

Compare options and uses when purchasing a livestock trailer.

Story and photos by **Corinne Blender**

A livestock trailer goes hand in hand with shipping cattle, but what do apples and oranges have to do with purchasing a trailer?

“You want to make sure you’re comparing apples to apples rather than apples to oranges. Try to get each manufacturer to spec his trailer as closely to the ideal trailer that you want,” says Stan Kolstad, a factory representative for M.H. Eby Inc. trailer company.

“None of us makes a trailer that’s totally ideal for every situation,” he continues. “But if you are comparing prices, you should at least get the trailers spec’d out with the same undercarriage, the same floor, basically the same options.”

Trailers have a wide variety of uses and options. Kolstad says it’s a matter of knowing what your own personal needs for the piece of equipment are, and then beginning to examine your options.

“It’s just like buying an automobile. You can buy a Honda for ‘x’ number of dollars, or

you can buy a Buick or a Cadillac for another set of dollars. They will all get you to where you are going, but maybe not in the same degree of comfort and safety,” Kolstad adds.

Lynn Shelton, Oklahoma branch manager for Wilson Trailer Co., says finding the right trailer to fit a person’s needs is a matter of listening to what that person desires.

“When a customer calls me, I try to listen to every word he says. Listening to how he is going to use it first — that’s the proper thought system,” Shelton says.

When considering the usage of the trailer, Buzz Harris, vice president of Travalong, breaks it down into four steps — structure, fit, finish and customer application.

“The customer today needs to take the time to get educated on the trailer from a good, reliable dealer,” Harris says. “I would want to be able to buy from a dealer who could

provide me good service down the road, because most of these trailers are staying out there 15-plus years.”

Trailer buying 101

There are numerous trailer manufacturers across the nation that provide several options for trailering cattle. Beyond personal preference, Harris says, “Without a good mainframe and a good floor, you don’t have much of a trailer.”

Once the quality of a trailer has been established, evaluate the needs of the livestock to be hauled.

“The first thing is the basic comfort of the animals. If they are comfortable they are going to arrive at the show or at the sale looking better, and [they] will bring more money that way,” Kolstad says.

Most livestock handlers will agree — ease of use and ease on livestock are two of the most important aspects to consider. But comparing the same trailer on different bases, such as intended use and location, can be like comparing apples and oranges.

Ease on livestock can depend on how far the cattle will be trailered. If the trips will extend across the nation, Kolstad says you need to consider such factors as changes in temperature and the room allowed for tying if you haul show cattle.

To control the temperature variations, livestock trailers can come equipped with vents on the front as well as on the roof. Many times the placement of slats will determine the amount of airflow allowed through the trailer. Also consider if the trailer may need to be enclosed during bad weather.

Fender bender

If the cattle are tied during transport, most customers opt for a wider trailer to allow the animal to lie down or stand in comfort. But as the trailer gets wider, the fenders will be enclosed on the inside because of design constraints.

“The advantage of having fenders on the inside is you can have a wider trailer. The widest trailer out there without fenders on the inside is the 6-foot 11-inch width,” Kolstad explains. “That gets a little narrow for some of the show cattle, particularly when you want to tie crosswise. The cattle are going to ride more comfortably if they are standing crosswise. That’s their natural position when they are being transported.”

One shortfall to having the fenders on the inside is cleaning around them when you wash out the trailer. Kolstad says for this reason most ranchers who haul cattle shorter distances will use a trailer that has the fenders on the outside. Those are also easier to see around.



► Trailers can be purchased in many styles, lengths and designs. Determining what your personal needs for the trailer are is the first step to take in selecting options.



► There are many different slat patterns from which to choose when shopping for a trailer. If the trailer will be used during extremely cold weather, a buyer should be concerned about ease of closing or blocking openings to control airflow.

Many ranch trailers can also come with a “brush fender,” Harris says. That allows a person to have a working platform if he is out in the brush. He also says some ranch trailers are narrower because they follow the truck better through rough pasture country.

The bull package

The livestock handler can enhance the functionality of the trailer by considering the trailer’s construction. Harris says pulling a trailer can be made easier through two critical points — nose design for minimal air resistance and placement of the axles for balance.

“Be sure that they are substantially enough made or engineered strong enough to withhold livestock pressure,” Kolstad says, adding that broken components can cause injury to livestock and people.

