



Merchandising

► by Keith Evans

He found marketing opportunities everywhere

The late Bob Cooney of Le Center, Minn., was one of the best registered beef cattle marketers I ever have known. Because of his skill and ingenuity, he succeeded where most others would have failed. His story is worth telling one more time.

Logistically challenged

Bob managed a registered Angus seedstock operation in the cash-crop farming area of south-central Minnesota. Beef cow herds were scarce around there, and it wasn't easy to sell bulls. But he did it anyway, with great enthusiasm and success. He knew that there was little truth to the old saw that a good product would sell itself. He bred good cattle and marketed them well. He looked for promotional opportunities every day, and he often found them.

A few years ago, he sent me a letter and a tape of an interview he had done with a local radio station. In the interview, Bob expounded on his breeding philosophy. "You must love your wife, forgive your kids and do neither for your cows," he said. "If they are not efficient, make a date (for them) with the golden arches of McDonald's."

The interviewer wanted to know why he was so successful in a cash-grain farming area. Bob explained that, despite the location, he sold most of his bulls within a 75-mile radius of home. He could do this, he said, because he took the time to learn what cattle producers within that area needed. He tailored his breeding program to produce the kind of seedstock that was in demand in his market area. That allowed him to attract a large share of the bull business and to entice most of his customers to return year after year.

Ad creativity

As the interview progressed, the station's farm director became enthusiastic about Bob's advertising and marketing ideas. Bob did things that virtually no one else did.

For example, in February, when it was time for people in the area to be thinking about buying bulls, he offered a 10% Valentine's Day discount. His advertising copy read, "What are you going to tell your cows if you don't give them a Cooney JRC bull?" Sounds corny. Not many farm or ranch people would consider sponsoring a

Valentine's Day sale. Bob Cooney did, and it caught people's attention and turned them into early-season buyers.

"We were delighted to have this opportunity to promote (our) cattle," he wrote me. "Following the broadcast, we received many inquiries and developed some new customers who live beyond our sales area."

I met Bob years ago when I interviewed him for a story about his herd marketing program. His success convinced me to write my first column about livestock advertising and marketing. I never had realized before then how simple good marketing is and how few people employ it properly in their registered seedstock businesses.

Monitor benefits

During my visit, Bob explained how he tested advertising. Every time he got a call from a potential customer, he asked how the caller obtained his name and telephone number. Within a couple of years, he knew which media produced results and which didn't. He dropped the media that didn't bring in customers and beefed up his schedule in the media that worked. Any marketer can do the same at no cost. Yet it can save hundreds — if not thousands — of dollars in advertising costs.

He sold ordinary benefits in interesting and ingenious ways. I love the way he advertised the fact that his bulls would sire polled calves. He developed a small cartoonlike ad that was 2 inches (in.) high and two columns wide. It featured an old-fashioned grave marker with the name "D. Horner" inscribed on the face of the stone. The epitaph below read, "Rust In Pieces."

A few lines of copy explained that the only dehorner cattle producers needed was a Cooney bull. It's easy to dehorn cattle, he explained, "our bulls do it just for the fun of it." This small ad had the ability to dominate a page in virtually any publication in which it appeared.

Bob knew that he could build goodwill and name recognition that eventually would boost sales by getting the right people to come to his place. He encouraged industry leaders to bring tour groups to his farm. He invited FFA and 4-H groups to his farm to work livestock or to judge cattle.

He staged a cattle drive each year to move stock from one farm to another. He and his two nephews could have moved the herd down the road in a short time. But instead, he invited would-be cowboys to saddle up and to help. He also invited members of the media. They had a good time and reported the event to the public.

Create opportunities

Virtually every farmer or rancher has had to deal with livestock's getting out and making a mess on someone else's property. Bob turned this misfortune into a promotional opportunity.

When a cow got out and wandered through the nearby town, feeding on flowers and dropping her calling card in a few conspicuous places, Bob wrote a letter to the newspaper, wording it as if the cow had written it. She appreciated the hospitality and understanding of the townsfolk, she wrote, and commented on how much she had enjoyed her outing. She also apologized for any problems she might have caused.

After each sale, regardless of how long buyers had been customers, Bob wrote personal letters thanking them for their business. He wanted people to know how much he appreciated their support and how much he wanted them to come back. He also used the telephone the same way. When he had a little spare time, he would call customers to thank them and to see how they were doing.

Some people feel that Bob's marketing program, as I have explained it over the years, was too simple to be effective. They are half-right; it certainly was simple — basic marketing techniques, sparked by originality and humor, used to communicate and to sell the benefits of his cattle. But it also was effective, and his approach can work for any registered breeder — any business, for that matter.

Bob Cooney died about five years ago. The livestock business lost a good supporter, a good friend and a great marketer. However, those who have seedstock to sell can follow his example still.

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