crew show up for the big work days, but most days, it’s just you, “chorin” cows, like the cows were chored before your time, and probably will be after you are gone. You get to know the cattle and the cattle get to know you. This feeling, or sense, is what is at the heart of every good cattle

producer. Is the heart trainable? Remember the pre-high tech term “animal husbandry.”

It is possible to train an “animal scientist,” but “animal husbandmen” are born, not made. After all, it’s the unexplainable feeling of what is right that is important so often. I can send four hands to school and they will all pass with top grades. They will all learn the normal rectal temperature of a beef cow is 101 degrees F, the heart rate is 60 to 70 beats per minute, and the resting respiratory rate is 30 breaths per minute.

The first will need to run the calf in the chute only to find out the heart rate and respiratory rate are peaked, but the temperature is fine. The second will grab a horse and rope and drag an uncooperative calf to the sick pen and dully proclaim the calf sick. The third will walk over, kick the calf laying in the corner, wonder why the calf doesn’t respond and leave. And finally, the fourth will quietly move a calf through the pen (on horseback or foot), restrain the calf and note an slightly elevated temperature, increased respiratory rate and normal heart rate. Appropriate therapy will be initiated, calf notes made and the calf returned to the pen.

The first three will loudly ask, “Why that calf?” The fourth will quietly say, “Well, the calf was sick. Couldn’t you tell?” Cattle producers know instinctively that only the fourth hand can survive the long run in this business. From those that can spot a sick calf, know what to do, and restore the calf to its prime, all that is needed is a handshake—the universal sign of honesty in the beef business. Here’s to hoping that 2002 has lots of handshakes, healthy calves and good prices.

May you find all your ear tags.

Your comments are always welcome at www.BeefTalk.com. For more information, contact the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association, 1133 State Avenue, Dickinson, ND 58601 or go to www.CHAPS2000.COM on the Internet. In correspondence about this column, refer to BT0071.

