

THE PEOPLE BUSINESS

Musgrave Angus knows what it takes to market themselves and their cattle.

*by Megan Silveira, assistant editor
photos by Fishhook Creek Photography,
courtesy of Musgrave Angus*

The scent of freshly brewed coffee rolls across the air, teasing noses all around. Peals of laughter cut through the quiet hovering around everyone present, lightening the mood. Black cattle in small pens are peppered across the horizon, painting a picture most can enjoy even without an artist's eye.

It's the atmosphere of sale day that pulls cattlemen in like planets to circle the sun. The star of this galaxy is more than just the prospect of purchasing new genetics — successful cattle auctions are built on the relationships seedstock breeders have with their customers.

“Great cattle don't sell great unless there's great people behind them,” says Casey Jentz, regional manager for the American Angus Association.

To Jentz, the family behind Musgrave Angus in Griggsville, Ill., lives and breathes the cattle industry, making them master marketers. The family works day in and day out to create and promote a brand other breeders want to be a part of.

Marketing the Musgrave name

The third Saturday in March has been a busy day on the Angus calendar for as long as Melvin Musgrave can remember, but he says he's proud to have his operation's name on the list of auctions hosted that particular weekend.

Over the past 27 years, Musgrave learned what it means to make his annual production sale more than just another event. He creates an atmosphere people want to be a part of.

Potential customers, friends and family flock to the Illinois property the night before the event, ready to connect with other Angus breeders.

“We have a little get-together — a little social for whoever wants to come,” Musgrave says.



The social consists of good conversation and a home-cooked meal. Some folks stay the night and others head off for a good night's rest before the main event Saturday.

Breakfast is offered to those who come to view cattle before the auction, but the lunch served before the 1 o'clock sale is the highlight for the 300-400 cattlemen who gather in hopes of purchasing Musgrave Angus genetics.

The latest auction hosted at the Illinois property boasted 90 bulls, 25 yearling open heifers and 40 cow-calf pairs sold to 20 different states and two Canadian provinces, but Melvin admits it took time to achieve this level of success.

"It takes a lot of work," he says. "You have to have a good work ethic, and you've got to learn to get along with people."

Work ethic isn't something the Musgraves have to worry too much about, according to Melvin's wife, Cathy. Everyone has a role to play, even the grandkids.

Their sons are hands-on with the business throughout the year. Andy prepares cattle, working with sale animals, clipping hair and assists with taking pictures for the sale book. Tyler handles advertising, compiling the sale book materials and all marketing efforts.

Daughters-in-law, Beth and Sarah, help Cathy plan the meals for the event and run the office, respectively. Melvin and Cathy's daughter, Lindsay, and her husband, Wes, serve as clerks on sale day.

Arguably the most important role in the family? Getting ears up on picture day. It's a job Melvin and Cathy's crew of 11 grandchildren are eager to take on.

No matter the age, however, each member of the Musgrave family is consistently pushing the operation toward sale day — the day where they sell themselves as a brand as much as they sell their Angus genetics. It's a process Jentz describes as continuous.

"As far as preparation for sale day, we start that a long, long time before," he explains.

Successful marketing happens year-round.

"For someone like Musgrave Angus, I would consider them a national brand," Jentz adds. "We've got to make sure our marketing efforts hit coast to coast."

Both digital and print marketing efforts are employed by the family. Alongside the constant presence they have in the industry, Melvin says the past 27 years have allowed the family to develop a schedule to prepare for sale day that hasn't let them down yet.

Tyler works closely with Angus Media to complete their sale books, so he knows far in advance to provide materials.

"The team at [Angus Media] are personable and great to work with," Tyler says. "They are down to Earth folks that will help you every step of the way."

Highlight photos and advertisements are submitted by the fourth day of January. These images

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are used in the sale book, but also serve as the base for advertisements published in the February issue of the *Angus Journal*.

As the first month of the year flies by, February is just as busy. Videos are recorded as time allows, and by the third week of the month, the sale book has been printed and mailed out.

“That’s when the phone starts ringing,” Melvin says.

All lot videos are posted online at least two weeks before the sale. Melvin considers this the sweet spot, as it gives people enough time to get excited about the animals while keeping the cattle relevant in the busy sale season.

This period also marks the days when the sale facility needs to be tidied up. Bleachers are pulled out, tables are set up and the entire area is cleaned.

