

MARKET COMMUNICATIONS

PHOTOGRAPHY: THE IMPORTANCE OF "HOW YOU LOOK"
Seventh and final in a series on promoting and marketing purebred cattle.

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Books have been written on photography. Volumes. Encyclopedias. Everyone who owns a camera has an opinion, and many believe they have all the answers to good photography.

I don't. In fact, I know I don't have all the answers even though I snapped the shutter probably 40,000 times last year, 20,000 or more times with a beef animal in the viewfinder. The continuing new developments in photography; its increasing use for industry, education, sales and art; and its acceptance as a medium for communications, science and art make it extremely difficult to define, to confine into a small area and say, "Hey, that's it! That's what photography is all about."

In this discussion, we will limit our comments strictly to livestock photography—what to look for in a photograph, how to get the good photograph, some suggestions for the cattleman who wants to do his own photography.

Most Important Element

The photograph is the single most important element in your printed piece—i.e., ad, brochure, poster, etc. It is your stopper. Research done by experts in direct mail promotion indicates that the photograph contributes 83% of the visual impact in a printed piece!

Good photography can improve or favorably influence your image quicker than any single phase of external communications. People do believe what they see (up to a point) and they will equate good pictures to the quality of your operation. Likewise, a bad picture creates the same poor image in the mind of the viewer. The obvious message—if it's not good, don't use it!

What makes a good cattle picture?

For most cattlemen, the "practical natural" photograph works best. Show them as they are, in practical working

situations. If it's a "wet" cow, try to include her calf in the picture. The old "belly deep in straw" show pictures are losing their appeal (if, indeed, they ever had any, particularly with commercial cattlemen). Thank goodness!

Simple Definition

A simple definition of a successful photograph is one that communicates what you want to say, that "sells" your ideas or products. This photograph will say something special about your cattle and your image. It won't be one of those "hold him by the fence on a halter" shots that clutter up so many pages of breeder advertising.

By nature, your prospective buyers are skeptics and extremely critical. You may misrepresent your product and get by with it. Once. So keep your photographs honest; be sure they truly represent you. Keep them simple and clear; make one idea (subject) dominate each photograph. It should present the strengths of each animal (or of the entire operation); it should minimize the weaknesses. Upon personal inspection, your prospective buyer will spot the weaknesses sooner than he will admit the strengths.

Show Cross Section

In an entire series of ads (or in a brochure), present a good cross section of your cattle—herd sires, yearling bulls, pairs, bred and open heifers. Don't leave the impression that only one or two groups of cattle look decent enough to photograph. (And don't show a big, overly fat, mature dry cow. It implies fertility problems. It's good selling psychology to always show mature cows with good calves at side.)

The picture should reflect the balance or symmetry of the animals. If presented from a front or back angle, be sure there is no perspective distortion—that portion of the animal nearest the camera appearing disproportionately larger than

the rest of the body. This can be controlled easily by your choice of shooting distance or type of lens, as discussed later in this article.

Watch Lighting

Watch your lighting on the scene. It's particularly critical on dark-colored animals. Generally, animals should be "flat-lighted"; that is, evenly lighted over all portions of the body exposed to the camera. Highly directional "over the shoulder" light in early morning or late afternoon usually works best. Shadowless lighting from a thin overcast also works well.

Keep shadows to a minimum. If Angus cattle stand so close together that shadows and body images overlap, your resulting picture will resemble a well-used ink blotter!

You can get some dramatic effects by using strong side-lighting and back-lighting. However, these effects and others that increase contrast will give you fits in print reproduction—particularly in some of the pulp or soft-paper publications or those that don't have especially good quality control.

What It Takes

There's very little luck involved in good animal photography. It basically requires planning (yours and the photographer's), knowledge of the animal and its habits, proper handling, anticipation, timing and patience. (Okay, I'll admit it. Even with all that, you don't always get the pictures you want. And in the process, some awfully colorful, expressive and pertinent expletives fall on totally deaf ears! There's no telling how many bulls I've renamed during a photo shoot.)

A. Getting Ready. Plan well in advance for getting your pictures. If you have specific animals to be featured, get them in good flesh. If cattle need to be moved to another pasture for photography,

move them far enough in advance so they are settled down and accustomed to their new surroundings before the photo session. The same holds true for mixing groups of cattle. Give them time to run, fight and get used to each other before you start shooting.

Plan Ahead

For nursing shots, you can keep cows and calves separated until time to shoot. Same for grazing shots. Just hold them off pasture until the photographer arrives.

If possible, try to confine cattle in a small area; limit their range. But keep in mind the necessity for clean uncluttered backgrounds and surroundings. Keep cattle out of tall grass or weeds. Mow the pasture if necessary (an abundance of weeds *always* detracts from a picture).

