

Listening and reacting to customers and others in the industry are the keys to survival, according to Florida cattleman Chris Hardee.

BY JANET MAYER

Chris Hardee will literally talk about cattle until the cows come home. Charged with enthusiasm and a knowledge derived from a lifelong association with the cattle business and agriculture, Hardee believes learning has to be an ongoing process to stay competitive in the business.

"There just isn't enough profit out there to do it wrong or make a lot of mistakes," he says, referring to his family's cattle business. "I don't have another entity financing me, and our family has always made a living through agriculture, so we need to be successful."

As the managing partner of Hardee Farms, a purebred Angus and Brangus operation in Chiefland, Fla., 42-year-old Hardee says he always has believed it is important for cattle producers to understand the industry in order to know where their operations fit into the overall picture.

He finds this is not always an easy goal since the industry seems to be constantly changing. To keep abreast of new information, he often turns to others in the agricultural field whose opinions and knowledge he knows and respects. He says most times they will either help him with what he needs to know or will put him in touch with others who can.

"It really is a people world, and people are resources, too; but I feel a lot of us either fail to use them or are too stubborn to use them. You have to make contacts and visit with people about things. And if you listen, you can learn a lot from others."

■ A family tradition

The learning process also has come from years of working closely with his father in the operation. Farming has been a way of life and a vocation for the family since Hardee's great-great-grandfather settled in the area in the 1800s. The tradition continued with Hardee's father and his grandfather joining forces to farm in 1945. For a time they bred Hereford cattle. They had so many problems with the breed that in 1956 they purchased a herd of Angus cattle from a Georgia operation.

After a short attendance at Auburn University and a time of working away from home, Hardee joined his father, Charles, and his brother-in-law at the farm in 1978. A legal partnership between Chris, his father, and his sister and brother-in-law, Diane and Hank Peterson, was formed in 1979.

Due to the declining health of his father and the retirement of Hank and Diane, the partnership has changed somewhat during the past year.

"The timing wasn't the best to be changing the operation," Hardee says. "We had the wettest spring in 30 years and then the driest summer on record and low commercial calf prices, but we got it all settled without any hard feelings, and that was very important.

"Now we need to scale back the operation to relieve some pressure and make life easier for me. I am not as young as I use to be, and although my children (Randi Jo, 16; Torie, 13; and Isaac, 9) help out a lot, I would like to be able to spend more family time with them and my wife, Franny, who is a teacher. I just know we don't want to grow any bigger in terms of land, and we don't want to have to expand the operation past the three full-time employees we now have."

The 3,000-acre farm was acquired over a number of years through the purchase of several smaller farms. They use 2,000 acres primarily for the purebred cattle operation and related crop and forage production. They use the remaining 1,000 acres, located some distance away, for commercial cattle and timber.

One hundred acres of the farm's sandy soil are devoted to growing high-quality seed peanuts that are sold in Georgia and Alabama. The peanuts have proven to be a good cash crop, but it's one that is labor-intensive.

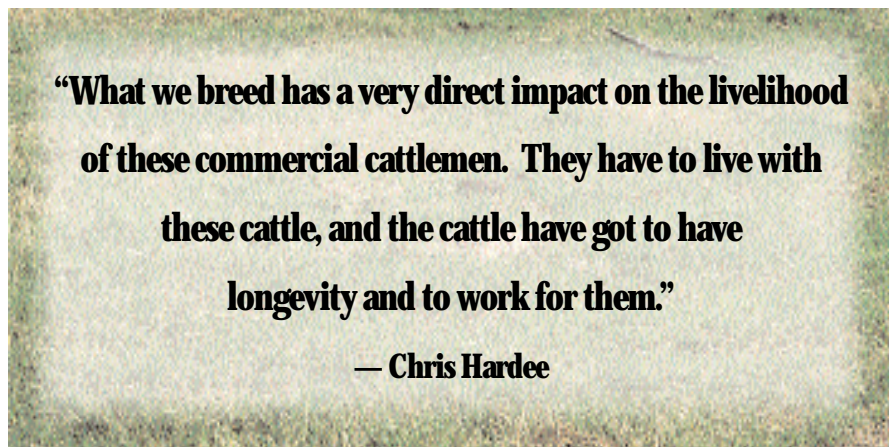
■ Adaptability

Years of experience have shown Hardee that nothing is etched in stone and there is no way things can be done the same way every year. He told his children to remember last year's heavy rainfall and drought, which both occurred within a nine-month span. He hopes they never again will see two such extremes in the same year.

But for Hardee the extreme weather provided another learning experience when the rain made it necessary to find an alternative to the usual haying process.

