



MARKETING CALVES AND YEARLINGS

Prepare your cattle to meet buyer demands at the sale barn.

by Heather Smith Thomas

When marketing calves and yearlings, it usually pays to know what the buyers are looking for in terms of genetics, health, nutrition and weight. Ron Gill, Ph.D., professor and Extension livestock specialist at Texas A&M University, weighs in on ideal conditions to get the most value for your cattle.

Genetics for growth

According to Gill, buyers looking for top-end cattle are usually interested in genetics for growth and efficiency. Genetics provide some assurance calves will do well postweaning, regardless of being on pasture or on feed.

“Most of the money made on cattle postweaning is made on efficiency of growth after they leave the ranch,” he says. “Producers who have a terminal cross system [selling all offspring for beef rather than trying to raise good females] can chase postweaning growth and performance and not hurt their cow size, cow efficiency or maternal qualities.”

Vaccinations

Most sellers require calves be raised under vaccination guidelines like Vac-45. This means calves have had, at minimum, a viral respiratory vaccine and a clostridial vaccine. These protocols usually include a requirement for *Manheimia haemolytica* and *Pasteurella multocida* vaccines. In most cases, producers use a modified-live vaccine either in a preweaning and postweaning shot or two rounds of shots postweaning.

Gill considers the Vac-34 the most cost-effective program in terms of premiums

paid for calves compared to program costs. “If calves are vaccinated 3 or 4 weeks before weaning and sold at weaning, the feedlot can booster them,” he explains. “If you look at video sales, the Vac-34 calves bring a premium of about \$2.30 per hundred-weight. For what it costs to put the vaccine in them, this will make you money unless your labor costs for doing it are really high.”

He adds weaned, preconditioned calves generally do well because they have been vaccinated and handled and are past the stresses of those processes. Stressed cattle may have a compromised immune system, preventing them from mounting good immunity when vaccinated. Stresses include weaning, bad weather, transportation and, sometimes, too much handling.

Gill describes, “As one buyer put it, he wants cattle that were either weaned for 45 minutes or for 45 days. He knows how to handle either one of those sets of calves, but the ones that are weaned for a shorter time — like only a week or two — are set up for failure. They’ve been recently stressed and then you move them again, right in the middle of that stress period, it’s a wreck, especially if those calves have been going through marketing channels for a week.”



Nutrition

Another factor of successful marketing is the nutrition calves receive. Preconditioning is a popular management practice to help prepare calves to enter a feedlot. According to the Beef Cattle Research Center, preconditioning includes weaning calves at least 30 to 45 days prior to sale, putting calves on a vaccination program and introducing them to processed feedstuffs, feedbunks and water bowls in order to spread out stressors so the immune system is not overwhelmed.

“The nutrition program dictates whether you make or lose money preconditioning calves,” Gill says. “You must closely evaluate what you can do to increase rate of gain and look at cost versus the value of that gain.”

He points out these factors can change with the market, because as cattle get bigger, they will usually bring less per pound, so the value of that gain is not as much as people think. If calves weigh 500 pounds at weaning and are kept for 45 days to push them to gain 2.5 to 3 pounds per day to weigh 625 pounds come sale time, they will probably bring \$6 to \$10 less per hundredweight than what they would have brought as a 500-pound calf.

“Most of the people who lose money on a preconditioning program are spending too much money on feed,” Gill notes. “They are convinced calves need to gain 2.5 to 3 pounds per day to pay for the feed, but that may not be true. You can precondition calves on a good roughage program with supplements. The important thing is to manage cost of gain and keep it below 60 cents per pound gained. Most feeding programs will cost about 90 cents per pound of gain.”

Another misconception about preconditioning is getting calves bunk broke. Gill says this may be irrelevant if calves are going to grass or wheat pasture; for example, stocker cattle which come off winter pastures and go straight to the feedyard do not have problems because they know how to eat.

“The biggest problem people have is when they bring fresh-weaned calves straight to the yard right off the cow — those calves don’t know how to eat because they are still going through weaning stress,” he says. “If calves aren’t stressed, they figure it out right away.”

Selling weight

The best weight to sell calves or yearlings can change from year to year depending on price of feed, weather, etc. Some years lightweight cattle that can go on grass are in



The optimum weight to sell calves fluctuates year to year, so it is important to communicate with your buyer(s) ahead of time identify a target weight for your calves.

demand and are worth a lot. Other years, buyers are looking for larger calves that can go straight to the feedyard. Gill says if you have a certain buyer you always work with, you may have a certain target to shoot for.

“It’s convenient to always have the same person buying your calves, but some years those calves may not fit their program and they may not pay what they are really worth,” he says, pointing to a drought year as an example of when to shop around for different buyers. “During a drought, calves may be 100 pounds lighter than usual... If you are locked into a certain program, going to the yard with all your cattle, and don’t have grass to go to, you might need to look beyond your normal buyer and find one who wants the kind of calves you have that year.”

Although buyer-and-seller loyalty is important, Gill adds it can pay to shop around for another buyer if you cannot agree on a price with your regular buyer. “There have been times when my regular buyer and I didn’t agree, and I’ve put the calves on a video auction and told him when they were going to sell,” he says. “Most of the time, he’s bought them at the video sale, at a little higher price than what he wanted to pay for them. You have commissions to pay, so you need to pencil it out; it’s not always easy to decide which way to go.”

Condition

Do buyers prefer calves that are fat and bloomy or calves that are leaner? Amidst

the discussion, Gill cautions against selling fat calves.

“Most cow-calf producers want their calves fat and looking really good when they sell, but this may not be what buyers want,” he says. “Buyers don’t want thin calves, but they don’t want some that have to lose a lot of baby fat.”

With this consideration in mind, Gill reasons that calves which go through the Vac-45 program bring more money because they look more like yearlings — they tend to lose a bit of bloom and baby fat but not weight.

Gill defines “good condition” as a body condition score (BCS) of 5 to 5.5 with a little bit of flesh, but not extra. “Those calves have room to grow a lot, with maybe some compensatory growth,” he explains. “After they go to the feedyard they really grow — they don’t have to transition out of the baby fat.”

In some cases, buyers shop for thinner calves because they will have more compensatory gain. However, calves with a BCS 3 may come with health risks because they may have stressed immune systems.

“You walk a fine line on body condition — it may work best in a pasture program where you are supplementing and can let those calves lose a little bloom and still grow,” Gill says. “In a drylot where you are mixing rations, you have to be careful to not put too much energy in the ration or you will put additional fat on them, which may be discounted by the buyer.” **HW**

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