



Vet's Corner January 2012

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Knowing how cattle perceive their surroundings and how they react to various handling can help minimize stress, both on the bovine and the human side. Many of us have had the honor of working with this wonderful species throughout our lives and have learned "cow sense" through experience, but I know there may be other Dexter owners who may not have had that experience. Either way, as cattle lovers, I'm sure you'll appreciate the refresher course on getting in the mind of our bovines.

For starters, cattle vision is much different than ours. The placement of their eyes allows them a 300degree panoramic view of the world, with their only true blind spot being directly behind them. It is important not to approach a bovine directly from behind unless you let her know your there. Although their field of vision is large, their depth perception is poor and they have limited vertical vision (about 60degrees). That is why you will often see a cow lower her head when focusing on an object on the ground- she is simply trying to bring it into focus, which also takes longer to fully focus compared to our vision. It also explains why cattle do not like shadows or strange objects when working through handling systems. In their mind they are unable to quickly differentiate whether a shadow is just a dark spot on the ground or the Grand Canyon.

Cattle are also able to hear quite a bit better than we can, but have a harder time locating the source of the sound. They hear higher frequency sounds and lower volumes than we can. Quiet handling is important, as yelling increases their stress level rather quickly. A bovine with impaired vision (pinkeye, etc) will rely more on sound, and may turn around quickly to locate what they can't see; this should be taken into an account when working with such animals.

Cattle also have a "comfort zone" called their flight zone- which is basically a distance from us where they feel comfortable. It varies from 5-25feet depending on the how tame she is, but can be much more for wild cattle. There is also what is called a "point of balance" which is at the point of their shoulder. When moving cattle, if you approach them from behind the point of balance, they will move forward, and if you approach from the front of the shoulder they should back up or turn around (this is most notable when approaching them from the side). Also, being herd animals, they are more comfortable being with other cattle. Certain animals, when singled out, can get very excited. If necessary, bring a buddy or two with the one you're trying to get in to help minimize that stress.

When you do get up close to a questionable bovine (in an alley or head gate) it's also wise to remember that cattle kick to the side, unlike horses that are able to kick straight back. An exception would be a cow that has learned to jump straight up before the kick and go straight back with it. It only takes one good kick to figure out your own comfort zone to your bossy. Holding their tail straight up (not curled or bent) with a firm forward grip is one way to partially immobilize them and avoid being kicked. Obviously, this only works if they are restrained by the head or trapped in a narrow alley. It is also handy if you need to check the udder or rear legs of a kicky cow.

Continued on Page 2

## Basic "Cow Sense" and Proper Handling

Restraint is very important when handling cattle to minimize both the stress on the critter and yourself. Even if all your cattle are halter broke, I would still strongly recommend purchasing a head gate and or an old milking stanchion (or building your own). A properly restrained animal is not only easier to work with (vaccinations, treatments, various surgical procedures-dehorning/castrations, pulling calves, tattoos, etc), but you can be assured they are getting the correct dosages, in the proper route (IM, SQ) via the neck, while minimizing stress. The internet is full of various plans for working facilities and head restraint options. Dr. Temple Grandin also maintains some excellent materials on corral design for large operations and animal behavior material at <http://www.grandin.com/>.

Docility and temperament can definitely be credited to genetics, but it can also be changed for the worse by improper or stressful handling. Cattle remember rough handling and may go out of their way to avoid a similar situation in the future. It can take up to 20-30 minutes to calm a group of very excited cattle down and get their heart rates back to normal. It's always a good idea to take a break, rethink your approach with "cow sense" in mind, and try again when the cattle are calmed down. Thankfully, most Dexters are not easily excitable, but knowing how they see the world can go a long way in keeping your cattle calm and taming them down for fun and show.