

The Cattle Market Teacher

Randy Blach earns 2022 Industry Achievement Award.

by Morgan Boecker, Certified Angus Beef

Some people search for purpose their entire lives. Few find their way early on.

In 1980, with an open mind and heart, Randy Blach took his Colorado State University (CSU) animal science degree to CattleFax. CEO Topper Thorpe and Jerry Bohn, director of market analysis, asked him to join the team, but it was a role Blach figured would eventually lead him back to the family ranch near Yuma, Colo.

"I thought this would be a perfect opportunity for me to spend a couple of years learning," he says. "But honestly, I just fell in love with my work, and the rest is history."

Devotion to CattleFax and the people it serves grew to where many consider Blach and CattleFax one.

Always focused on the data and how it can deliver solutions, the decades of work earned Blach an understanding of the market and all that affects it. Part intuition, part learned experience and a growing database gave him the tools to communicate to producers what the market demands.

The bottom line consistently front and center, his mission is to keep more cattlemen and women on the land, doing what they do best.

It's that kind of servant leadership

that earned Blach the 2022 Certified Angus Beef (CAB) Industry Achievement Award.

It's a journey more than four decades in the making.



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— Randy Blach

The cattleman's filter

The office fills with analysts before 7:00 every morning. It's quiet. Headsets isolate conversations in the low hum of chatter as calls are made. Graphs automatically take shape as data rolls in, all in preparation for consultations with clients.

It's a different kind of hard work that happens more in the mind than with the hands and feet.

As the second-youngest of nine children born into a Catholic ranching family, Blach credits his parents and older siblings for imparting a strong work ethic, honesty and integrity.

"We were blessed to come from a family that knew how to work and

knew how to pray," he says, "because it took a combination of those things to keep our operation going and sustained."

The Blach family homesteaded in Yuma County 135 years ago. They dabbled in hogs, ranching and small grains farming, but in the 1960s and '70s that settled into 600 commercial cows, 200 registered Herefords and a few thousand stockers. That's not counting the farming it took to feed them.

Responsibility was inevitable. To keep everyone straight, second-oldest Tom was assigned his younger brother to look after.

"Tom always had a love for the livestock and cattle," Blach says. "I think that's part of where my love for livestock came from."

Today, Tom and his sons cover the day-to-day management duties for the 600 head of commercial Angus cows. Blach is a partner and uses his day job to guide marketing decisions, making the two-hour drive from Denver at least once a month to put in sweat equity.

"Every one of us tries to make some tracks that won't blow away," Tom says.

When beef demand tanked in the '80s and '90s, losing 400,000 beef producers and 50% of beef demand, Blach advised his brother to start looking at Angus. Since then, they



Randy and Karen Blach

While there are many things Blach learned about ranching from his parents, he credits his family for his work ethic, honesty and integrity first.



Blach uses his day job to provide marketing insight to his family's ranch. He makes a point to visit at least once a month, driving two hours from Denver to spend a day working and catching up with his brother and nephews.

try to select bulls they can retain ownership of.

“For 25 years, we have gotten the carcass data to know where we’re winning and where we need to improve,” Blach says. “The last load of cattle we marketed on the grid reached 93% Choice or Prime and 58% CAB.”

He remembers what it took to get there, understanding the risk of not putting better-tasting beef on the table.

“Certified Angus Beef was a real leader that the industry needed at that time, and still is,” Blach says. “They have a vision of what the consumer wants.”

Now beef demand is at a 30-year high. Their access to and understanding of market drivers makes CattleFax a natural conduit for connecting beef quality to the production system.

“I know we’ve done our best work when we publish our research and analysis and share it with our customers,” Blach says. “But we’re always challenging each other to do better.”

Job never done

Blach learned more than just how to take data and translate it for cattlemen to make better

risk management decisions. He mastered the importance of putting customer service first. He learned those things from Thorpe, the 2014 Industry Achievement Award honoree.

“Topper would tell me, ‘Randy, always tell the truth,’” Blach remembers. “Producers need to know what we’re seeing, so they can make their best decisions. So, we don’t sugarcoat it.”

That much hasn’t changed. The early days mainly focused on cattle markets and long-range weather patterns. Today, the team covers beef, pork, poultry, grain and energy markets both U.S. and globally. Clients range from small and large cow-calf producers, stockers and feedyards, to animal health and feed companies, trade associations, banks, and financial institutions.

