

Longaberger Farms

Blend Baskets, **Bovines** and Beef Education

BY SUSAN K. DAVIS



aving cattle into his basket company is as natural to Dave Longaberger as mom and apple pie. Plus, it's an effective sales tool.

"Farm life is the backbone of our country," says the president of the Longaberger Company at a consultant extravaganza called a basket

bee. The family heritage makes people feel good and helps to sell cattle, too, Longaberger laments.

Longaberger's link into the cattle business started as a couple of head on his 150-acre farm near Dresden, Ohio. Longaberger announced at a consultant meeting he had bought a farm. That's when he realized how many folks were interested in agriculture, explains Linda Weiler,

director of farm operations.

"Ninety percent of our consultants have a relationship through fanning," says the unconventional CEO. Sporting a blue and white sports shirt and dark blue pants, Longaberger stops for photographs in front of a four-foot basket and ceramic pot. The spotless silver Longaberger cattle trailer is conveniently parked in the

background. Eleven thousand consultants swarm into Dresden to buy crafts and baskets.

Longaberger has transformed Dresden (population 1,500) into a hot tourist spot drawing 490,000 visitors yearly with trendy outdoor eateries, fashionable clothing stores and even a Longaberger University. Longaberger is to baskets what Elvis is to **Rock** and Roll.



Dave Longaberger's farm team is led by (at halter) Jeff Gooden and Linda Weiler (not pictured). Their main goal since starting in 1993 has been to build a quality herd of registered Angus.

Dave sightings are a popular sport at the basket bee. "Oh, oh, I'm so excited. It's him, it's him," screams a dark haired 40-something woman jumping up and down.

"We have 30,000 consultants. They were excited about us getting into the farm business," Longaberger says while a woman rushes up for an autograph. The farm business as he calls it, has grown from a couple of cattle to 175 head and plans for a production sale in 1998, as well as an educational complex in 2000.

Longaberger's ties to the country lifestyle work. A woman from Paris, Ill., props her feet on her basket to rest and chats with the farm staff. Another young farm wife wants to know when Longabergers will have cattle for sale.

"You don't know when that contact will come back," Weiler says. "Maybe it'll be one year, two years or five," she says patiently, pausing to answer a woman wondering where Dave is.

Longaberger admits his expertise is in the manufacturing business. "I don't know anything about farms." Here are the people who know, he says pulling over the farm team of Weiler and Jeff Gooden, cattle manager.

Longaberger handed the reins over to the farm folks. When launching the farm, Weiler steered toward Angus. "I chose Angus because of the Certified Angus Beef Program and quality assurance."

Quality is crowned with a capital Q in the Longaberger business. The purebred operation goals, set by the company, are to preserve the farm heritage, form an educational facility and at the same time build a respectable Angus herd that coincides with the company standards, Weiler explains. "It has to be quality or we scratch it and



Consultants wait patiently in line to have Dave Longaberger's sister, Genevieve, sign baskets. People swarm into Dresden, Ohio, for a Longaberger basket bee, and also take in an Angus cattle and beef education exhibit.

start over."

The quality shines through from the attractive baskets to the line of trophies gracing the tent. The first bred heifers were purchased at the R&J Ranch dispersal sale in April

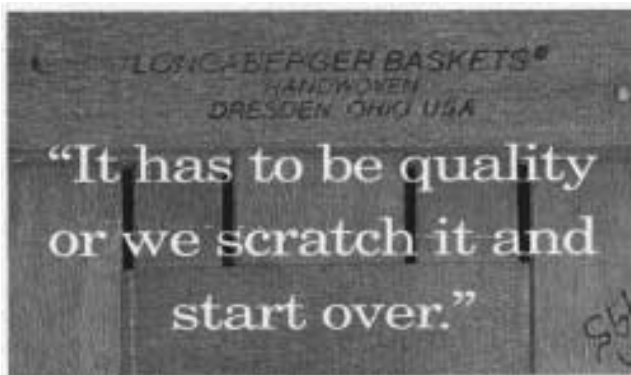
basket in downtown Dresden, Longaberger will launch the world's biggest barn. The farm now has an 88 x 45 foot show barn and new cattle breeding facilities with a birthing room. Closed circuit

beef by-products. Another program will feature the past, present and future of agriculture.

