

Getting outside the box

(MEAT&POULTRY, June 1, 2002) By Dr. Temple Grandin

When McDonald's Corp., Oak Brook, Ill., started auditing plants for animal welfare in 1999 significant improvements in animal handling and stunning needed to be made. During the first year the plants needed to make changes in equipment to improve performance. Lighting had to be added and non-slip flooring had to be installed to improve animal movement. However, during 2001 most problems and poor performance scores were due to management shortfalls rather than equipment deficiencies.

During the past three years approximately 90 percent of the beef plants have passed the stunning audit. The improvements that occurred in 1999 have been maintained and chains such as Burger King and Wendy's have begun using similar auditing programs.

In 2001, the few plants that failed audits did so because management didn't pay enough attention to animal handling and stunning issues. Equipment design is only one-third of the equation. The other two-thirds is management. The management part of the equation consists of employee supervision, internal auditing, training and equipment maintenance. Poor stunner maintenance was common in several plants. The plants that had consistently good scores in multiple audits had excellent internal auditing programs. These plants manage the things that they measure.

Maintaining the quality of handling and stunning requires constant vigilance. If vigilance is relaxed the standards will slip. This principle applies to food safety. In 2001 one plant completely trashed an unannounced audit. They failed on many measures. Their stunning score was 88 percent while 20 percent of the cattle vocalized during handling. Electric prods were used on 100 percent of the cattle. These scores are atrocious. Most plants have a first shot stunning score of 95 percent or more on cattle with less than 3 percent of them vocalizing (mooring or bellowing).

The manager at this plant had not made a sustained commitment to managing animal handling and stunning. During the past three years at least three plant managers have been fired or chose to retire because they failed to uphold either animal welfare or food safety standards. Bad practices had become normal in their plants. One of the reasons why this happened is because these people had never seen "outside the box." It is difficult to see "outside the box" if one has never traveled outside their plant to see how similar tasks can be improved. In many cases the departed managers had a narrow professional life; they had never traveled outside of their own company.

Travel is a great educator. Many of my perspectives have changed after traveling extensively in the U.S. and other countries. My first visit to Australia in 1978, for example, served as a real eye opener. I was amazed at how beautiful and clean the meat plants were. However, most of the old-school Australian managers could have benefited from seeing food factories in other industries. The well-maintained Budweiser beer plant in Fort Collins, Colo., which is open to the public, is one example of a plant where managers of any industrial manufacturing operation could learn valuable lessons.

A big problem in the meat industry is that people responsible for managing animal welfare programs are trapped "inside the box." Too often, people within each segment of the industry only attempt to understand one specific function.

I recently gave a talk at a rancher's conference and was appalled at the lack of knowledge about meat plants among the attendees. One rancher, for example, thought meat was aged for three days at room temperature; another thought that cattle were held in slings at the plant. This proves how valuable an open house for groups like these could be.

I want to end this column with an interesting story about seeing "outside the box." I talked to a man who ran a small plant and he had entered many niche markets. He had traveled extensively in both the U.S. and in other countries, and he picked up many ideas during his travels. He has worked with local ranchers to supply specific types of cattle to fit his program. This man is innovative and sees outside the box, but his brother, who owns a ranch, is still doing things the same old way. The brother has never traveled and has lived on the ranch his whole life. Every year he dumps his calves off at the local auction and then complains about the prices. He is so blind from being in the box that he will not consider better ways of marketing his cattle. Blinders are for horses, not managers of businesses. To see outside the box you must go outside the box.

The author operates Grandin Livestock Systems, Inc., Fort Collins, Colo., and is a faculty member in the animal science department at Colorado State University. www.grandin.com