

Customer-focused

Rick Cozzitorto takes the helm of Angus media arm.

by Sheryl Smith-Rodgers

A large, dry-erase board hangs on a wall in Rick Cozzitorto's office at Angus Productions Inc. (API) in Saint Joseph, Mo. Across the white board are four handwritten columns of concepts, goals and tasks. On his first day on the job as new API president in June 2017, Cozzitorto spent several hours penning the chart in green ink.

His bottom line: People matter, no matter whether they're American Angus Association members, customers or API employees.

"It's always about the people," says Cozzitorto, seated at his desk on a gray November afternoon. "People, products, processes — you need all of these to make a company successful, but it starts with the culture within the company. We've got great people here at API, but they've done the same thing for 25 years. Now, we're asking them to change and serve our customers in an even better way.

"That said, we're a service organization," he continues. "One of my primary goals here at API is to improve our customer experience. We're going to do that one customer at a time. Beyond that, our ultimate goal is to help our breeders make more money and market their cattle even better. As their go-to resource, we want to take their operations to the next level."



Cozzitorto knows what he's talking about. As a business executive and team leader with more than 20 years of experience, he's well-versed in livestock marketing, product sales and employee management.

"Rick brings a unique perspective to his role as president of Angus Productions Inc.," says Allen Moczygamba, American Angus Association CEO. "He's been involved with the Association as an employee, a member and as a customer, which provides him with a broad perspective. And when you factor in his extensive business experience, I can't imagine anyone more suited to lead Angus Productions than Rick."

Ag heritage

Cozzitorto — an Italian surname pronounced "cause-ZUH-tor-toe" — has deep roots in rural agriculture and the Angus breed. "My grandfather immigrated in 1912 from Italy to Gustine, California," tells Cozzitorto, the fifth of six children.

"He died before I was born. Our family had a farm and dairy. We also grew walnuts and alfalfa. We ran the dairy operation until 1977, then we bought our first Angus cows and started building a herd. When I was 11, I decided that I wanted to be a registered Angus breeder."

After high school, he figured he'd go straight to work in the cattle business, but his employer at the time had other ideas. "I took care of show cattle for James Bright in Merced, California," Cozzitorto says. "He insisted I go to college. He even said I couldn't work for him unless I did."

Reluctantly, Cozzitorto agreed. In 1992, he graduated from Texas A&M University in College Station, Texas, with a bachelor's degree in animal science and industry. That same year, after judging a cattle show at the Washington County Fair in nearby Brenham, he decided to attend a street dance with his college roommates. As it happened, so did Melissa Vyvlecka, a Texas A&M University journalism major. Introduced by a mutual friend, the couple hit it off. They married in 1995 and have one daughter, Alexandria, who's 17.

In 1994, Cozzitorto accepted a job as regional manager with the American Angus Association. For

four years, he met with producers in California, Nevada and Arizona to help them identify herd goals, learn about new Association products and services, and market their cattle.

“Looking back, being a regional manager was the best job I’ve ever had,” Cozzitorto says. “I still can’t believe they paid me to visit with members and look at Angus cattle.”

From 1998 to 2001, he and Melissa ran RMC Marketing, an Angus sales management company in Merced, Calif. During that time, he was also co-founder and CEO of TC Publishing, which produced the *California Cattleman* magazine.

Midwest move

In 2001, Cozzitorto accepted a position with AgriLabs, and the family moved east to Saint Joseph, Mo.

“I learned a lot about the animal health industry,” says Cozzitorto, who worked as a business unit manager for the animal health company. “On the job, I met with cattle producers and filled their needs for healthier animals. During my four years there, I worked with Brian Reardon, the husband of Sara Reardon, who’s now API general manager. Sara gave our daughter her first horseback ride at age 4.”

A professional opportunity led the family to move to Fort Collins, Colo. There, Cozzitorto worked as regional sales manager for the High Plains region with the Schering-Plough Corp. (now Merck), an animal health company. In his 12 years with Merck Animal Health, Cozzitorto — who transferred to Kansas City in

2008 — was promoted four times and managed four different U.S. livestock divisions.

“In my last 16 months as executive director for the U.S. cattle business, I managed 100 employees,” he says. “I’m most proud of the staff that I left with Merck. The company has a great team that will propel Merck’s future success.”

Melissa, who’s seated at a round conference table in her husband’s office on this particular day, agrees. “For Rick, it’s always about the people,” she says, “the people that you surround yourself with to meet your (the organization’s) goals.”

Full circle

As a family, the Cozzitortos talked for hours after Moczygemba called in spring 2017 and invited Cozzitorto to

come on board as API president.

“I thought it’d be a good fit for our family, and I knew I could contribute to the organization,” he says. “That’s what I’ve always done best in my career — help good companies reach their full potential. Plus, I wanted to give back to Angus. It was a family decision to accept the position.”

Melissa nods.

“Angus has always been an important part of our family and a big part of who Rick is,” she says. “Angus is not just a job; it’s a way of life. We wanted our daughter to grow up in a rural community with chores to do and cattle to care for. She takes those rural-ag ethics into her suburban classrooms.”

Currently, Alexandria, who’s active in the Kansas and National Junior Angus associations, reigns as the Kansas Angus Queen. Likewise,

Melissa serves in the American Angus Auxiliary and the Kansas Angus Auxiliary. The family manages a small Angus herd on their ranch near Lawrence, Kan.

Behind his desk, Cozzitorto gazes at the dry-erase board.

“I wrote that out in less than one day,” he reflects, “but it represents at least three years in future plans. I’m big on having a road map, and that’s what the board is. With a road map, you can get to where you want to be.” **AJ**

Editor’s Note: Sheryl Smith-Rodgers is a freelance writer from Blanco, Texas.



API President Rick Cozzitorto and wife Melissa have one daughter, Alexandria. Cozzitorto says it was a family decision for him to come on board as API president.