Hitting the show circuit

The Longaberger name has become recognized for more than baskets in the Angus industry. In 1995 the show team captured a grand championship at the Fort Worth Stock Show and Dixie National, and reserve grand championships at the Atlantic National and Ohio State Fair. Their top show bull, Determination, brought home the 1994 junior bull calf champion of the year in the Angus Roll of Victory (ROV) program. Harmony Hill Peg won the '95 ROV junior female calf champion.

"We don't want just show cattle. We look for cattle which are going to have good offspring," Weiler says. "We look at pedigrees, expected progeny differences (EPDs) and phenotypes."



1993. Other bred heifers came from Yadkin River Angus in North Carolina and 26 bred pairs came from Ankony in Nebraska. The barn doors officially opened in May 1993.

The Basket Ring doesn't do anything in a small way. Along with the world's largest

TVs monitor calving.

The educational complex, targeted for 2000, will include the largest wooden barn in the world. Daily activities will be held for tourists, including the American Cattle Women's "When is a Cow More Than a Cow?" program highlighting

Longaberger Farms cont.

The Angus cattle business is a long-term investment. "Good will is our return," Weiler says. Even so, the farm operation department is held accountable in the company. "We have budgets and limitations of how much we can spend. It's not like we're handed a blank check," Weiler says sitting on the red and silver metal showbox. "Dave's been very supportive of what we do."

Longaberger employees set their own goals. Basket weavers work on an incentive program earning by the basket. "It makes you work harder. Any pressure we are under, we put on ourselves. It's not like someone is standing over us telling us what to do," Weiler says.



Linda Weiler, (left) director of farm operations for Longaberger, enjoys sharing lessons on animal agriculture with the public and school children,

Adopt a Calf Program Teaches Kids More than Cattle

One of Dave Longaberger's goals is to maintain farm heritage. Not an easy task, when the farm folks number less than 2 percent of the U.S. population.

"A lot of kids don't know anything about cattle or agriculture," points out Linda Weiler, director of farm operations. Many children today are two generations removed from the farm, she says. "We have to be more conscientious of letting the consumer know we're doing a good job." And the education needs to start early.

Starting with kindergarten through sixth grade, each class from a local elementary school adopts a calf. The 265 students visit the farm in the fall when the calves are weaned. Each class names a calf, draws an ear tag, and records the hip height and calf weight. This year veterinarians will work with students in a mentor program. One lesson includes measuring fat content and taking ultrasounds.

Throughout the school year the students write stories about their calves. They sing cow songs in "moosic." "We tie the program in with writing, math and animal care," explains Toboso Elementary principal Bill Weaver.

Each month a student visits the farm and records the calf's weight. In May a rate of gain winner is chosen. Last spring the kindergarten class calf won. Each student received a four-inch tall milk bottle with the Longaberger Adopt a Calf Program printed on the side,

The students follow the calves through the second generation and outline their pedigree. Students receive a photo of their calf's sire and

dam. The kids trace their own pedigrees, too. A genealogical society speaker taught the kids how to trace their heritage last year,

"They received a prize if they traced their family's genealogy. Eighty-five percent traced their history. That was neat," Weaver says.

The program generates a tremendous interest from the kids. "It becomes their calf. They've named it and watched it grow. Even though we're in a rural area, not all the kids live on farms," Weaver points out,

The cows are a natural tie in to other programs, too. If students saved \$4,000 through the local bank, the principal had to kiss a cow. Of course, the kids met the challenge.

"It was a hot spring day and the heifer was frothing at the mouth," Weiler recalls. A local photographer caught the mouth-meets-muzzle moment. The photo now decorates Weiler's and Weaver's offices.

"We, me included, learned a lot," Weaver says. The farm staff brought vocabulary lists outlining heifer, bull and other terms. They also had posters of "When is a Cow More Than a Cow?" creating consumer awareness of cattle by-products. "A lot of them I was unaware of," Weaver says.

The school's business link and Longaberger's education goal blend well, Weiler says. "I think it's a real rewarding experience for all of us — us on the farm as well as the kids, teachers and parents involved.

You let them know where the food comes from and how important farmers are to everyday life.

