

Rolling out THE RED CARPET

Virginia farm takes customer service to the next level.

by Megan Silveira, assistant editor

*I*t's a gently familiar sound, the steady and rhythmic beat offset by the chirping of nearby birds. Slowly the pounding grows louder, and a pair of matching black geldings turns the corner of the driveway, trotting up in an elegant gait.

The Dutch horses pull a carriage that allows for views of the sweeping hills surrounding Aldie, Va. Green grass and black cattle are seen in every direction, and champagne is poured while horses rest at the halfway point, in line with the long-standing traditions of carriage driving.

It's a memorable way to view cattle — one that has become a distinct signature of the farm. The experience is one of many ways the team at Whitestone Farm uniquely embraces the idea of customer service; and it's one Mark Duffell, general manager, is especially passionate about.

"It's just another way to reach out and provide excellent customer service," he explains. "If someone takes the time to fly over here, get a hotel — you know, I feel that it's important that we show them the best hospitality that we can."



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Duffell and the Whitestone staff built their business on making customers feel appreciated. From guaranteeing the genetics sold to making the facilities a hub for agriculturists, the farm has spent years making their customers a priority.

“It’s a part of my job that I enjoy greatly,” Duffell says simply. “I love people.”

BACK TO THE START

When Duffell joined Whitestone in 1988, farm owners George Lemm; Tom and Nancy Andracsek; and the late Kitty and Robby Robertson had their hearts set on black-hided cattle, but hadn’t yet considered how to promote their herd’s genetics.

Duffell used the show ring to spotlight the operation’s breeding objectives. This side of the industry fit well with his personal opinion on cattle: livestock bearing the Whitestone brand have to look good first, but also need to be backed by an impressive set of expected progeny differences (EPDs).

“I’m a firm believer that we still need to look at cattle,” he says. “We try to raise cattle that are easy-fleshing, easy-doing type of cattle, but cattle that still have a phenotype that is attractive to look at.”

Only two years after joining Whitestone, Duffell led efforts to host a fall female sale. He made plans based on the blueprints of other successful breeder events.

Festivities started early, with the Saturday sale kicking off as attendees viewing cattle Friday evening were treated to a prime rib dinner and a performance by a live band.

“It was kind of uncharted water,” Duffell admits. “We didn’t really know what to expect.”

Nearly 600 people arrived the night before the auction, far more than the Whitestone crew had even hoped for. Thanks to an outstanding caterer, all guests were fed, and they repeat the celebration each year.

2023 will mark Whitestone’s 35th female sale, and Friday night still typically sees between 200-300 guests.

“I think it gives our customers a good feeling, and they’re appreciative that we go the extra step to roll out the red carpet, so to speak, for them,” Duffell explains.

The Friday night event encapsulates the idea of customer service, says Reese Tuckwiller, regional manger for the American Angus Association.

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"It's the perfect environment for a relaxing evening to talk about Angus cattle and have fellowship with repeat customers," he says. "Not to mention, it's a phenomenal meal."

Each time Duffell opens the doors at Whitestone to friends and clients, Tuckwiller says it's obvious to see the action is more than a marketing decision. Surrounded by like-minded people, Duffell's smile is real, and Tuckwiller says the joy is reflected on the faces of everyone who visits the farm.

The two days of the Whitestone female sale are two days Patrick Sines, Sines Family Farm, plans to be in Virginia each year.

"We pretty well make it a family affair," Sines says.

Breeding goals for the farm center around raising seedstock Angus bulls, selling freezer beef and marketing weanling calves. Sines manages about 60 pairs today, but he has sights set on raising that number to 100.

In the five years since he entered the seedstock industry, 90% of the new genetics purchased have been from Whitestone. Sines knows the farm offers top-notch livestock, but it's not just the cattle that bring him back to Virginia year after year.

"When we first got into the registered business, Mark's was one of the first sales we went to. Mark treated us like we've been there for 100 years," he explains.

