

Progressive Partner



Samson Cattle Co. is recognized for exemplifying the forward-thinking and creative mentality sought in licensed CAB feedlot partners.

BY STEVE SUTHER

A multienterprise cattle feeder from Platte Center, Neb., was named the 2000 Progressive Partner of the Year at the *Certified Angus Beef*[™] Annual Conference in Whistler, British Columbia, Aug. 26. The first-ever “Progressive” award went to the licensed feedlot partner who exemplified the best use of strategies to further build the partnership with Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) and the focus on quality beef production and marketing.

It's based on a combination of creativity in procurement and partnering with producers of Angus cattle, adjustments in management to enhance CAB[®] acceptance, sharing of information and educational efforts. In other words, says John Stika, CAB feeder-packer relations director, “thinking outside the box.”

Scott A. Mueller grew up feeding cattle east of the Nebraska Sandhills. He established a family business of his own at Platte Center 12 years ago with his wife, Pat, under the name that ties his initials to an invitation for their sons, Brandon, 17, and Jordan, 12. But the “Samson” name is just the beginning of Mueller's creativity.

Samson Cattle Co. includes a 2,700-head-capacity CAB-licensed feedlot that is continually expanding toward its permit for 5,500 head. The family also owns and manages farmland, a 250-head commercial cow herd, a feed dealership and Traditions Inn — a bed-and-breakfast in Columbus, Neb., that includes a

100% CAB-licensed restaurant, a pub and a gift shop.

That's diversification, with excellence as the standard for each enterprise — and there's always something new being added. Mueller's philosophy fits both the feedyard and the overall array of businesses: “Our goal is to be world-class, which means best in our business. We will accomplish this through customer focus, continuous improvement and relationship development.”

Successful partner

Stika says, “We noticed early on that Scott would do anything possible to increase grade and CAB acceptance without sacrificing feedlot performance. It's always interesting to see what new ideas he's putting to work or looking into.”

You can bet the ideas are backed by research. “We're working on a database here that tracks cost of gain,” Mueller notes. “If we can't identify the breeder, we'll enter owner and sale barn of origin, then evaluate groups of cattle by standardized [feed-price constant] cost of gain.

“It gives us an edge,” he says. “Our goal is to hold standardized cost of gain to no more than 45¢ across the yard, so that's one reason we track that cost for every pen by source.”

The average for 1999 was 48¢, but 2000 was on target by summer. So far, targeted calf-feds have the edge in both uniformity and quality grade, and cost of gain was not significantly correlated to grade.



PHOTOS BY STEVE SUTHER

“Our goal is to be world-class, which means best in our business,” says Scott Mueller, Samson Cattle Co., Platte Center, Neb. “We will accomplish this through customer focus, continuous improvement and relationship development.”

Mueller tracks health and management differences similarly, through spreadsheets and line graphs in the office, where Assistant Manager Sara Hanlin helps out. One early use of the tool, Mueller says, “It's

been a good way to evaluate cattle buyers.”

Samson also contributes to the growing CAB database that will, in turn, chart its performance against FLP group averages.

The feedlot keeps a lid on inefficiency through the Purina Impact Program. The supplement and feeding regimen modifies cattle's eating behavior so they are satisfied with less at any one time, and it keeps feed in front of them all day, Mueller explains.

"Company research has shown a 6% improvement in both quality grade and feed efficiency. We get more consistent intake from every animal, all the time. During extreme weather, cattle tend to be picky eaters, and this helps a lot," he says.

Customer education

"Samson's customer programs are among the most effective I've seen in terms of hands-on education and tying the production side to the end-product side," Stika says.

Mueller knows education never ends. "We set up programs that tie together the details on all the things we do

here at the feedyard, the feed business, and link to the cow-calf customers. Meetings are often held over a juicy *Certified Angus Beef* steak at Traditions, which helps producers think about end product," he notes.

Education started several years ago with a Purina-sponsored steer test.

"Initially guys would bring in five or 10 head, and we'd feed them in a commingled pen," Mueller explains. "Now many of those initial participants have increased the numbers fed and have their own pens, and we still get some that are just starting.

"If they can bring in 30 head or more, they get their own pen, their own feed-efficiency information, and don't have to worry about trying to estimate that in a commingled pen," he adds.

Having a small cow herd himself, Mueller identifies with those customers.

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"A steer futurity exposes entry-level cow-calf producers to the commercial feedyard and the feeding industry and points out the real purpose of their cow herds," he says. "For those who are comfortable with retained ownership, we become their feedyard of choice. For those who don't want to participate in ownership, the program allows us to identify good cattle for other customers to feed here."

Partnering varies from 10% to 75% feedlot ownership depending on many factors, including relationship with the customer, what the customer wants, what is known about the cattle and the market outlook.

"We can finance the other percentage, too, so that you can pay the bank as if you sold all the cattle," Mueller notes.

Ingenuity

"From one end of the beef business to the other, Scott shows the kind of creativity that we want to call attention to," Stika says.

Through growing relationships with seedstock producers, including a South Dakota Angus breeder and his customers, Mueller is building a network of genetically similar cattle to feed, evaluate and improve through Samson and CAB data-analysis services.

But take something as far removed from the beef product as waste management, and you'll still find Mueller's brand of ingenuity. As feedlot expansion progresses, schools of fish will patrol his lagoons to monitor water quality. Solid

wastes are combined with municipal garbage from Columbus and upgraded as compost for area farmers.

"Two tons of compost per acre provides all non-nitrogen needs, and 4 tons builds soil tilth," Mueller says. This year he expanded to add a "quality" niche, selling to gardeners.

No doubt, some of that product can be used in the flower gardens around the picturesque Traditions Inn in the historic district of Columbus. Inside you'll find luxury, comfort and a Victorian style broken only by every modern convenience — from a whirlpool to a fitness center and fax and business services.

This is primarily Pat's domain, and if you stay over, you'll discover she knows a lot about breakfast nutrition in addition to the hearty CAB entrées that grace the lunch and dinner menus in the Fireside Room.

"We are beginning to see a few producers get involved in CAB-licensed restaurant businesses," says CAB Vice President Larry Corah. "But none of them have a higher degree of direct family involvement on both sides of the business than the Muellers. It makes a nice complement to Scott's innovative management of Samson Cattle Co. and adds just one more reason why we are so excited at being able to honor them with the first CAB Progressive Partner Award."



Scott and Pat Mueller know the value of concentrating on a high-quality end product firsthand. CAB® entrées grace the lunch and dinner menus of the Traditions Inn bed-and-breakfast that Pat manages in Columbus, Neb.