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Build, Brand and Market your Calf Crop: *A Path to Reputation Cattle*

When weaned calf prices are high the revenue difference between the top third and bottom two-third benchmark farms in the COP Network has been minimal. But in 2021 when calf supplies were larger, and buyers were more interested in quality than numbers to fill pens, the revenue difference was 16%.

Even in 2024, for herds with **less than 200 beef cows**, the average weaned calf price was 13% higher in the top-third performing benchmarks (based on medium-term profit). This is what drove their overall revenue to be 7% higher compared to the bottom two-thirds, showing that putting time and effort into building reputation cattle is worth it at every stage of the cattle cycle.

Revenue per cow was not statistically different between the herds with more or less than 200 beef cows suggesting that at current high prices and tight calf supplies, there may not be a premium for large sized groups. However, this may change when the cattle cycle has ample supplies and more competition between sellers.

What is the COP Network?

The Canadian Cow-calf Cost of Production Network (COP Network) uses standardized data collection which allows for comparison both within and between provinces, and internationally. Since launching in 2021, the COP Network has collected data from over 235 producers contributing to 64 cow-calf benchmark farms that represent various production systems. Each benchmark is based on data from 3-7 producers. Data collection occurs every 5 years with annual indexing of input and output prices, as well as crop and forage yields, in subsequent years. Individual benchmark farm summaries, can be found at: https://canfax.ca/resources/cost-of-production/cop-results.html

While prices are high right now, they will not stay that way. Preparing now, can make a difference when low prices squeeze profit margins. Producers who consistently deliver high-quality, uniform calves backed by consistent performance can achieve “reputation cattle” status —and command premium prices. This is crucial to surviving the low in the price cycle.

Reputation cattle aren't built overnight—they’re the result of consistent management, honesty, and reliable performance. By focusing on quality, transparency, and buyer needs, you can build a brand that keeps buyers coming back and puts more dollars in your pocket.

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1. Build a High-Quality Calf Crop

Start by defining your target market — finishing lots or backgrounders — and select genetics to meet their needs. Use reputable AI sires or purchase bulls with strong Expected Progeny Differences (EPDs) for the desired traits. Maintain accurate records.

> The miracle isn't that I finished the marathon. The miracle is that I started. ~ Michelle Salaz

Implement a strong herd health and nutrition program. Calm handling and bunk training go a long way in reducing stress and improving performance down the line. A tight calving window (45–60 days) will also help deliver a uniform group of calves at sale time.

2. Brand for Reputation

Develop your ranch's visual identity. Build awareness and loyalty among buyers - by finding ways to connect the quality to the source of the product. Producers who stand out in the marketplace are those who back up their quality with verified practices.

On-farm assurance programs like Verified Beef Production Plus (VBP+) demonstrate your commitment to food safety, animal care, biosecurity, and environmental stewardship. Adding certifications, like CRSB can open doors to additional benefits; but it does require that extra steps be taken (see sidebar). Operations certified by VBP+ are also certifed to meet the Sustainable Beef Production Standard (CRSB Certified) as the same time.

CRSB Certified Beef requires:

1. A **completed audit** by Verified Beef Production Plus, Ontario Corn Fed Beef Quality Assurance Program or Where Food Comes From
2. **Consent to sharing information with the Canadian Cattle Identification Agency (CCIA)** for the purposes of Certified Sustainable Beef Chain of Custody
3. **Submit birth dates** to the Canadian Livestock Tracking System (CLTS)
4. **Submit move-in events** to the CLTS when cattle move to a new operation

A five-year Level 1 assessment (cow/calf or grazing operation) with VBP+ costs $1,250 which can be paid up front or through five annual payments ($250/year). With a CRSB certification at $20 per head qualifying cattle credit for cattle processed at Cargill, it would take approximately 1.25 years to pay-off the assessment cost assuming one has a 120-cow herd with an 89% weaning rate, selling only their steers (53 head = $1,060/year of additional revenue) to a certified operation and sold to a qualifying packer.

In addition, assessment costs for verified or certification programs can be offset by incentives provided through some provincial programs to cost-share assessment costs or infrastructure linked to grant priorities. Other benefits include the Farm Credit Canada Sustainability Incentive on lending.

3. Market for Premium Value

> Not being known does not stop the truth from being true. ~ Richard Bach

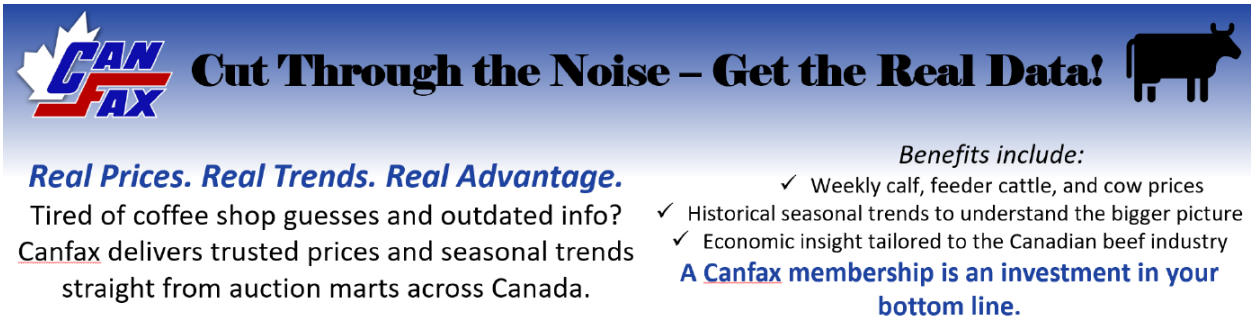
Choose a marketing channel. Pre-sort, internet and satellite sales are ideal for producers offering large, uniform lots with verified programs. Direct sales to feedlots or through an order buyer can help build relationships and generate valuable feedback. Some auction markets provide showlists, so that buyers know who is selling. Similarly, buyers know if sellers consistently sell at the same sale every year.

Key Takeaways:

1. When prices are low in the cattle cycle, reputation cattle can be the difference between profit or loss
2. Building a reputation takes time and consistency
3. The proof is in the product, don't oversell and under-deliver

Market early and clearly. High-quality photos, short videos, and weight data help buyers make confident decisions—and reduce their risk. Share vaccination details and weaning protocols well ahead of shipping.

Once the deal is made, deliver what you promised. Clean, calm, properly tagged calves, delivered on time, leave a lasting impression. Follow up with buyers, ask for feedback, and share performance results if available.



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