The week of the sale, meal preparation begins in the kitchen and cattle are brought up for viewing.

It’s a hectic time with many items on the to-do list, but both Melvin and Cathy credit the dedication of each generation of Musgraves for everything that gets crossed off in those moments leading up to sale day.

“Really, we wouldn’t be able to do this if we didn’t have our family doing it with us,” Cathy says.

The multigenerational history of the operation is just one component of the brand that is Musgrave Angus. Their story is all about sharing the raw and honest love the entire family shares for the Angus breed.

“We don’t try to act bigger than the person we’re dealing with. You have to be one of your customers,” Melvin says. “Most of our customers do their own work, and we do our own work. You just need to fit in.”

It’s a philosophy that shines in all the comings and goings of Musgrave Angus, and it’s one each generation is proud to promote, in and out of sale season.

Writing your success story

How can other breeders work to sell their brand just as effectively? There are a few simple tips and tricks to marketing an attitude and an atmosphere so sale day can be a success.

⇒ **Establish home base.**

“If you’re going to have a production sale, have it on your own property,” Melvin says.

For the Musgrave family, hosting the event at home simplifies the preparation process. There’s less travel for equipment, livestock and personnel. It’s also easier to feel at home and create a homey environment in a location

where you’re already comfortable.

Auctions and marketing efforts are about selling a brand alongside genetics, Jentz adds.

Offering a glimpse into the operation on sale day helps further establish the legitimacy of that brand.

⇒ **Embrace available tools.**

“Angus Media and the American Angus Association work as two entities pretty well together to make things happen for our breeders,” Jentz says.

From evaluation tools like expected progeny differences (EPDs) and dollar value indexes (\$Values) to marketing services like website management and digital advertising, Jentz says the Angus team is always eager to take care of its members.

Maintenance of an operation’s website, promotion of various lots and events through boosted Facebook ads, printed advertisements on glossy pages of the *Angus Journal* and the *Angus Beef Bulletin* — Jentz says the Angus Media team can help producers make the most of any communication touchpoint they can think of.

These marketing plans are customizable, so operations of all size and experience can create a strategy that fits their goals and budgets.

Beyond selling an operation’s brand year-round, Jentz says one item stands out in terms of sale day.

“The number one marketing piece is the [sale book],” he says.

Musgrave Angus works closely with Angus Media and utilizes the Pasture to Publish portal to complete their sale book. Following the timeline suggested by Angus Media Print Coordinator Ashley Petty, Tyler begins to submit information for their books about two and a half months before the sale date.

Petty says the Musgraves provide sale-specific information to the team including animal listings for lots, lot order, the EPDs and other performance data to be printed, sale day information for buyers, and photos and writeups for both sale animals and their operation. Breeders looking to work with Angus Media for their own books can expect to provide the same type of data.

Beyond the advice and skill set breeders gain access to when they work with Angus Media, Petty says they also have a valuable opportunity to connect with buyers and promote their brand.

“They get to tell their story through their sale book,” she explains. “In addition to that, they get to utilize our database and have the most accurate and up-to-date

information to use in marketing their cattle.”

Hot off the press, the next step is distribution of the sale book.

“Making sure we get it out to the right mailing list, I think, is key,” Jentz says.

He says the mailing list available to breeders when they work with Angus Media has an advantage, both in terms of commercial buyers and seedstock operations.

Jentz also praises Musgrave Angus for collecting their own information each year to add to the supplied mailing list. Tyler and Sarah keep track of individuals who request sale books or reach out to the family for information. They’ll add those names and addresses to the contact list, in hopes of encouraging a new potential customer to come to Illinois come sale day.

The team of regional managers are also a resource for breeders. Whether it be a task as simple as helping breeders meet advertising deadlines to assisting a producer in working with Angus Media to promote digital advertising efforts, Jentz says he is there for whatever level of involvement a breeder chooses.

“Members should utilize regional managers,” Tyler adds. “They are a great tool to give an unbiased opinion

and clear representation that will help the buyer.”

On sale day, Jentz and his peers can also help connect genetics for sale with interested individuals from across the nation.

“I try to help those people that can’t be there that day to be able to purchase an animal. We’re there to help other producers that don’t have eyes or boots on the ground see those cattle,” he explains.

➔ *Set measurable goals.*

Jentz reminds producers a sale can’t be labeled a success if there aren’t metrics to examine.

