

Working with Your Consulting Nutritionist/Feedmill

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Take Home Message

- ✓ Nutrition and management decisions many times dictate profit/loss in cattle feeding.
- ✓ Objective information presented in an unbiased manner is necessary to make correct decisions on key issues.
- ✓ Your advisor should be honest, knowledgeable and have a genuine interest in your operation.
- ✓ Research data is the basis for informed decision making, however data becomes a more powerful tool when combined with feedlot observations.
- ✓ If you work closely with your feedmill and expect a high level of expertise then you should expect a competitively priced supplement/premix, not the lowest price.

Introduction

Today, western Canada has a very aggressive cattle feeding sector. To be a successful feedlot in a highly competitive market, cattle feeders need to have an edge. Nutrition and management are key factors relative to controlling cost of gain and therefore profit/loss. Where do you turn for leading information in today's world of information overload? One key person most feedlots turn to is their consulting nutritionist or feed mill representative. This person can be an invaluable source of information for you. Are you obtaining quality and timely information? I will describe three working relationships between feedlots and feedmills that are common to the feedlot sector.

1. Feedlots work with a feedmill and are provided with supplement/premix and technical expertise.
2. Feedlots hire an independent consultant to provide technical expertise and the consultant bids out the custom supplement/premix to several feedmills for the lowest price quote.
3. Feedlot manager puts together a set of supplement specifications and bids it to several feedmills.

The supplement/premix formulation should be customized based on your feedstuffs (forage and grain), your feeding program and performance goals set for your cattle. If you are a serious cattle feeder, you need to have a knowledgeable person discuss your needs and formulate customized products for your operation. Incorrect feed ingredients or additives cost you money, potentially lead to nutritional problems or a loss in efficiency. In addition, when a new product or feed ingredient hits the market it is important to make an early and correct evaluation of the product as the early adopters make the most money from new and successful products.

Feedmill

If you enjoy working with a certain feed company and they have a highly technical staff that provides your business with a professional service then the lowest price supplement should not be your number one priority. Technical information comes at a cost! If there is no margin left because lowest price per tonne is your main goal then obviously you will receive low level of technical expertise. What should you expect from your feedmill advisor? Be fair. How much feed do you purchase? Are you expecting a realistic level of service from your feed company? Your feedmill representative should be honest, knowledgeable in nutrition and management, well connected within the industry and have a genuine interest in your operation. Is your feedmill representative's first goal to sell, or do they have your feedlot's needs first in their mind?

Give your feedmill plenty of notice when ordering, if you wait until the last minute to order, you run the risk of a late load or a hot load. Do not get too bent out of shape if your pellets are not high quality if you have a silage based diet.

There are three common types of supplemental feeds for feedlots; dry supplement, liquid supplement and premixes. Liquid and dry supplements and premixes work well with silage based rations. Premixes should not be used when dry chopped hay is your only forage as the fine particles within the premix will sort out of the ration. If you are comparing the price of liquid supplement, dry supplement and premixes on a cents per head per day basis, it is only fair to give realistic energy values to the carrier in all three types of supplemental feed.

Private Consultants

Private consultants charge for nutrition and management services and generally bid out the supplement or premix for their clients. The US feedlot industry has used private consultants for years. In western Canada, consultants have recently started to increase in number. Some consultants are excellent and worth their weight in gold others are simply called consultants for a lack of a better term. It is up to you to evaluate the ability of your consultant. Some consultants are flexible and will work with your favourite or most convenient feed mill. This procedure is acceptable as long as that mill is willing to accept a bid type margin. If the mill wants full feed margins and the feeder also pays directly for the consultant the farmer in effect pays twice for technical expertise.

Prior to agreeing to a working relationship with a private consultant, it is important to agree upon a fee structure. Will your feedlot be charged on an hourly basis or will you be on a retainer. Is telephone consulting included? Who pays for long distance phone charges? Communication is the key to developing an effective and long term consulting relationship!

Farmer Bid

In many situations, feedlot operators bid out supplement or premix themselves. This procedure generally guarantees an economically priced supplement. If lowest cost per tonne of supplement is your main goal and technical expertise is not important to you, then you may choose this route. During the last 10 years in the feed industry, I have not witnessed one feedlot that employs this procedure for optimum profitability. They either purchase too many feed ingredients or not enough. How do feedlot managers keep on top of new technical trends in the feedlot industry in addition to their day to day duties as a feedlot manager? In bid situations, the feedmill provides little or no technical information because there is no margin left. I do not recommend 'farmer bid' without help from a consultant or someone knowledgeable in the feed industry. Lowest cost supplement is good for coffee shop bragging, but not for optimum profitability!

Information and Decision Making

We live in a time of information overload where most everyone's most precious commodity is time. Therefore, it is critical to have confidence in recommendations given by your advisor. Information for decision making generally comes

from two sources, scientific research and common sense. Data generated from scientific research is an excellent base to begin the decision making process. In general, feedlot data comes from two sources, Universities and research stations such as Ag Canada or from privately run research stations which are generally funded by pharmaceutical firms. Both research groups have their pros and cons and both are necessary as a check and balance system. A limitation with academic research is generally a lack of numbers. However, academic research tends to be less bias because the almighty dollar is not as closely linked to recommendations. Private research generally has the advantage of greater numbers but you must evaluate whether the researcher has a vested interest in recommending the product. Will they make money from there recommendations based on sales of the product or obtaining further research dollars? When data is examined it should be determined whether there was a statistically significant difference in the treatments.

Research has limitations and understanding those limitations are important for correct interpretation of the data. Certain types of research can be accomplished in one location and extrapolated to different geographical regions of the world, other research needs to be run in the local area. For example, implant data from Kansas feedyards should be able to be extrapolated to Alberta feedlot conditions. However, worming data from Louisiana has very little implications for Alberta cow-calf operations.

Research data is necessary to evaluate feed additives relative to animal performance. However, since feedlot rations are unique to each setting, observations in your own feedlot that are *recorded* are important relative to trouble shooting problems such as bloat and grain overload. For example, when a research trial evaluating a feed additive is conducted with cereal silage and your rations are based on haylage, you can most likely extrapolate performance data from one forage to the next. However, bloat control data should not be extrapolated from a research trial using cereal silage to rations where haylage is fed because haylage is more bloat provocative than cereal silage. Data is important, but it becomes more effective when applied with common sense!