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**Cows and Computers:
Choosing Records Management Software**

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INTRODUCTION

Back in 1990, those of us at Malm Ranch Company decided it was becoming more and more difficult to keep accurate records on over 800 head of cows using the paper/pencil method-- especially when the "paper" ended up being the inside of boxes from our vaccines and Ivomec! So when my two kids and I returned to work at the ranch full time, I was given the job of computerizing the cattle records for our family farming/ranching operation. I started out using a data base program but soon found myself having to enter the same information over and over because I was not software-literate enough to know how to integrate my data. It took me four long years of searching and trying programs before I found software that would work for our operation. During that time I discovered there are many programs on the market each with different features. However, my experiences during my own search combined with the experiences I have had since becoming a sales representative for the software I now use, have shown me that many of us begin our search asking the wrong questions. There are so many programs out there, it becomes confusing if we approach the task from the wrong aspect and we usually end up being disappointed with our selection. I quickly learned to beware of any salesman who wanted to tell me what his program could do for me because no one knew exactly how we kept our records. I would like to discuss the six steps I feel you need to go through when are trying to choose a software package.

YOUR COMPUTER SYSTEM

The first step you must take before you begin your search requires knowing the capabilities of your computer system and your own level of user experience. You need to know the version of DOS or Windows you will be using, the system's RAM and available hard disk space, and the model and speed of your microprocessor. You also need to know the type of monitor and video card your system has. Today, most programs are available in DOS or Windows, operate best with at least 16 megabytes of RAM, take up at least 8 megabyte of hard disk space and require a 486 microprocessor. A VGA or Super VGA monitor is usually adequate along with a 4-megabyte video card. All of these are important considerations when you make your software selection so make sure you are familiar these aspects of your computer system. Your own computer experience will also be a major consideration in your selection because you must choose software that you will be able to learn quickly and that you will be comfortable using.

UNIQUE FEATURES

The next step is the one I consider most crucial: You must identify the unique features of your current record keeping system. We all keep the same basic information; but we may keep it

in a variety of different ways. Some of us may have additional information we track about our cattle that is unique to us as individual breeders. For Malm Ranch, the first unique feature was our animal ID system. All software requires that each animal have its own individual, unique ID number as the primary source of entering and locating that animal. Because we have developed a purebred composite breed called Carcass Masters™ in addition to the seven other purebred breeds we raise, our animal ID and tagging system is different from the system other ranchers use. Another unique feature is a numerical breed code that we give each animal. These are just two examples of unique features of our record keeping system that required specific elements in the software we chose. You need to spend considerable time looking at the way you currently keep your records and list every feature that is unique to your operation before moving on to the next step.

AREAS OF FLEXIBILITY

Once you have identified the unique features of your current system of record keeping, you must decide which ones you are or are not willing to change or modify to fit a computerized system of keeping records. In other words, for each unique feature you have identified you must decide if you are willing to change the way you keep your records to fit a software program or if you want to find a program that can be customized to the way you already keep your records. The one thing we were not willing to change was our ID system; any program we chose had to accommodate the way we were already identifying each animal in our herd. That meant the program's animal ID field had to accommodate a combination of letters and numbers and have a minimum of ten character spaces available. Because there was the possibility of ID duplications between heifers and bulls, we did modify the cows IDs on paper by using the BIF year letter code for our heifers and cows. The numerical breed code could not be modified; but we could be flexible in either keeping it in an open standard field or in a user-identified field. All we needed for this feature was a field that had 8 character spaces. From the inventory of unique features that I developed, I realized I wanted a program with a lot of fields I could name myself rather than a program with all program-identified fields. For each unique feature of your current record keeping system you must decide whether or not you can be flexible and to what extent you are willing to modify the way you record the information you keep.

ROUTINE ACTIVITIES AND DATA

The fourth step you must take before beginning your search involves identifying those activities you perform routinely and the data that you compile and enter yearly. Vaccinations, branding and weaning are all examples of routine activities. Calving information, weaning and yearling weights, and yearly AI and pasture breeding information are all examples of data that will be entered on a yearly basis. You must find a program that allows you to enter your routine data as quickly and efficiently as possible. Some programs allow you to perform certain activities to large groups of animals with a minimum of data entry while others require individual entries for each animal. The greater the number of routine activities you perform and data you gather, the more necessary it is to have a program that does as much of the work for you as possible.

DESIRED OUTPUT

The next step is one that is easily overlooked in this age of technology when more is always thought to mean better. You need to determine what types of information you want your software to be able to process from the data you enter. Computers and the available software are able to keep and "spit" out all types of information; but unless you are going to utilize all of the information, there is no sense in paying for software that exceeds your needs. You need to know what information you will want to print out and how you will want to use the information you enter. For registered breeders, that means considering such things as if you want to download EPD information from your breed association or be able to send your registrations in on floppy disks rather than on paper forms. For both commercial and registered breeders you must know what types of decisions you will use your computer data to help you make. For example, will you use the data in your program to help make culling decisions; will you need printouts to send to prospective bull customers. What types of calculations do you want your software to be able to perform-calving due dates, calving intervals, adjusted weights, ratios? All of these are important questions to ask yourself before you choose a computer program.

MAKING YOUR PURCHASE

Having done your homework, you are now ready to begin examining the various programs on the market. Because you have already determined what you want your computer software to do for you, you know the questions to ask so you can quickly "weed out" programs that will not work for you. Once you do find programs that fit the criteria you have established, you are then ready to compare prices, the availability of a demo, the availability of technical support, and the length of a trial period or the guarantee offered by each software package. Don't forget to closely examine the instruction manual provided with each program. Make certain it fits your user experience level. The final step in choosing a program requires selecting software backed by a reliable software developer. You are not just buying a product; you are forming a partnership. You will need technical support from someone who understands the computer and someone who knows the cattle business as you learn to use your program. Make sure to purchase a program backed by a company that will always be working to up-grade their software as the industry changes.

CONCLUSION

Taking these six steps will save you time and money. But most of all, when you do make your final purchase, taking these steps will help insure your satisfaction with the software package you choose.

WORKSHEET

Step #1: Your computer system

Size of RAM

Space available on Hard-Disk Drive

Microprocessor Model

Microprocessor Speed

DOS Version

Windows Version

Type of Monitor & Video Card

Step #2: Unique features of your records

Step #3: Areas of flexibility

Step #4: Routine activities and data

Step #5: Desired output

Step #6: Making a decision