

WAGONHAMMER RANCHES:



Investing Time

Wagonhammer has established a reputation by exerting effort to open dialogue with their commercial customers and by standing behind a good product.

BY TROY SMITH

"My granddad told me that the only thing you can take with you when you die is your reputation," grins Myron Benes of Wagonhammer Ranches. "And a good reputation has to be earned. That doesn't happen overnight."

The Wagonhammer is the brand owned by Jim and Jay Wolf, who manage an integrated agricultural business at Albion, Neb. Farming and feedlot operations are nearby, but grass ranges are located to the west, along the fringe of the Sandhills. There, near the towns of Elgin and Bartlett, graze both spring- and fall-calving herds bearing

the Wagonhammer brand and reputation.

Riding for the brand is Benes, reining his pickup over the trails between headquarters at Albion and three separate ranch units. Benes oversees breeding programs, including extensive use of artificial insemination (AI), for Wagonhammer's registered Angus and Charolais herds.

He's also primarily responsible for promotion and sales of seedstock representing both breeds, registered and commercial females, as well as club calves. As many as 150 Wagonhammer bulls are sold through the annual production sale, along with some registered heifers. Most females are offered at private treaty.

Wagonhammer has been marketing breeding stock for most of four decades — long enough to build a reputation.

Benes credits the outfit's good name to a sound breeding program and a willingness to stand behind the resulting product. Only proven genetics are used, and Benes considers that to be a strong selling point. Sires proven by plenty of progeny boast high-accuracy expected progeny differences (EPDs), more confidence and less guesswork.

■ CREATING A DIALOGUE

"We promise to stand behind the cattle," Benes adds. "It just doesn't happen very often, but if there is a problem, we handle it. We bend over backward to make it right."

Even if they don't have specific problems, Benes seeks opportunities for dialogue with customers. He knows firsthand what it's like to buy a bull from a breeder whose interest in customers seemed to wane after the sale.

"I've bought bulls from people [who]

never bothered to follow up — never asked how the bulls were working or how the daughters turned out. And I'm reluctant to go back to them, regardless of how good their cattle were," Benes explains. "So I always try to follow up with a phone call. I visit buyers when I can, but it's getting harder to do."

Another means to stimulate communication is direct-mail contact through a mailing list that includes more than 1,500 names. Whenever Benes attends a show or cattle industry event, he looks for customers in attendance. Any opportunity for one-on-one conversation can be beneficial.

Benes says conversations often turn to EPDs and their use as a selection tool. Many customers seek advice for practical application of the numbers, as well as for guidance toward bloodlines most likely to complement their commercial breeding programs.

"Quite a few buyers call for advice on which bloodlines or individuals might work to follow the last bulls they bought. They trust us to steer them in the right direction. That kind of confidence is built over time," adds Benes. "That's where good communication comes in. But it works both ways. We have to learn about our customers' herds and what they need. When we select the genetics we're going to use, we have to be thinking about the needs of our customers."

■ REPUTATION FOR HOSPITALITY

Since it has become increasingly difficult to visit every buyer's operation on a regular basis, the buyers are given reasons to visit Wagonhammer. Customer-appreciation parties have been scheduled periodically, with customers invited to share in a barbecue meal, pitch horseshoes and enjoy the company of other cattle folk. While the gatherings are designed for fun and fellowship, a short educational program may be included.

Also included are hayrack tours of pastures, affording some customers with their first close look at Wagonhammer females. The tours stimulate communication, strengthen relationships and often prompt return visits. Benes welcomes visitors to the ranch at any time.

"Whenever producers make time to come see us and look at our cattle, we owe it to them to drop whatever we're doing and make time for them," Benes adds.

"Whenever they come, we're going to treat them right. We've tried to build a reputation for hospitality, too." 



PHOTO COURTESY WAGONHAMMER CATTLE CO.

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