Some trailer manufacturers will offer a “bull package” — a trailer that offers more structural strength. It can generally be attained through the addition of uprights and cross members in the floor. Harris says it’s a matter of moving them closer together, adding more for extra support.

“A bull package is just a common slang word that everybody refers to as that heavier-built trailer,” he adds.

But Kolstad warns that the “bull package” can be a misnomer.

“I know a lot of manufacturers who will say, ‘Well, this one has got the bull package.’ We try to build a bull package into all of our



► Trailers that are used for traveling long distances to cattle shows may offer air-conditioned tack rooms or living quarters. Trailer representatives warn that adding the extras doesn’t always mean those dollars will be recovered in resale value.

trailers because we do so much work with commercial haulers,” he says. “I’ve got customers who are still hauling 1,800-pound fat steers. Some of the big dairy steers up in Wisconsin, Minnesota and that area are probably going to put more pressure on equipment than a 1,200-pound yearling bull going to Denver.”

Shelton says many people who request a bull package will also want a taller trailer to accommodate the bull’s head. He adds that if you do not have strong sidewalls, bulls can put pressure on the trailer, weakening and eventually expanding the sidewalls.

Higher enclosed sides, Harris says, are also

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being put on most trailers to keep the manure on the inside. Most sides have increased from 48 inches (in.) to 55 in., he says.

Consider the undercarriage

The build of the trailer is just as important when considering what undercarriage to use.

“Often we will get asked to underrate our undercarriage — our axle and tires — because the customer doesn’t think he is going to use it very hard,” Kolstad says. “We take the approach that we have a certain minimum standard we think should be applied as far as the size of the axle, tires and wheels.”

Even though the initial buyer may not overload the trailer, the trailer’s second owner (if it is ever resold), may fill it up, he reasons. “We’re all going to try to squeeze another animal in rather than make another load or another trip.”

Especially when the trailer is loaded, it is important to have good brakes. Kolstad says the standard trailer brake is the electrical

brake, but most will also offer a hydraulic brake that can be either vacuum-activated or electrically activated.

“At 26-foot and over, a person ought to at least consider the hydraulic brake, even though they are the same axle size as the electric brakes,” he says.

“It’s going to be a much stronger brake, probably a little more sure — but they do cost more.”

Separating livestock from the road and the axles can offer just as many options. Most trailer companies offer aluminum, wood or rubber flooring.

Trailer representatives don’t all agree on the safety and functionality of rubber floors. They have been around for almost 10 years, Harris says, and he has seen few problems with them. He says they seem to have caught on in some areas more than in others.

Shelton, however, says he has seen rubber flooring cause problems and will warn his customers against them.

“A lot of people feel it is the answer, and it’s not,” he says. “We have had a lot of people purchase those trailers and have had extremely expensive animals fall through the floor. I would never go with a rubber floor from a liability standpoint.”

Aluminum vs. steel

A steel or aluminum trailer can be a matter of personal preference, as well, depending on what a person wants to spend and how the trailer will be used.

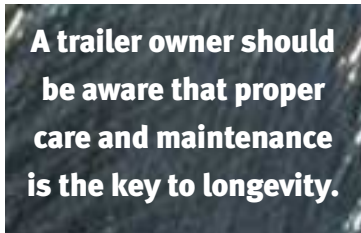
“The bigger the trailer the less apt the customer is to purchase a steel trailer just because of weight,” says Kolstad, who adds that he assists farmers from family-type operations, as well as commercial haulers. “There is not as much price differential between the aluminum and steel trailers now as there was maybe 10 years ago — spec for spec or feature for feature.”

There is a lot of variety in trailers today from solid steel or solid aluminum to a combination of steel and aluminum. All have their benefits. Traditionally, steel is known for its strength, and aluminum is known for its durability, Harris says.

“What we are seeing on the stock trailer right now is a bigger, more multi-use trailer than ever before,” Harris says. “There are stock trailers going out with small tack areas in them and with different gates, heights and widths.”

Customers are using their stock trailers

for a variety of purposes, from moving their children to college, to storing seed sacks while planting, to calving cows on the range, to hauling livestock, he explains. “They have really replaced the two-ton truck and stock racks.”



As the trailers get bigger, many say the aluminum has an advantage.

