



# Outside the Box

► by **Tom Field**, professor of animal science, Colorado State University

## Burden of accumulated aggravation

*What goes on in the life of my customers? What are their hopes and dreams, goals, opportunities, limitations, and burdens? These questions should regularly cross the minds of each and every seedstock provider in the industry. The answer to these questions should contribute significantly to the genetic, information gathering, communication and service decisions that we make.*

### Facing the issues

Consider the challenges of the cow-calf producer:

- The regulatory climate of our society adds pressure to do more paperwork, attend more meetings and incur more cost to attain or remain in compliance with the law.
- The economic climate remains filled with the uncertainty brought on by rising land prices, international trade issues, animal disease incidents and the growing consolidation of the U.S. food supply chain. Add to that the traditional sources of risk such as precipitation, price discovery and equipment failure.
- Identifying, hiring and retaining a qualified and motivated labor force is increasingly difficult.
- Societal issues such as food safety, environmental management and animal welfare continue to mount.
- Marketing is more complicated given the variety of available alternatives, the pressures of source and age verification, the need to adhere to quality assurance guidelines, and the vast and varied amount of information that is available upon which to base decisions.
- Technology continues to evolve, the information superhighway has added complexity, and many technologies have failed to yield the "user friendliness" promised by vendors.

### Facing ourselves

The trends revealed in the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) 2002

Census of Agriculture provide insight into the demographics of production agriculture — fewer but larger farms, growing disparity in the price of farm inputs compared to goods generated in the production sector and the slow but steady rise in the age of the American farmer and rancher.

**Table 1: Distribution of age of principal farm operators**

Age	% of owners
<35	6%
35-44	17%
45-54	27%
55-64	24%
>65*	26%

\*17% are 70 or older.

Source: 2002 Census of Agriculture, USDA.

The age distribution of principal farm operators is shown in Table 1. It seems that the barriers to farm ownership make it difficult for young professionals to enter commercial agricultural

production. More than one-quarter of our nation's farmers are past the normal retirement age of their urban contemporaries, and a large segment of farmers and ranchers are in the life stage where the activities of their children and grandchildren are a central focus in the family.

### Facing our customers

The genetic customers with whom we work are mature, have multiple demands on their time, and function under the burden of accumulated aggravation brought on by the varied and disconnected demands on their time and energy. Because of these factors, commercial bull buyers have developed certain characteristics: They are short on time and have a minimal tolerance for unpleasant surprises. They are averse to high levels of risk, and they have a keen desire for a trusting relationship — supported by fair guarantees and clear communication — with their seedstock suppliers.

These commercial bull buyers have a

healthy skepticism about expensive or time-consuming technologies. And they couple a profit orientation with a general preference for simplicity.

The commercial cow-calf producer doesn't have the time, tolerance or inclination to deal with cattle that contribute to their aggravation level. The symptoms of aggravating genetics include but are not limited to:

- a little more calving difficulty than last year;
- slow but persistent slippage in calving distribution;
- less docility than has been the historic norm;
- more trouble getting females bred following their first calving;
- increasing incidence of undesirable udder and teat structure;
- a growing percentage of cows that are classified in the lower margin of desirable body condition, particularly in situations where environmental stress is not particularly high; and
- a progressive decline in the age at which cows are culled for functional failure.

One of the fundamental tasks of the seedstock producer is breeding cattle to help the commercial cattleman reduce the burden of accumulated aggravation. Part of the process of accomplishing this goal

**Table 2: Traits to monitor to help reduce the burden of accumulated aggravation**

- Calving season length and distribution
- Calving ease
- Disposition
- Reproductive performance trends by age class of female
- Number of calves that have to get help nursing
- Death loss and morbidity
- Distribution of body condition scores (BCS)

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involves monitoring the traits listed in Table 2 (see page 191) in both our own herds and those of our customers.

It is important that our tolerance for aggravation equates with that of our customers. Quantification of our customers' wants and needs requires clear and honest communication. Are we asking our customers the right questions? In the long run, the questions asked may be the most important step to initiate communication with our customers. And as the answers are delivered, we have to find time not only to listen, but to understand.

Are we making excuses for our cattle? Do they stay another season despite their

disposition, udder structure, fleshing ability or other functional failures? Do our cattle contribute to both our customers' bottom lines and their quality of life? At the end of the day, our greatest gift to our customers is to provide them with functional cattle. For example, it should be an easy decision for our customers when they choose whether to stay in the calving barn or attend their children's basketball game, concert or 4-H meeting.



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**Editor's Note:** Field is a professor at the Colorado State University (CSU) Department of Animal Sciences, where he is responsible for the seedstock cattle breeding program of the university teaching herd, composed of Angus and Hereford cattle. He directs the Seedstock Merchandising Team and teaches Food Animal Sciences, Beef Production and Family Ranching. He is a contributor to the research efforts of the CSU Beef-Tec program. A frequent speaker at beef cattle events in the United States and internationally, Field is also a partner in his family's commercial cow-calf enterprise, which uses Angus as an important genetic component.