

Unlocking The Data Stronghold Partners Indeed

From data interpretation to feeding education and health coordination, full-service yards do it all.

BY DEANNA SCRIMGER

The thirst for knowledge is making waves. Sometimes that wave can develop into a sea of data that can be collected, recorded and entered. But it's only valuable if it becomes the water of knowledge — information that can be used.

Understanding the data and using it to make positive change in the herd make the effort worthwhile. Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) licensed feedlot partners are working with their customers to get the most from their cattle by not only providing data, but helping them put the information to use.

Customer service

Joe Eisenmenger, Eisenmenger Farms Inc., Humphrey, Neb., sees it as one more step in providing complete

customer service. "We specialize in customer service and providing information back to our customers," he explains. The 5,000-head commercial feedyard deals with a large information-driven customer base from Montana and the northwestern states. "There is a perception that this is where the industry is going, and our customers want to be first."

Neill Cattle Co., Welch, Okla., also stresses customer service when cow-calf producers are selecting a feeding partner. "It's important to find someone [whom] you are comfortable with and feel you can have a relationship with," says Joe Neill.

He focuses on working hand in hand with customers in his 14,000-head lot. A majority of his customers are small-scale

producers from eastern Oklahoma and Kansas. "We provide data back to our customers and also try to help them understand what the data means," Neill explains. Although the majority of the discussions take place via phone, he always encourages producers to visit the yard to see their cattle and to learn.

"We try to help them understand, when looking at the data, they also have to look at the weather and time on feed," Neill notes.

His favorite stories, ones you'd be sure to hear on a tour of his facility, are of a few clients he says are doing it "by the book."

"I have two or three customers who are actually retired from other industries. They want all of the individual

data they can get," he explains. "It's all in the computer, and they study it. They do it by the book. If everyone would make that commitment, it would really make a difference."

Council Bluffs, Iowa, licensee Roger Chambers operates Silver Creek Feeders Inc., a 2,500-head yard. He relies on data from CAB and the Precision Beef Alliance (PBA) to monitor his own management and the steadily improving genetics of cattle from his customers, who are mostly from the Southeast.

In fact, an agreement to feed a mixed pen of 80 steers for the Georgia Challenge four years ago has developed into feeding 800 head annually, more than half of his custom business.

"We work hard at service, to preserve identity in commingled pens, and we have experience with electronic ID," he says. As other Southeastern producers ranging in size from 35- to 500-cow operations continue to step up to the challenge of the commingled-pen test, many of the original participants feed pens of their own now, thanks to data feedback that has allowed for positive changes.

"The herds are either predominately Angus or working that way," says Chambers, who visits the area several times each year and works with as many as 60 Southeastern producers. "From the information they got back, they are looking to Angus to improve, mostly through bull purchases."

That information amounts to computer printouts with both feedlot and individual carcass performance, interpreted and explained by Chambers and Extension beef specialists.

Looking at a typical kill sheet from a packer, Chambers says, "This is a fantastic piece of information — it tells me how we're feeding and if we're sorting correctly, along with information for the original producer. At 77% Choice or better and a high percentage of Yield Grade (YG) 2s and 3s, I think we picked the optimum harvest time."



PHOTO BY TROY SMITH

Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) feedlot licensees are helping customers interpret data to find cattle that will work in the yard and on the rail.

Neill admits times have changed with computers. "Up until the mid-'80s, we didn't look at performance until two or three weeks later. Computers have allowed us to be a better manager," he says. He predicts data utilization will become even more intense with more individual data in the future.

Data utilization

Understanding the cattle before they enter the yard is the first step. "We look at [backgrounding, feed and] vaccination programs used at home and offer suggestions that may help," Neill says. "We don't require they do it our way, but they are usually receptive. We recommend a booster vaccination here — anything we can do to get on the right track from the start."

Eisenmenger follows the same forward thinking with customers. "Complete vaccination and implant programs are explained up front so we can design programs that complement each other," he says. Without knowing the background of cattle, Eisenmenger says efforts may be duplicated, resulting in lost efficiencies and increased cost.

"There are a lot of data being collected in the industry. Yet a lot is stacked in a corner and not being used," he says. More than half of Eisenmenger's customers work with a third-party consultant who helps them interpret and use the data so they gain an understanding of the effects of genetic selection.

"This individual is seeking ranchers who want long-term relationships and want to use the data. [Being a party to those relationships] has allowed us to seek and find these genetics," he explains, adding it has helped make faster progress than he anticipated in providing information back to his customers.

Putting it all together

Trelay Farms Inc., Livingston, Wis., focuses on customer services, but with a farmer-feeder and seedstock twist.

The business had fed cattle and raised seed corn and popcorn for more than 100 years; nearly 10 years ago, it expanded to include a registered Angus herd.

Today, Trelay Farms offers a full-service program to bull buyers by purchasing and feeding out calves sired by their bulls. In the fall, most of the 1,000-head lot is filled with calves from that program.

"We work with our bull buyers to wean calves 30 days before they come to our yard," explains Brian Nodolf, an owner-partner. "We also work with them on a vaccination program. We require calves are vaccinated when weaned or before." In most cases, he says, "We work with them on a program recommended by their veterinarian."

Nodolf says the system has developed. "Three or so years ago, the producers weren't willing to wean according to our suggestions. Now, I'm impressed with how they are trying to do the right thing," he explains. "On evenings and weekends, we'll see pickup trucks driving through the yards, because they want to see their pen of cattle and how they are doing."

