

Cattle Business in Mississippi – February 2010 “Stocker Cents” article

Finding the Right Information

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A few of the newer technologies that come to mind as potentially valuable tools for stocker operators include internet-based news and educational materials. There are many other technologies that can improve specific aspects of production and information about each of them can be found on the “web.” This article will focus on using internet-based communication tools to become more effective at finding and interpreting educational materials.

Almost all of the newer communication tools are based on the internet. In fact, an internet search engine can yield an amazing amount of information pertaining to a fairly simple search. For example, searching the phrase “stocker cattle production” on one popular search engine yields 1,130 links. Searching that same phrase on Google (the most widely-used search engine) yields nearly 68,000 links. So, there is an amazing amount of material to be found on the internet. However, finding material that is actually relevant to the specific question in mind can be difficult. As internet use continues to increase in rural areas and in production agriculture, it will become more important to know how to concentrate time on productive use of it.

The best way to start sorting through the internet clutter is by developing the right query. A “query” refers to what is typed into the search engine. Guides for developing the right query are available for each search engine. They explain their individual features and show how to search for more specific information by refining an original search. A general concept to keep in mind is that entering more key words or phrases will generally focus the links or “hits.”

After focusing in on the appropriate links, it can still be difficult, and time consuming, to decide which material actually addresses the original question. It is important to keep in mind that material on the internet is generated from across the world. Searching for information about grazing wheat can return information from Oklahoma or Russia. So, always look at the source and make sure the information is appropriate for the environment in which it will be implemented.

Legitimacy and reliability can also be an issue with material located through a general internet search. Make sure to check multiple sources and question a site that gives information inconsistent with several other sites. The best way to combat the issue of misinformation is to go directly to a trusted source. University Extension and industry association websites are places to find information backed by research and field trials. Also, getting information from these websites will ensure that information is specific to the local environment. Visit www.ms cattlemen.org or <http://msucares.com/livestock/beef> for beef cattle production material specific to the state of Mississippi.

Other internet based communication tools include e-mail, podcasts, video training modules, blogs and social media sites. E-mail is a great way to share information with other producers or to communicate with industry representatives and generally accomplish day-to-day business. Another great feature of e-mail is the multitude of newsletters that can be received on a regular basis. Some great examples of e-mail news are the “Monday Memo” from the Mississippi Cattlemen’s Association, the Mississippi Beef Cattle Improvement Association monthly newsletter and the “Weekly Wrap” and the “Cattle Market Notes” from the MSU department of Agricultural Economics.

Podcasts (audio and/or video) and video training modules are a good way to obtain non-text information that can be viewed or listened to while multitasking. One crucial requirement for using these medias will be a relatively high-speed connection. A good podcast example is the weekly podcast available through the MSU department of Agricultural Economics which provides an update on market activity and time-sensitive production information. Video training modules for Beef Quality Assurance and Master Cattle Producer certification can be found at the MSU beef cattle Extension website listed above.

Blogs that provide timely news and information concerning beef cattle production are plentiful. Many are generated by university Extension personnel while others are kept by online magazines and industry support businesses. While this type of information comes fast and often, special care should be taken to evaluate it for accuracy and validity. Check the credentials of the people writing them and their objectives.

Social media sites like Facebook, MySpace and Twitter are likely the fastest growing method for information exchange. These sites provide a free platform for building communities of people, from across the country and world, with common interests. Each of these networks has communities devoted to production animal agriculture and specific sectors within it. One of the most important benefits of these websites is the ability to network with a wider scope of producers and consultants that can help grow an enterprise.

Admittedly, these internet-based resources require some basic knowledge of computer technologies. However, it is relatively easy to learn them. Even though the average age of beef cattle producers might lead some to believe that these tools are underutilized, that does not seem to be the case. For those intimidated by these technologies, consider at least trying them. Their simplicity will be surprising and the rewards can be extremely beneficial.