

Express Yourself

Bearing the royal blue of their founder — Bob Funk — Express Ranches in Yukon, Okla., takes name recognition to a whole new level.

by Lindsay King

The story of this Yukon, Okla., marketing giant isn't exactly what producers expect: an employment services executive dabbling in the Business Breed. Express, and its royal blue roots, began when Bob Funk and some business associates picked up the pieces of Acme Personnel to build the long-standing Express Employment Services.

"As Bob became more successful in the employment business, he started raising some cattle," says Jarold Callahan, president of Express Ranches. "That was primarily in the '80s. Bob started raising Limousins and didn't come back

around to the registered Angus business until 1994."

The iconic white fence with blue accents surrounds black-hided cattle and white barns on the original property purchased by Funk in 1989. He's continued to expand and diversify his empire ever since.

In the early 2000s, Express added a third branch: equine. The gentle giants that are the Express Clydesdales travel the United States both for competition and advertising for the ranch.

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Start small

It's no secret Express found the key to success when it comes to raising a high-quality product. However, a majority of their accomplishments stem from a comprehensive marketing plan that started with geography.

"I think one of the things that helped Express expand so quickly was the location, and that we saw early on this part of the country was moving toward Angus," Callahan says. "We had a lot of cow herds in the Southwest that wanted to become more uniform, and Angus bulls were the answer for that."

It was the uniformity, polled gene and market value that supplied Express an avenue for growth with their Angus endeavor. Funk and his team simply provided the high-quality product cattlemen were demanding.

"The Angus market share grew very rapidly in the mid '90s through the early 2000s," Callahan says. "The marketplace will let you know if you have the ability to expand."

When the demand for Angus bulls outnumbered the supply, Express knew they were doing something right.

"Our main objective here is to add value to customers' herds by developing a brand and a consistent product that adds value is really important," says Kevin Hafner, vice president of

operations for Express. "People come to Express because they know what they are going to get."

Perhaps taking uncertainty out of the equation is the piece of the puzzle Express keeps getting right that bolsters their brand.

Top-of-mind marketing

Flip through any cattle magazine in the country and a striking blue and white ad will surface toward the front cover. It's Express. Even if it doesn't say their name, cattlemen simply know who it is.

That marketing strategy isn't a new concept in any industry driven by sales, but the steps Express takes to achieve it just might be novel in their own right.

"Part of our marketing strategy is centered around being customer-friendly, to make and build upon relationships," Donnie Robertson says. "We want to become more one-on-one marketers if you will."

As an entity that sells more than 2,000 Angus bulls a year, one-on-one marketing can seem fairly daunting. Producing a product that speaks for itself paves the way for this strategy.

As the vice president of marketing for Express, Robertson finds himself on the road more often than not. He attends the sales of his customers, getting to know them, their herds and their goals.

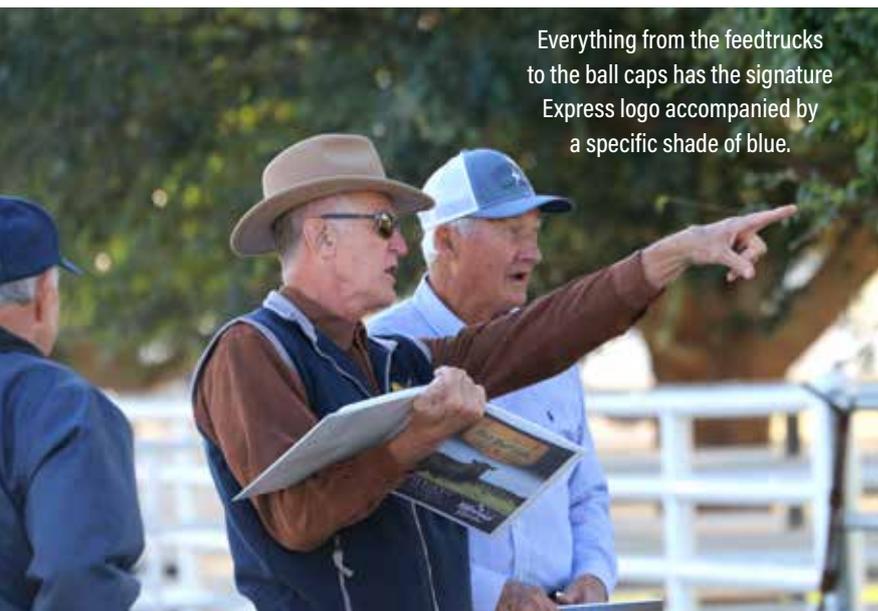
"You have to become genuine friends with your customers," Robertson says. "They need to feel comfortable with calling us up if they ever have a problem with one of our animals or need help finding one. You're not only buying from Express, you're buying from the people that work at Express."