Nodolf sees the CAB Feedlot Licensing Program (FLP) as a way to increase the information he can provide to his customers by increasing the amount of individual data they are tracking.

"Some of our customers have also expressed an interest in the new [Angus Beef Records Service (BRS)] commercial cow herd program from the American Angus Association to start tracking information on their cows. We are excited to cooperate with them," he says.

"More individual data will allow us to get a better handle on gain. Some of our customers have 100 head. But some [have] only 20 head, and we can't have a full pen."

Some Southeastern producers get individual data on calves fed at Silver Creek Feeders through their local auction markets. "It's



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"The cattle feeding experience has certainly enhanced cooperation among the small producers," says Roger Chambers of Silver Creek Feeders Inc., Coucil Bluffs, Iowa. "When we go out with Extension people to see one producer's cows, other producers follow along to see what they might have in common."



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"We don't send cattle into a grid that haven't been ultrasounded or have no past information," says Joe Eisenmenger, Eisenmenger Farms Inc., Humphrey, Neb. "We typically want to offer recommendations and give the risk involved with putting cattle on a grid."



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not part of an organized program,” Chambers says, “but we’ve developed relationships with the sale barns. We’re starting to identify some that realize they can move service into a new direction.”

In the four years of working with producers from that area, Chambers says the biggest improvements have been in uniformity. Grade has improved, too, due to some quick reactions to lack of quality.

Data-based decision making

Should producers take action on the first year’s data as some of the Southern producers did?

“It depends on how bad the news is,” Chambers says. “If you have a high percentage of Standards and Selects, you know you need to do something.” Some culled heavily, most bought improved Angus bulls, some dropped out of the program, and some quit the cattle business entirely, he reports.

Eisenmenger tracks gain on an individual basis at beginning implant and second implant. “This allows us to know how an animal is doing in relationship to the group. Producers can use this information to compare the pen,” he explains.

The Nebraska feedlot uses ultrasound data to assist with key decisions.

“All cattle are ultrasounded at reimplant. This gives us the opportunity to sort for the appropriate out date. We can also target the best niche for perceived genetics of the cattle. This allows us to minimize risk when cattle go to slaughter,” Eisenmenger says.

Coordinating more closely with customers on implant programs is on Neill’s list for the

future. “Currently, decisions are based on the type of cattle and working with our feed nutritionist,” he explains, emphasizing the competitiveness of feed conversion. But change is in the air.

“In the future, the industry may be willing to give up some performance to see an increase in grade,” he says.

When it comes to marketing the cattle, each yard is aggressively working with their customers to find the best options. For Neill and his customers, the decision to market cattle on a value-based grid can happen two ways.

“People who really know their genetics are selling on a grid. Some customers are willing to put their money where their mouth is, and some simply say to do whatever you can to get the most money,” Neill explains.

When making these decisions, Neill will consider the time of year and where the market is, while taking care to avoid overfeeding. A recent success story of a customer following Neill’s recommendation and marketing on a grid resulted in a premium of more than \$4/hundredweight (cwt.) over the live market.

More than 30% of cattle marketed from Eisenmenger’s yard are sold on some value-added program.

“We have a number of cattle that are sold on a grid or alliance program. We have utilized U.S. Premium Beef and Monfort [ConAgra]. We don’t send cattle into a grid that haven’t been ultrasounded or have no past information,” he explains. “It’s important the cattle fit toward the specific grid. We typically want to offer recommendations and give the risk involved with putting cattle on a grid.”

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— Joe Eisenmenger

Eisenmenger usually has a large majority of cattle on which he would like to obtain carcass data, and he recognizes that packers are a key part of that process.

“Five years ago the only viable way to get information was to sell on a grid. Packers have recognized, if we are to improve carcass quality, we’ve got to get information. In the last two years, they have really allowed us to get in and get tag transfers and information,” he says.

Opportunity

As producers look at putting carcass data to work for them, Eisenmenger feels it is essential to look at all information.

“Using just quality and yield grade with hot carcass weights is an OK system, but when we really get into evaluating a herd, it is essential to have backfat and ribeye area. This tells producers how good or poor we do. It also tells him the genetic viability of his cattle,” he explains.

The results can be exciting. “When you show producers the carcass data, they are looking at profit or loss. When you put the data sheets on the desk or in the computer and look at some what-ifs, when you can show examples, their eyes get real big,” he says.

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“If a producer has cattle that perform for the packer, but he doesn’t retain ownership, he’s

leaving money on the table. There’s no way for the yard to pay for the value without [the rancher’s] having an interest in the animal. If they’ve paid for the genetics, retained ownership is the only way to recover their input. Those who have done so are getting the value back.”

Eisenmenger is seeing an increasing number of customers retaining some share of ownership.

Some Southeastern producers who fed in Silver Creek Feeders’ steer-test pen, then dropped out of feeding, plan to try again after a couple of years’ worth of genetic improvement, Chambers says. Others set about coordinating with neighbors at weaning time to muster shared pens and shared ownership with the feedlot.

“The cattle feeding experience has certainly enhanced cooperation among the small producers,” Chambers says. “When we go out with Extension people to see one producer’s cows, other producers follow along to see what they might have in common.”

For the future, Neill believes the industry has just scratched the surface of what could be done on the genetics side. He encourages producers to learn more about their cattle.

“Every state has some type of feed-out program. If they aren’t now, they should feed some of their own cattle,” he suggests. “Eventually, to make margins to survive, we may all have to participate in more than one sector. From cow-calf to stocker and feeder, we need to get ready for the future.”



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