“A lot of people have a sale, but not a goal,” he explains. “If you have a goal, we can measure it and do things to reach it instead of just ‘feeling’ like we had a good sale.”

He says these goals often start with finances. At the end of the day, he knows the monetary factor is a driving force on a sale — producers want to make a profit.

Those profit goals stem from other measurable items, he adds. For example, higher sales come from higher attendance numbers.

Supplement those profit goals with other achievable goals to truly know if sale day is a success or not.

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“The **Number 1** marketing piece is the [sale book].”

—Casey Jentz

⇒ *Find ways to reach as many people as possible.*

Jentz says producers should try to have as many touchpoints as possible with their target audience. Everyone has their own preference on how they consume information, so by having a presence year-round on as many platforms as possible, Jentz says producers can position themselves to close more sales.

Digital advertising has become a crucial element to outreach, Jentz adds. Beyond advertisements printed in magazines, Jentz says an operation should be looking to promote their brand online as well.

For Musgrave Angus, digital media has taken on a wide definition. Beyond social media platforms and their website, they have watched online auctions positively affect their sales for the past 10 years since they first started working with this type of marketing platform.

“We could get more publicity out of our area — people could see the videos of our cattle,” Melvin explains. “It really does pay off. I wouldn’t think twice about using it. It’s a must.”

Today, Melvin says they sell a good portion of their offering each year to online customers, distributing their Angus genetics nationwide.

⇒ *Keep your eyes and ears open on sale day.*

Watching and interacting with the attendees on sale day helps producers identify potential holes that need to be filled for the next year.

From feedback on the type of food served to the passing chatter about the comfort level of the sale barn, Melvin and Cathy learn the most by listening.

Cathy says she also likes to have pictures taken of the crowd during the sale in case they don’t get a chance to talk to someone in the hustle of sale day.

“We try to visit with as many people as we can,” she says, “but honestly, it’s impossible to do.”

These images can help the family further relationships with their customers after the event, when the family has time after the final fall of the gavel.

Setting – More than Just a Placemat at the Table

When Melvin and Cathy Musgrave first started their auction, people came to a small facility on their property and bid on 20 head of bulls. One of the first “upgrades” they invested in was a bigger space for the growing crowd. The sale barn of today is actually a heated machine shed, but Melvin says the building is the perfect location.

It’s a place that serves as great storage during the year, but also can be transformed come sale season. The shed becomes a bustling center of business the third weekend of March.

From the meals served to the view of livestock running through the ring, Melvin says he’s proud of the event his family has built — and he thinks his guests feel the same way.

“People want good company and good food and good cattle,” he says.

Melvin describes the atmosphere of the event as warm and homey. He doesn’t consider the machine shed to be extravagant, but he says it’s comfortable, and that’s what he thinks is most important.

“You don’t have to have extravagant facilities to have good cattle,” he explains. “We make sure people are comfortable when they come to our sale, both physically and mentally.”

It’s not hard to make people feel comfortable when you pile their plates with roast beef, beans and salad, Cathy says. She keeps tables clear of decoration, allowing buyers to utilize the space for their overflowing plates and dog-eared sale books.

“We have a bull sale; we don’t have a banquet,” Melvin says, “It’s nothing fancy, but we don’t want to be fancy. We want to be practical and make people comfortable.”

Combine the humility of the hosts with the quality of the genetics offered, and you’ll find the perfect equation for creating a setting people want to be a part of.

“It’s more than just a cattle sale. It’s a little bit of a social event, and we know that,” Melvin explains. “We just feel good about people coming together.”

⇒ *Remember that quality sells.*

It might sound simple, but Melvin says it’s important to realize a sale is only as good as the cattle it offers.

“Quality cattle are very important in a good sale,” he says. “Quality does sell.”

To help tie an operation’s name to quality genetics, Melvin strongly suggests producers add a prefix or their name to the front of an animal’s registration number.

“Our theory is, if our name goes in front of an animal, so goes the name of our integrity,” he says. “You’ve got to have integrity in this business or you’re not going to be very successful for very long.”

The concept of quality extends further than the registration paper. It even reaches beyond the bounds of a pasture. Jentz says the people offering the good genetics have to be top-notch individuals as well.

“People buy from people they like — their personalities and the way they go about their business,” he says. “The cattle are a tool, but it’s still a people business.” **AJ**