

# Merchandising

by Keith Evans



## Sale books can work harder

Talk with a group of registered cattle producers about marketing, and someone is sure to ask about sale books. Even breeders who have sponsored an annual sale for years sometimes aren't confident about what they are doing.

Most sale books have two functions. They are a direct-mail piece to convince people to come to a sale, and they are a listing of cattle for sale on auction day. The breeder who understands these two functions stands a better chance of holding down costs and increasing effectiveness.

I've known people who say they only want a sale book to use on sale day. Their sale books list the cattle, their pedigrees and performance records, and they assign a number to each animal. Prospective buyers have the basic information on each animal to use as they view cattle on sale day.

The first time a breeder mails one of these minimum sale books to a prospective buyer prior to the sale, it becomes a direct-mail piece. Direct mail by nature shouldn't be utilitarian because of the jobs it has to do.

If you plan to send your sale books to potential buyers to encourage their attendance at your sale, your sale book becomes a sales brochure. This kind of a sale book must accomplish five important things in addition to listing the sale lots.

1. It must attract the reader's attention. It must stand out from the rest of the information received in the mail the day it arrives.
2. It must arouse the reader's interest about what's inside the covers. When cattle producers receive the book, they must be enticed to learn more about what's inside.
3. It must create conviction. Readers must be convinced that the information is true and reliable and that the breeder is capable and sincere.
4. It must influence the reader to act — to come to the sale or at least to contact the seller.
5. The sale book should have a distinct appearance that is used year after year. This "look" should identify the breeder at a glance.

If these five rules sound familiar, they should. They are essentially the five basic things every advertisement should accomplish. The thing to remember is a sale book can accomplish all these things without four-color printing on coated paper stock. Color and slick paper certainly will improve a

properly designed book, but they won't turn a poorly designed and shoddily written book into an effective sales piece. So work smart.

**Start with the cover.** That's where you attract attention and build interest. Think of the book cover as the illustration and headline of an advertisement. It should grab attention and create interest by offering a benefit.

Don't just announce your sale. Sure, it's the "Fifth Annual Jones Farm Sale on Nov. 15, 2000,"

and you do want to say this on the cover. But these facts shouldn't constitute the only headline — or even be printed in the largest type.

There has to be at least one great reason why people should come to your sale. If there isn't, what's the point? So distill this reason into a catchy headline, and feature it on the cover.

I have five sale books in front of me as I write this. Not one cover headline offers the reader a benefit or a sound reason to attend the sale.

One breeder's sale features the progeny of two bulls in which he owns an interest. The bulls have outstanding, balanced expected progeny differences (EPDs) for many of the traits for which commercial producers are looking. But not a word of this is noted on the cover. The information is hidden in the middle of Page 1.

There's an acceptable, traditional photograph of one of these bulls on the cover, but there is not a word about his outstanding genetics nor the benefits his progeny offer to buyers. The breeder prints only the name of the sale, the date, location and time. It is a wasted opportunity.

Sale-book covers run the gamut — from boring to enticing and from black-and-white to glorious four-color. But regardless of its color, a book cover never should be plain. Remember, boring is the most deadly sin in advertising. So make your cover sparkle. Make it attract attention and create interest. Hire a good photographer — or an artist if you prefer not to use a photograph — and be specific about what you want to accomplish. Then let the expert produce a cover illustration that will grab the reader's attention and create interest. Money invested in cover illustration and design is well-spent.

**The first two pages of the book,** usually the inside front cover and Page 1, are where you should tell your sales story. These two pages are like the body copy of an ad. What you say about yourself, about your cattle,



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about your breeding program and about your goals will create conviction in the minds of readers and spur them into action. It can actually make them look at the sale cattle listed in the sale book in a different light.

Produce these two pages carefully. Get help from an expert. You might want to do something more creative than the traditional letter from the owner and the sale manager.

Of course you also need to spell out the sale details. List the auctioneer, sale manager (if there is one), the media representatives and anyone else who can help customers select cattle. Be sure to include how to reach them.

If buyers must stay overnight, make it easy for them to get accommodations. Explain how your free delivery works, if you offer it. If you don't, tell how you can help arrange transportation. Give them telephone numbers and e-mail addresses to make it easy to reach you and to ask questions. Encourage people to call.

**All this talk** about the first three pages doesn't mean the rest of the book is not important — it is. Research shows that the animals highlighted by a good photograph bring higher prices. That may be because a seller takes photos of only the best cattle. Regardless, include as many good photos as possible, and never use a bad photo.

Finally, insist on an attractive layout. Don't cram sale lots together just to save space. Use less-expensive paper and print more pages rather than crowd things together on expensive paper stock. And print the lot numbers large enough to be read easily.

Footnotes are necessary only if they include important information. Keep them factual, short and to the point. If you must print them in 6-point type to save space, forget them — or include a magnifying glass with each sale book.

Remember that *expensive* isn't the same as *effective*. By the same token, *low cost* doesn't spell *trash*. Given our choice, all of us would prefer to work with an unlimited budget. Since we don't, we can overcome this handicap by understanding the basics of communication and salesmanship and by applying them to sale-book production.