Duffell helped the budding cattleman select genetics that would move his herd forward at a faster pace. The entire Whitestone crew is dedicated to providing an honest opinion, and Sines knows when the farm says an animal will work for him, it really will.

"If I'm debating between cattle from two different operations, most of the time I'm going to go to Whitestone," Sines says.

TAKING THE NEXT STEP

As the cattle show landscape changed, Duffell says it was time to put more focus into performance-type cattle.

"I felt that in order for us to be relevant to all of the registered business, we needed to focus on having our own bull sale," Duffell says.

Just five years after Whitestone's first fall female sale, another auction was added to the docket. Knowing Whitestone's bulls are marketed to commercial customers, Duffell says the event had to be shaped to fit the needs of the intended audience.

The spring sale allows producers to turn newly purchased bulls straight into the pasture when they get home, but it does overlap with the peak of crop season.

"We try to be really considerate of their time," Duffell explains. "We don't get the same enthusiasm or crowd for the night before the bull sale. I find most of these bull buyers want to show up about 9:30 in the morning of the bull sale. We feed them lunch, and then we go right into the sale at noon. We try our best to get the buyers in and out as quickly as possible."

Socialization and customer appreciation don't go out the door with the condensed schedule, however. Duffell still makes it a point to connect with every guest.

Tuckwiller says there's never a moment when the manager stands still. He shakes every hand, and everyone has a chance to get Duffell's opinion on the cattle up for grabs, the status of the beef industry or even something as simple as the week's weather.

"On sale day, Mark will take time to talk to anyone," Sines adds. "It's one of the busiest days of the year, but he's still going to take the time."

At that first bull sale, each animal sold. It set a standard the Whitestone team has worked to maintain the past 30 years.



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“We really targeted a whole new audience [with the event],” Duffell says. “We continued to raise cattle that we felt could be relevant and competitive in the show ring... but we really wanted to focus on our commercial cattlemen and how we could best help them select bulls from Whitestone

ABOVE AND BEYOND

“Anyone can raise good cattle. What sells cattle to me is the operator, and how the cattle are managed, and what happens after the final sale point.”

The statement comes from Sines, though it’s one Duffell also tells himself on a daily basis.

Sale day is the perfect opportunity to gather clients for a little fun, but customer service is a duty Duffell takes seriously, 365 days a year.

“When talking to new breeders about customer service, I always refer them to Mark Duffell,” Tuckwiller says. “There’s no one better in the business.”

Anyone visiting the operation is treated to a carriage ride tour of the farm, followed by a champagne picnic. Duffell says serving as host is something he loves. Not only is it a chance for him to spend time behind the reins of his beloved carriage horses, it’s another way to continue creating that “red carpet” experience for customers.

The days at Whitestone are marked with summer picnics, association meetings and so much more. The farm serves as a gathering place where memories are made for everyone who visits. Those memories create relationships, and relationships help encourage breeders to remember this Virginia farm each time they want to bring home new genetics.

“I want repeat customers,” Duffell says. “I love new customers, but knowing that our repeat customers are there for us year in and year out keeps the doors open at Whitestone.”

Since he entered the industry, Duffell has learned there’s more to *the Business Breed* than just business. When it comes to livestock, there’s heart and soul in every purchase.

“You’re dealing with people’s livelihoods,” he explains. “Their trust is humbling.” 

that would work in their programs here in the East.”

Bulls are competitive when it comes to birth weight, yearling weight and marbling, and they are thick made. The combination creates animals ready to perform in the fescue country of Virginia that still look good in the pasture.

“Those are traits that I look at, because I know our customers are mainly commercial cattlemen with small herds,” Duffell says.

Most clients get their income from another profession, meaning herd work happens early in the morning or late at night. It’s a truth that only emphasizes the importance of efficiency in the Whitestone cattle Duffell markets.

“When you go to Whitestone, they’ve done their due diligence of culling hard and making sure all the animals go through extensive testing,” Tuckwiller adds. “All the boxes are checked, and they offer the best product possible.”