Scholarship marketing

Express takes their marketing strategy one step further through their scholarship program.

"Bob started the scholarship program in 1996 in memory of his father," Callahan says. "Bob wanted to give back and help provide support through this program, so he made it progressive."

When young cattlemen and women purchase an animal from Express, and



Everything from the feedtrucks to the ball caps has the signature Express logo accompanied by a specific shade of blue.



subsequently exhibit them at the state, regional and national level, they earn scholarship dollars.

“We’ve had several young people pay for most, if not all, of their college education with their earnings,” Callahan explains. “So far the fund has paid out \$4.4 million to youth and the breeds they are involved in.”

Investing in youth is just one more way for Express to get their name out to the public. Not only is the program enticing for young showmen, it also brings their parents to the ranch on sale day.

“Bob believes in the young people as well as 4-H and FFA,” Callahan says. “He believes in giving something back to those people who are investing in our genetics.”

As the founder of an employment company, Funk is a strong believer in the work ethic developed in the barn. His investment in the next generation is evidence of that.

“Several of Bob’s biggest clients at Express Employment Services that hire rural kids say they make better employees,” Callahan says to further illustrate why Express stands behind their cattle and their youth.

This may not wear the typical marketing hat, but rest assured their scholarship program is accomplishing more than just awarding hard-working youth.

“The scholarship program is important to us,

and I think in some ways it has helped drive our show-heifer market,” Robertson says. “Not that we set out to use the program for that, it’s just done it naturally.”

Arena advertising

It’s no secret that Express cattle are successful in the field, but another way to get their name out there is through the show ring. It’s easy to spot an Express animal; the simple EX brand on the left shoulder stands out.

“Cattle shows are a big advertising tool for us,” Robertson says. “We took 60 head out to the Denver Stock Show this year. We had two different sets of cattle for the Hill and for the Yards, along with our Bases Loaded sale out there in Denver.”

Express makes it their mission to provide cattle for a variety of functions: the commercial herd, registered herd, and the show ring.

“We strive to produce a product that is competitive in the show ring, but also that they have a product they enjoy,” Robertson says. “And when their show career is over, they can make a nice cow and produce their own.”

Despite walls covered in purple banners, many cattle at Express never see the show arena. Old-fashioned means of success come in the form of donor cows and herd bulls working day in and day out to put calves on the ground.

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It's the traditional means of breeding cattle that make innovative marketing plans viable. However, nothing beats "the way Dad did it."

Traditional marketing

Despite selling a large number of cattle every year, Express sells them just like everyone else: one at a time. It's repetition in the marketplace that sets Express, and many others like them, apart from the pack.

"If you want to build a brand, you have to back it up with the quality of the cattle," Callahan says. "You have to make it synonymous with who you are if you're going to promote it."

From the blue feed trucks to the jackets and giveaways on sale day, everything at Express represents the brand. Even their print and digital advertising efforts are designed to elevate their name.

"One thing that I think we do differently than a lot of competition is that our bull sale cover has been the same for 20 years," says Mark Squires, office administrator at Express. "There is an onslaught of [sale books] out there, so we want people to recognize our book when they show up on sale day."

Using the same cover is 20 years of continuity at work. The repetition is by design; Express advertising is built to be recognized almost instantaneously.

Producers don't need to sell 2,000 herd bulls a year to gain the type of brand recognition Express enjoys. There are three keys to stick to when it comes to marketing: consistency, quality and reaching your target audience.

"Ideally producers should identify their target market on the front end, but many people find themselves doing it in the reverse order," Squires says. "To identify the cattle with the most value for your target customers, producers need to figure out their market first."

Keeping a thumb on the pulse of the industry is not just good business, it provides producers with an avenue for making breeding decisions and finding

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their marketing niche.

"I think it's very important, regardless of the size of your operation, that your marketing strategy is pretty aggressive," Robertson says. "It takes work; it takes time. Your customers are not just going to come to your sale, you have to entice them to show up and to buy." **AJ**