"We had some grass to cut, and it rained all week long while we were cutting. We just let it wilt first, then bagged the grass for haylage, and it worked out real well," he says. "Had we waited for that stuff to dry out, we would have been lucky if we had gotten 3% or 4% crude protein with a digestibility of less than 50%. As it was, it came out to be on a dry-matter basis of 13% protein, and the cattle would fight you for it. We intend to do a lot more bagging next year."

To provide forage for the cattle during



the drought, the operation was forced to feed hay as it was made, necessitating the purchase of commodities for the winter.

In other years, when weather conditions are more favorable, forages provide adequate feed for the cattle from early April until the grasses mature and the quality lessens in late August.

To optimize as much quality as possible in forages, Hardee has taken note of methods used to harvest forages by area dairy operations and has followed suit. Hay is cut at decent intervals to ensure a high percentage of total digestible nutrients, and about 1,500-2,000 tons of sorghum silage is put up to provide a consistent source of forage for growing the calves and yearlings.

Although the silage is admittedly no better than good hay, he says it is much better than the mediocre or bad-quality hay they often have put up in other years.

To better coordinate management of calves with the optimum period for the area's grasses and resources, the operation has changed the calving season from October to late December. This change has eliminated weaning calves in the hottest months of the year. The operation currently calves 400 cows and 100 heifers yearly, but Hardee is anticipating downsizing to a more manageable size of 300 head — 150 Angus and 150 Brangus.

■ Genetics

Performance records on the herd were recorded first in 1963, and it was through these records that Hardee and his family saw some differences in the way the crossbred calves performed. They felt these calves often did better because of their

environment, and since there was a market for this type of cattle in the southern part of the state, the operation began breeding Brangus cattle in 1972.

Cattle are bred using artificial insemination (AI) with 13 pasture bulls used for cleanup. Hardee would like to use estrus synchronization and AI more extensively.

Scaling back herd size is also expected to help eliminate a problem with parasites.

Hardee believes that, with the large number of cattle, the pressure has intensified the problem, making deworming necessary two or three times a year instead of the usual once. He does, however, admit the situation shows some performance differences in respect to toughness, but that's not the situation he wants.

When it comes to culling, Hardee faults himself and other purebred breeders for being slow to cull, usually because a calf is out of a purebred dam and sire and "could be destined for greatness." Logic tells him there are just too many variations in genetics, even between the same parents, for all of the progeny to be good, but he still hates to cull.

To gain insight into the genetics of the herd, the operation gets carcass information feedback from several of its customers. For the past five years, Hardee Farms has been supplying one of their customers with free semen to breed heifers in exchange for passing carcass data back from the packer. The breeder steers bull calves, putting them on feed in his own feedlot, and uses the heifer calves as herd replacements.

Hardee says the information received from the packer has been revealing, as has information on the heifer calves received from the breeder.

"It is important to every breeder to find



the right type, size and quality of replacement heifer that goes back into their herd," says Hardee. "All of us have got to maintain the maternal quality in our herds, making sure these females can survive in their environment, so it is especially revealing when we find a bull we were keen on produces daughters that don't work."

■ **Customer commitment**

Commercial breeders, mostly from central and southern Florida, make up about 95% of the operation's customer base. Prior to 1991, yearling bulls usually were sold from the farm by private treaty. Seeing a demand for older bulls, and with the size of their herd increasing, there was a definite need to expand the customer base. The decision was made to hold a yearling bull

sale at the farm on the first Friday in November.

Hardee says at first they were apprehensive about doing a sale and initially used a sale manager, but the sales have done well. For the last several years, with the help of the auctioneer and his wife, the family has done their own sale management.

Last year 135 bulls were sold through the sale; and, because of a growing demand, future plans call for possibly increasing the number of bulls to about 200/year.

"What we breed has a very direct impact on the livelihood of these commercial cattlemen," Hardee says. "They have to live with these cattle, and the cattle have got to have longevity and to work for them. To achieve this, we have to do everything we can to give these breeders genetics that can

deliver the performance they need and [that] will be able to produce cattle that will market well."

Hardee notes the commercial market has changed considerably over the last few years with the commercial man paying closer attention to carcass data.

"Awhile back, many of them thought they could go out and get everything: cattle at the top on the marbling, enough retail yield and ribeye, too," he explains. "But that critter is hard to find. It is difficult to get those really high-marbling bulls and still have the growth and the ribeye."

