Call the Market

3 Factors for Cattlemen to Consider When Deciding Strategies for 2026

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With ample opportunities on the table again for cattlemen in 2026, it's vital they have well-thought-out business plans for the upcoming year. (Photo by Kayla Walker)

What an exciting time to be in the cattle business -- 2025 offered numerous opportunities for cattlemen to sell cattle at prices never seen before. And, with the way the market has charged into 2026, I believe there will be opportunities to richly capitalize on the market again in the year ahead.

But rarely does achieving great success happen to those who operate without a strategy. Sure, from time to time someone may get lucky and just happen to take their calves to the sale barn on the week where prices are the absolute highest for the year. However, operating blindly more commonly means dollars are left on the table and regrets of missed opportunities linger.

So, with that, I must ask you: What's your business strategy for the year ahead? For the next five years? For the next 10 years? And 20 years from now, what would you ideally like to see from your operation?

Having a dream and having goals to reach that dream provides motivation. It's perfectly acceptable for your goals for your family or for your operation to change; but we can't sit idle and expect to reap profits or feel purposeful in our own skin.

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With that, I hope you sit down and answer the questions asked above and take some time to consider these further questions.

1) What's your plan for marketing your calves this year? Sure, everyone wants to sell them for the highest dollar possible; but without knowing what that dollar figure is or when it may roll around, that's a pretty aimless goal.

Instead, I think it would be worthwhile to ask yourself specifically what price you'd be pleased with and to pinpoint the time you think it would be most advantageous to sell those calves. I understand it's somewhat hard to specify what price you'd like to see for your calves without having a great understanding of what the market may be early this spring/summer when the first big rounds of feeder cattle sales happen.

But until then, we need to actively track the market and see what different weight groups of calves bring, so when spring rolls around and some sales shake out, we haven't been sitting idle for the last six months. Instead, we know how the market has been trending and can feel comfortable with the details we've outlined.

2) What's your strategy to market your cull cows this year? I know all too often cattlemen ship their calves in the fall, preg-check the next day, and then sell the open cows the next day or two after that. But what's defeating about that strategy is cull cow prices are usually the lowest in the fall and that's when most producers market their cows. And cull cow revenue can account for anywhere between 15% to 30% of gross revenue for cow-calf enterprises. So, again, what's your plan to market your cull cows this year? And specifically, if feed is cheap, would it be more advantageous for you to feed her for some extra time to have a hotter market to sell her at?

3) Do you plan to utilize any form of risk protection? It's not my place to tell you whether it's a good or bad decision for your business one way or another. However, those decisions need to be thought out now as opposed to later. Whether that's in the form of Livestock Risk Protection (LRP) insurance or drought insurance, you're more apt to make calculated decisions if you have the time to think them through, rather than feeling pressured and forced to make a quick decision.

There are a couple of things we can be sure of heading into 2026. First, we know the bullishness that's currently driving the market is expected to remain steadfast -- so long as no unforeseen hurdles arise -- through the first quarter and potentially into the second quarter of the year, as that's when supplies are going to be the absolute lowest. Second, even though the market is ripe with opportunity, there's still more risk laced through today's market than has ever been seen before.

I hope all of you take some extra time to think about your business strategies for the year ahead, strengthen your endurance and build on your success into 2026.

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