

# Your Web Site: A Personalized Tool

STORY & PHOTO BY TROY SMITH

Are farmers and ranchers shopping on the Internet? You bet! While many rank-and-file producers were dragged reluctantly into the Computer Age, about 85% of producers now use computers for at least some aspects of their operations. Many are navigating the Internet and embracing e-commerce. Between 1998 and 1999, Internet access among agricultural producers increased by 20%, bringing nearly half of all farms and ranches online.

Electronic trading of goods and services is growing. E-commerce among all industries is expected to reach \$1.3 trillion by 2003. Marketing seed, fertilizer, equipment, feed and livestock should bring agriculture's share to \$58 billion. By 2005, agriculture's tally is expected to reach \$70 billion.

## Ranch Web sites

As it becomes increasingly common for cattlemen to search the Web for sources of farm and ranch inputs, many seedstock breeders are using the Internet to reach an expanded audience. Lyons Ranch established a Web site to lure computer-savvy seedstock shoppers to its Angus operation near Manhattan, Kan. Debbie Lyons-Blythe sees an Internet presence as a means of supplementing more-traditional advertising efforts.

"It's a form of year-round advertising that has helped add to our customer base. We've picked up new customers from other parts of the country, but locally, too. If the rancher just down the road uses the Internet, his world is bigger because of it. He might be using the Internet to buy bulls in California, but we want it to be easy for him to look at what we offer, too," she explains. "The Web site helps to put a face on Lyons Ranch. I think it makes us more personable. It shows who we are and tells about our operation."

Lyons Ranch is a family outfit consisting

of founders Frank and Jan Lyons, their daughters (Debbie and Amy), sons-in-law, and a bunch of grandkids. Photographs of their family and cattle dress up the Web site ([www.lyonsranch.com](http://www.lyonsranch.com)) where past and potential patrons peruse information about herd sires, semen and embryo availability and an online sale book with expected progeny differences (EPDs) and ultrasound data for the offerings.

With a click, users can request sale books, see a map with directions to the ranch or contact Lyons Ranch directly. They'll also find links to beef industry sites including the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA), Cattlemen's Beef Board (CBB), American Angus Association and Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB). Just for fun, there's a link to a site for kids, another for Kansas State University (K-State) sports fans and an offering of favorite beef recipes.

## Producer insights

Calling upon her agricultural journalism degree and practical experience in publishing, graphics and design, Lyons-Blythe designed and maintains the Web site. She's willing to share insights about using the Internet as a merchandising tool and did so during a recent conference on applied agricultural computing conducted jointly by K-State and Fort Hays State University (FHSU) in Hays, Kan. Her first bit of advice to producers interested in establishing a Web site was to avoid biting off more than they could chew.

"If you don't like computers, hire it done," she says, noting several options and their potential advantages and disadvantages. "A professional design firm can be hired to build a site that's unique and personalized, but it's probably going to be expensive." Some firms charge as much as \$50-\$100/hour.

"At the extreme end of the scale, I heard



about a design for a three-page site that cost \$30,000," she adds. "Another thing to remember is that some of these firms are not very ag-oriented. You might want to be choosy in selecting a company that understands your business."

A less-expensive option for seedstock breeders is to work through their breed association, where staffers are knowledgeable about the purebred cattle industry, Lyons-Blythe says. They know what EPDs are, and when you work through Angus Productions Inc. (API, a subsidiary of the American Angus Association), they will automatically update EPDs on your Web site.

Costs for API template packages are listed at \$395 to \$1,295, says API Web marketing director Angie Stump Denton. Custom sites are quoted on a per-bid basis, but so far have ranged from about \$900 to \$1,500.

Lyons-Blythe says using template designs may make your Web site resemble those of other producers who have used the service, which she regards as a disadvantage.

There are independent designers who are familiar with the cattle business. "I think a reasonable ballpark cost for the initial building of a site would be \$2,000 to \$3,000," she says. For many independents, Web site design is not their main occupation, so they may not always be readily available.

"If you're really into computers, you can do it yourself. You will have to have the proper software, the know-how and the time. It takes a lot of time!" she adds.

When building your own site, adequate software will be required for customizing graphics. However, prepared artwork can be purchased, and some can be downloaded from the Internet at no cost.

When incorporating photographs, make sure the resolution is sufficient for a pleasing image, but not too high. Lyons-Blythe recommends 72 dots per inch (dpi), as photos with higher resolutions may be slow to download, and users may become impatient while waiting for them to appear fully on the computer screen.

### Register your site

Whether you're ready to establish a Web site now or planning to do it sometime in the future, Lyons-Blythe recommends that you register a domain with an Internet provider. That's the name users will enter to access your site, but you don't have to be up and running to register.

If you already have selected a catchy name, you'll want to make sure it's available, then claim it. If you hire a designer to build a Web site, make sure the domain is registered in your own name, so you'll have the password. You may want to make



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*—Debbie Lyons-Blythe*

updates yourself, rather than going back to the designer.

"When choosing a provider, be sure to consider the amount of memory available to you. A local provider may be cheaper, but they might assign a name to your domain rather than giving you a choice. And make sure it's a provider that's reliable and likely to remain in business," Lyons-Blythe warns. "When we started out, it was with a local server that went broke just before our annual bull sale. So our site went down at a time when we needed it to take catalog requests and post updated performance information.

"I'd recommend using a national server company as your host. Costs vary, but our host charged \$50 initially, then \$25 per month. That includes 24-hour technical support and a guarantee that they will be up and running at least 99% of the time."

When the Web site is completed and uploaded to the host, you'll want to lead potential customers to it by submitting the name to listing services or search engines that help users sort through the multitude of sites for those that match a specific interest. Lyons-Blythe says some listing services are free, and others can cost \$200 or more. She advised cattlemen to use cattle-oriented listing services.

"They're more pertinent and usually less expensive. With [a] big-name search engine,

your site might be number 3,000 on the list, and most users probably won't wade through so many names," she adds. "I think it's more effective to be listed with your breed association or a service like *Cattlepages.com* that already pay[s] the big price to be listed with the big-name service."

### Measuring effectiveness

Lyons-Blythe admits that it can be hard to measure a Web site's effectiveness. You can get an idea, however, by checking the number of times users access, or "hit," the site.

"We know the number of hits, which pages are hit most often, and we have our sale catalog requests. Of course, the requests give us a name and address that you don't get otherwise. Unless a Web site requires the user to identify themselves by logging in, you won't get their e-mail address. But you can tell which server companies the hits come through, giving a general idea of what area they're coming from," Lyons-Blythe says.

"Check the user statistics, then update, update, update. Give special attention to the Web site page or pages that users hit frequently. Try to update those pages often," she adds. "It takes a lot of time to maintain it, but a Web site can go farther than print ads or catalogs. It's a tool that you can make very personal."