■ **Changing needs**

Some of the operation's customers have started to feed their own cattle, and because of this Hardee says he has seen them have a slight change of opinion. They still want cattle that will fall into that middle Choice grade and be a little higher yielding — in the middle of Yield Grade (YG) 2 — with a little more ribeye and more muscling than what most purebred breeders have been delivering.

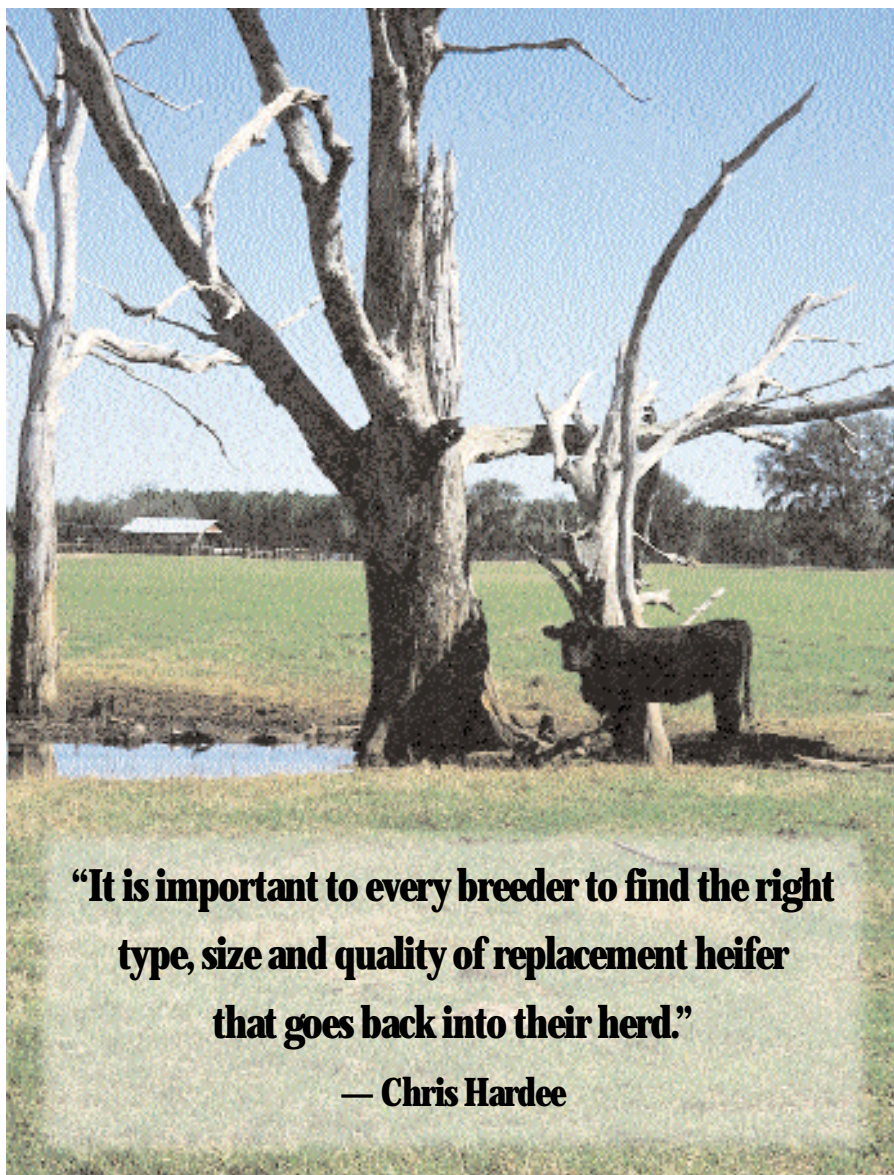
He points out they are still wanting marbling, but gain is the thing determining if these breeders make money or not, and they have to be sure to have enough yield and enough gain to have feedlot efficiency.

"We've got a lot of work to do in the cattle industry," he says. "As purebred-cattle breeders, we have to realize that there's a new twist in that we have to do everything we can to serve the industry.

"Most of us have been self-serving; we selected a breed because we like it, and we breed our cattle the way we like to, and we provide the kind of information to our customers because that is what we want to provide and not necessarily what the industry needs. I think we have been naive, indifferent and often downright arrogant, and this has hurt us tremendously."

The Angus breed has been fortunate to have good cattlemen who have produced and continue to produce cattle selected for traits that make them useful, says Hardee.

"They stayed on course and understood things, and the future looks very promising; but we have got to listen to what our customer is asking for and deliver it. If we don't, someone else will, in another breed or in another source of protein," he says. "If we continue to maintain indifference, we are out. So when my customers say they need a certain type of bull, by golly, I am going to try my darnedest to give it to them."



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