“Historically, aluminum weighs one-third less than steel,” Shelton says. “Most people don’t want to pull

that extra weight, as they have moved to lighter trucks for pulling. It’s been a revolution nationwide. Most customers are going to want a lighter trailer.”

However, making the trailer more aerodynamic can help offset the weight problem.

“Aerodynamics is a factor, particularly for any of us who live out West or travel out West at all,” Kolstad says. “It’s nice to have an aerodynamic nose shape. Height is also a factor. The taller the trailer, the more wind resistance you’re going to encounter.”

Both trailer representatives will tell you resale value is important, not only between steel and aluminum, but also between a show trailer and a ranch trailer.

“The normal thought pattern should be, ‘How much is that trailer going to be worth five to 10 years down the road?’” Shelton says. “Show trailers will lose value quicker because the next person may or may not pay a premium for all the extras.”

Kolstad says aluminum does have an advantage compared to the steel trailer in resale value.

In it for the long haul

Manufacturers and dealers will agree, warranty is important.

“It’s easy to say you have a warranty. But unless you back it up and have customers in the area who use your equipment, sometimes it’s just hollow words,” Kolstad says.

Most trailer manufacturers offer a two-year warranty, with some offering a year or two of extended warranty. Kolstad says reading the fine print will generally explain that it basically covers only the trailer’s mainframe, something you would almost have to wreck to need to replace.

Shelton says generally warranty problems happen with the axles. More often than not, the trailer driver hits a curb and bends an

Ranch use vs. show hauling

Trailers can be adapted to an individual’s personal needs. However, there are a few popular features livestock handlers will request based on whether the trailer will be used around the ranch or for hauling cattle to shows. Neither list is complete; they offer only a few common features. Many options can be added by different companies, for different needs.

Popular ranch trailer features:

- Fenders on outside
- Steel or aluminum construction
- Slam gates extending full width
- Closing up side-slats is not generally a concern
- Front vents
- Spray-on gravel guard coating on front and fenders

Popular show trailer features:

- Custom-made
- Tack/living quarters
- Versatility due to larger travel area
- Steel or aluminum construction
- Inside, outside tie rails
- Front and roof vents
- Walk-through center gate
- Moveable gates
- Wider side-access door
- Ramp for tack
- Extra interior lights
- Stainless steel noses
- Hayracks



axle, which is something that is not usually covered by the warranty.

“A high-quality trailer very often will never go back for repairs,” he says. “As the quality of the trailer decreases, maintenance will increase.”

A trailer owner should be aware that proper care and maintenance is the key to longevity.

“The biggest function in longevity is taking care of the floor, making sure that you don’t let it get rotten,” Kolstad says. “Aluminum will rot just like steel or wood. It just takes a little longer. You need to keep it clean. The second function is just good maintenance of your wheels, tires, hubs and brakes.”

Harris says that some good maintenance practices can become an everyday thing by checking your tire pressure, making sure your lug nuts are tight and that moving parts are lubricated. Other steps can be done on a yearly basis to keep the trailer operating smoothly.

“We recommend that our customers take their hubs apart or pull the wheels off and check the brakes and bearings and check the lubrication of the bearings at least once a year,” Kolstad says. “That would be true of any trailer — any piece of equipment that’s on the road.”

All three trailer experts will tell you that there are a lot of good, old trailers still on the road. It’s simply a matter of how well they were taken care of.

“It’s just like your new car. Leave it out in the sun all day, never wash it, never wax it — the whole 10 yards — it deteriorates over time faster than one that is washed every other week and waxed a couple times a year,” Harris explains. “It’s commonsense maintenance.” If a trailer is maintained properly, he says it will last 15-25 years.

No two trailer manufacturers or salesmen will offer you the same advice in every instance. However, keeping the apples in one basket and the oranges in another can make trailer shopping easier.



►A spray-on gravel-guard coating often is used to protect the front and fenders of trailers used on gravel roads. Some trailer owners also use the coating to protect the inside of steel trailers.



►Left: Consider aerodynamics when selecting a trailer. The nose shape and height of the trailer are key factors in wind resistance.

►Below: Maintenance is the key to longevity of a trailer. Whether it is of steel or aluminum construction, washing the inside of the trailer after each use is important. You should also be sure to maintain the wheels, tires, hubs and brakes.



PHOTO COURTESY OF TRAVALONG