A product of his environment, Blach’s mentors and board members guided him along the way.

Blach was an analyst for 21 years, until Thorpe retired in 2001 and he stepped into the current role of CEO.

Never one to settle, the new responsibility had him searching for ways to expand and improve. Making the company more financially solvent created a more stable environment for both employees and clients.

“The average shelf life of an analyst when I started was two years,” says general manager Duane Lenz, a 33-year CattleFax team member. “Now most of our people have been here for 10 to 40 years. And that kind of continuity is great for our business and customers.”

Hiring talented staff is no exception to Blach’s golden rule. Planning for continuity led to sponsoring future analysts by funding their graduate work, often at CSU. Patrick Linnell joined the team through this pipeline.

“It’s critical to identify people who have the skills, potential and, ultimately, the values of the company,” says Linnell, the analyst and special projects manager. “It was a pretty bold vision on Randy’s part.”

Other visions saw the need to move from merely reporting facts to serving up decision-friendly information.

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When Mike Murphy started in 1996, they wrote notes on Big Chief tablets and cut off snippets from teletype machines and other data feeds. Today, it's an automated process that pulls from large databases, like that of USDA, and compiles them.

This lets analysts model data and predict what may happen months and even years down the road. Sharing that with the industry has evolved from packed boxes of overflowing three-ring binders to a single flash drive with detailed charts.

Data sharing can be a more direct exchange, too.

"Randy took us to another level in terms of the intimacy of how we work with our clientele," Murphy says. "We focus on decision-friendly data so that many of our customers who are not trained in market analysis, but are experts in production, can make solid business decisions."

Knowing when to buy or sell is just one of the risks clients face. Market volatility creates uncertainty, making risk management and answering those what-if questions a large part of an analyst's role. Without it, long-term planning is nearly impossible.

"These are crazy times," Blach says. "Black swan events. We've had one after another, after another, after another, after another the last seven to eight years."

Their ability to use large databases and sort through what's happening is what helps folks out.

"Take the Russian invasion into Ukraine," Blach says. "We have to know exactly how product moves in and out of each region, how much grain is moving out of Ukraine and Russia, and who they are shipping to. That way we have an instant understanding of how these markets

are going to change, how they're going to reroute grain and how it can influence prices domestically and abroad."

Every new marketing environment meets the commitment to keep farmers and ranchers on the land.

A brand for those it serves

"Everything Randy does is more about the CattleFax brand than it is about him," Murphy says. "All the little things that he does behind the scenes, he's been on tons and tons of committees over the years, he's served in so many different ways with different organizations at all sorts of levels."

He helped the Chicago Mercantile Exchange update its cattle futures contracts in the 1980s. Since then, it's been a given: if it has to do with the cattle market, he's there.

With more than 80 Blachs having attended CSU, his love for the agriculture and athletic programs of the school is strong.

"He and a few other folks started the CSU Beef Club," Lenz says. "Now it's donated more than a million dollars to the agriculture scholarships and athletics."

People, rather than money, are the common thread.

"It was always about the work and being able to help people and support them," Blach says. "It's been a love to be able to do that, serve the customer. Hopefully, keep them on the land by helping them make one or two more good decisions on an annual basis."

He gives much of the credit to his support system at home. It's why Blach takes time to watch his son

Early in the week, the CattleFax analysts gather to go over the data rolling in. It's one of the ways new talents are trained and developed alongside the senior analysts.



There's a reason the CattleFax update is the most well-attended session during the Cattle Industry Convention. Producers know they'll walk away with the insight needed to make business decisions for the upcoming year.

pitch for the Rockies or catch up with his daughter, Haylee, on her work for Catholic Charities. He takes walks with his wife, Karen, almost every evening.

"What's truly important about Randy is that he's a teacher. He's able to share his knowledge and help future generations understand what it's going to take to be successful in the world they're living in," Karen says.

By his second year at CattleFax, he knew this was his calling.

"There's always another challenge ahead," he says, always up for what's next. "I've been blessed to work with a very talented staff and the same company all these years. I feel like my tank's still full." **AJ**

Editor's note: Blach will be recognized at the 2022 Feeding Quality Forum in Kansas City, Aug. 23.