

What's that Light?

In March, I had the pleasure of having lunch with Dr. Temple Grandin at the Maritime Beef Conference in Moncton, New Brunswick. Dr. Grandin is world renowned for her insight into animal behaviour. She told of a recent visit to a processing plant where a simple thing like a small crack of light coming around a door was causing animals to balk. Her key message is that you must think like an animal; go where they go; and experience what they experience. Only then can you understand and make handling system improvements that will work.

Most beef farmers do not think like a beef consumer simply because they have no experience as a beef consumer. At scores of meetings with literally many hundreds of beef farmers I have asked "Have you purchased beef at a retail store in the past year" and it is always about 1 in 10 that put up their hand. That means that 90% are not having the experience of the consumer. This is a great limitation to making changes that will resonate with consumers.

Today's consumer has a lack of background on agriculture. Too often, the farm community is critical of the consumer for that. How is that fair: how much do you know about what they do day to day? Too often I have heard farm meetings say, "we need to educate the consumer". Rest assured, if they wanted to be educated, there are lots of resources available. The far more important issue is trust. Think of trust as being like a reputation... you prove yourself everyday with hundreds of little actions... and can lose your reputation with just one of those little actions. Losing trust of your consumers is a huge risk.

A recent study initiated by AgSights looked at risks facing agriculture. You can find a copy of the results at <http://agsights.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Screen-Shot-2018-04-30-at-12.03.36-PM.png>. The findings clearly show that the beef sector lags far behind other sectors in identifying and making plans for risk. The dairy sector, for example, has been implementing their ProAction program on a staged basis for several years. This includes moving forward with traceability in advance of the government requirement to do so. That's leadership.

Central to any such program or any planned improvement is data. Farmers collect data for one of two reasons: you have to, or you want to. Those that do it because they want to are in business and the data collected helps them to implement their own business plan. The variation

in profitability in the beef industry, particularly at the cow calf level is staggering: there is profit to be made but only with well-informed management decisions. Those that wait to collect data until they have to increase their business risk and miss opportunities. There are several things emerging that in the short term will force even the most stubborn farmers to collect data: traceability, antimicrobial resistance and sustainability. On the horizon are even more challenges to livestock producers: plant-based meat substitutes; cultured “meat” and insects for human consumption.

The beef industry finally has some market pull emerging that may yield some payback to the tremendous cost of our partially implemented traceability system, which is currently just a tagging system. The national “sustainable beef” pilot included small premiums for cattle that came from verified farms. This is good but there needs to be more planned and proactive action make sector adjustments in tandem with all players (farmers, processors, retailers and government) in order to realize the potential that exists.

Every day, consumers have experiences just like an animal seeing that light around the door. Farmers need to understand the light and the only way to do that is by listening to consumers and understanding their experience. Then industry leaders and individuals need to implement change based on good data to deal with consumer issues with a clear and consistent focus on building trust.