

Merchandising

by Keith Evans



The best way to sell cattle

I've been blessed during my professional career to work with talented communicators who were willing to share their knowledge and experience with others and me. One of them was Harry Barger, who headed the advertising division of both Wilson Foods and Wilson Sporting Goods in that company's heyday.

Harry was a Missouri farm boy, an agricultural journalism graduate of the University of Missouri, a farm owner and a cattle producer. In addition, he worked as advertising and communications consultant to the American Angus Association for more than 30 years. That's how I came to know him and to develop a friendship that lasted until his death in 1994.

Harry would tell me anything he knew, at any time. If I asked for his opinion on any of my work, I got complete honesty. "That's good, Keith," he would say, "but it would have been better if you had done this." He was virtually always right.

I wish there were more people like him. Experienced people should tell youngsters the truth about their work and how to improve it. You never help anybody by buttering them up or saying something like, "Oh, that looks good to me." All you're doing is misleading them and getting them to move on and leave you alone.

The other day I came across a transcript of a talk that Harry made to a group of registered cattle breeders in 1968. I'll share some ideas from this talk, titled "Sell Your Cattle With Advertising." He would be pleased to know his words are valuable nearly one-third of a century after he uttered them.

The best way to sell cattle is one-on-one, face-to-face, he told the crowd. But the problem was, there weren't enough days in the week for most breeders to sell all their cattle this way. That's why advertising was invented.

"The advertising contact doesn't carry the weight of a personal call — not by any means. But little by little these inexpensive contacts add up and eventually create a

strong impression," he said. "It's like a light rain. Each sprinkle doesn't sink in very far — but if you get enough of them — one on top of the other — they finally sink down to the roots and make the grass grow greener."

"Some people run one ad and think they've told the story. But one message [doesn't] sink in very far. You have to hit your audience over and over again, sometimes with the same [message], until it finally makes the impression you're after. If you stop too soon, you're apt to waste much of the money you've spent."

There's no mystery about advertising, and no secret formula to creating a good ad, Harry proclaimed.

"Advertising, properly used, is just salesmanship in print," he said. "Look on the advertisement you're creating as an extension of your personal sales talk. Just put on paper the things you show or tell a prospective customer."

Be fussy about the illustration you use in an ad, he cautioned. "You wouldn't show your cattle to a buyer unless they were looking their best. The same should be true of the illustration you use in your ad. So hire a professional photographer to take good photos of your cattle."

"Remember, too," he said, "illustrations [should] contribute to the sales story, and not merely embellish the advertisement."

Next, write a headline that "works hand in glove with the illustration to attract attention. The headline should appeal to the reader's self-interest by promising him a benefit or announcing news [of interest] about your cattle or farm." Include the farm or herd name in every headline, he urged, "so the reader knows right from the start who's talking."

Harry Barger was a believer in body copy, something you still see little of in registered beef cattle ads. Most cattle-advertising professionals don't like to write

body copy, maybe because they don't know how to write. But they can learn. Listen to Harry.

"Body copy is made up of simple statements you would use in selling. Go straight to the point. Don't beat around the bush. Tell the truth, but make the truth interesting. Be specific; use short sentences. Don't try to be cute or funny. Put yourself in the buyer's shoes, and figure out the most enticing things you have to offer. Explain what your cattle can do for him."

The copy should end by asking readers to act and by telling them how, Barger told the cattle breeders. If you want the prospect to write or telephone for a sale book, say so and tell how to do it.

He urged advertisers to "keep it simple." An ad, he said, should be designed to have a clean, attractive appearance and to be easily read. "Do not use too many big typefaces indiscriminately throughout the ad. It will distract the reader."

Avoid reverse type (white type on black or another color), he urged. And never print red type on black or any other dark color, because it can't be read.

There's no substitute for a high-quality product. But quality alone, he said, will not accomplish the results you desire. "In the challenging years ahead, in these years of constant change and continuous population growth, not only must you produce quality cattle — you must market them aggressively and consistently in order to maximize your success.

"Be bold and imaginative in your marketing program," he concluded. "Use good, fresh advertising as one of your modern marketing tools to help sell your cattle for more money."

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