Plan your shooting to coincide with the animals' routine activities if possible—when they graze, when they nurse, etc. It's difficult—no, impossible—to force animals to orderly change their routines on a moment's notice.

Pick the time of day to enhance the type shots you need. This will be determined by the shot you need—nursing, grazing, individuals, etc.; the "mood" or "feel" of a shot as influenced by light; the need for "flat" lighting; heat or cold and how it influences the activities of cattle.

Know Your Animals

B. *Handling the Cattle.* Animals don't volunteer to model; they aren't paid; and



they can't be vocally coerced or begged. You must sensibly use your knowledge of animal behavior to get the desired results.

Some things to keep in mind when photographing animals include:

1. Have good help available, people who understand cattle.

2. Move easily, quietly. No abrupt moves. Wear neutral to drab clothing. Don't create a spectacle.

3. Know how to motivate the animal. Primarily through hunger, sex or curiosity. Animals are much more "sound conscious" than people; most respond to unusual sounds. A variety of noisemakers—clickers, whistles, duck calls, coyote calls, etc.—can be effective. *But use only one*

noise from one source at the same time. Don't confuse the animal. Keep distractions to a minimum. Once his curiosity is satisfied, he'll ignore you and you must try another noise or attention-getting device. Driving a cow in front of a bull usually gets his attention. Unless cattle are unusually spooky and you can't get close to them, don't throw out hay or cubes. They just bunch up and fight, making it almost impossible to get good pictures.

Be Ready

4. *Timing—Anticipation.* Animals have short interest spans, so *be ready!* Have all your mechanical problems (exposure, focus, etc.) worked out, because you don't have time to fiddle with equipment when the animal is ready. Then respond with lightning-fast reflexes. Get the animal on film the first time it looks pretty good, because that may be the only shot you get. Then work for the great shot. Don't wait and wait for the perfect shot; it may never come. Cover yourself first, then go for the knockout.

5. *Patience.* A vital necessity in dealing with unpredictable subjects. Don't expect the unexpected; expect the expected. If an animal can't or won't do something, it's pointless to sit and wait. For example, don't expect a bull that's after a cow in heat to take time out to cooperate with you!

6. *It's Physical—and Dirty!* If you're going after the great shot, be prepared to pay the price physically. Expect long walks, short

runs, kneeling, squatting, crawling or whatever else may be necessary. It requires physical endurance and a certain amount of compatibility with heat, cold, dust, sweat, barbed wire, cow manure and gates that are too hard to open.

Shoot Everything

7. *Explore All Angles.* Once you're there, shoot everything you can. Individuals, pairs, groups. Side shots, three-quarter fronts and backs. Most pair and individual photos look stronger, more dramatic, if shot from a low angle. It's best if you can walk among the cattle, then drop down for the shot. If cattle are too spooky, work them in a vehicle familiar to them. Then, if possible, ease out of the vehicle, drop down and get your shot. Overhead angles sometimes work for groups, but rarely if ever do they work for individual shots.

When you shoot animals from the front or back (three-quarter angles), watch for the perspective problem—"big head" on front shots, for example. If you only have a "normal" lens (50-58mm) on a 35mm camera, simply move farther back from the animal. Granted, the shot will be a little "loose" (not full frame), but you can crop in on the animal for the final print. Another solution is to use a longer lens—105mm or up—on a 35mm camera. This allows you to shoot angle shots full frame without perspective distortion. So far as possible, without getting into perspective problem, try to shoot "tight." Move in close. Fill up the frame.

Keep Backgrounds Clean

8. *Backgrounds.* Keep them simple, clean, uncluttered. Don't let the background interfere or compete with the subject. Make it *contrast* with your subject. Watch for slanting horizon lines, fences, posts, trees, power lines or poles that dissect the animal or grow from its back. You can control your background by moving your subject, moving your camera position or by moving your camera angle to block out the background with the animal. (Often you can drop down a few inches and hide a tree behind the animal, move an inch to the side and hide a post behind the animal's leg, etc.)

9. *Dark or Black Animals.* You'll have to "open up" (over expose) dark animals by one to two exposure stops to bring out the texture of hair and details in conformation and muscling. This will cause lighter-colored elements in the picture to somewhat "bleach" or burn out, but it's a compromise that must be made. When you have elements in a scene that vary widely in tone (black to white), you must choose the element(s) most important to the scene and expose accordingly.

These suggestions alone won't make you an expert in beef cattle photography or in photographic evaluation. Hopefully, they will provide the *basis* for you to take a hard close look at your photographic needs and the *guidelines* on which to meet those needs.

Good shooting!

