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Deciphering Marketing Media to Evaluate Cattle Operation Inputs

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New products or new marketing efforts for products that have been on the market for a while often generate interest in using these products on the farm. Cattle producers routinely ask questions about the effectiveness and quality of potential inputs for their operations. Inputs may include anything from forage seed to equipment to cattle feed. By design, marketing media are intended to make these products appear very attractive to potential buyers. Yet before making a purchase based on a fancy advertisement, it is important to objectively determine the potential value of the product being considered for purchase to the cattle operation.

Product advertisements often make claims about the product's performance. For example, an advertisement might read, “XYZ annual ryegrass outyielded QRS annual ryegrass in recent product trials conducted at Somewhere, Mississippi”. Start by asking questions about the “product trials”.

- **Were they conducted by an unbiased third party or in-house by the company selling the product?** A company selling a product has an incentive to increase product sales by “spinning” results in their favor or excluding unflattering results. That is not to say that marketer-led research trials noted in advertisements are falsely represented, just that they should be subject to adequate scrutiny.
- **Are the results of these trials applicable to my farm?** Area or regional differences in growing conditions, soil types, forage adaptability, and so on are important to consider. A product may perform relatively well in one area but not as well in another area. For cost and other reasons, many products have not been researched in all of the locations where they are being marketed. In the case of animal health products, seek advice from a local veterinarian who is aware of disease concerns and appropriate preventative and treatment methods for the area.
- **Were these trials true research efforts with valid comparisons and adequate research controls and replication or more demonstration-type trials with less rigorous design and data collection and analysis?** Research results are only as good as the quality of the research effort. Although on-farm demonstrations and testimonials are good ways to garner attention for a product, they must be viewed differently than rigorous research efforts that attempt to answer research questions in a scientific manner. Appropriate research controls, replication, and statistical analysis and interpretation are essential to establish reliability of research results. If research references are listed in an advertisement, then track them down to make more informed judgments about the product.
- **Are claims of enhanced performance statistically valid?** An advertisement might claim that cow pregnancy increased from 84% to 92% by feeding a certain product to cows. This sounds at first like a very effective feed that cow-calf

producers should rush out to buy. However, the two pregnancy rates quoted in the advertisement might not be statistically different from one another. There may not have been many cattle in the comparison groups so that one open cow greatly changed the results of her treatment group. In other words, using this product may not produce improved cow pregnancy rates.

- **Have the trial results been repeated?** A good example of this is forage variety testing program results. A forage cultivar may rank at the top of its class in one year but may rank much lower in other years. Look for products that consistently perform at a certain level. Also, it is not uncommon to have contrasting research findings for a research question. Each research effort must be put into context of the “bigger picture”, and specific conditions that might have influence one result or another must be considered. For producers comfortable with interpreting research results, use Internet searches and university resources to seek out additional research findings regarding a particular product. Otherwise, go directly to Extension personnel or consultants trained in research review and interpretation for advice on what research findings about a particular product mean to the cattle operation.
- **Are the trial results currently valid?** Many things change over time. Legal requirements, technologies, and cattle genetics are just a few of these things. When using information that has been around for many years, make sure that it is still appropriate and applicable to the current production and marketing environment.
- **Is there any fine print?** Many product advertisements contain footnotes with important information such as withdrawal times or sources from which statements are drawn. This information may qualify claims or put them in context. Read the fine print.

Marketers use techniques in designing promotional media that make products appear very desirable upon first glance. For instance, bar charts where one product is represented by a very short vertical bar and the product being marketed is represented by a very tall vertical bar for a performance item give the illusion that the product being marketed is far superior to a competing product. But, be sure to review the axis values and scales in these types of illustrations. They may be designed to make relatively small increments appear huge instead. Then ponder whether the performance difference is enough to warrant purchasing the product at its current price.

When considering products that have not been used previously on a particular cattle operation, determine if additional items must be purchased to implement use of the product. Does the product require a special applicator that is sold separately? Ask other relevant questions to pinpoint the investment needed in adopting the product. How often will the product be needed? How much of the product will be needed? Will there be any reoccurring costs associated with the use of this product?

Become an informed consumer of cattle operation inputs. A little extra homework on the front end can make the difference between a wise purchasing decision and buyer regret. For more information about beef cattle production, contact an office of the Mississippi State University Extension Service.