

Communication Is Key to Service-Minded Breeder

BY TROY SMITH

More than ever before, seedstock producers have to be in the business of providing service. So says Mike Assman, whose family serves farmers and ranchers in south-central South Dakota.

Mike is part owner of an implement dealership near Mission, but his primary responsibility is to Assman Land and Cattle, which he co-manages with his sister, Mary Beth, and brother, Dave. In addition to purebred stock, the operation includes a 1,200-head commercial cow herd with part of the calves marketed as feeders while some are fed to finish.

Despite the diversity, Mike doesn't presume to know exactly what all of his bull customers need and want. Nor does he expect to learn without putting forth some effort himself. Mike sees his relationship with seedstock customers as partnerships, and partnerships don't survive without open communication.



Keeping customers often boils down to service after the sale, according to Mike Assman of Assman Land and Cattle, Mission, S.D.

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"I could go with the idea that no news is good news, assuming that if customers aren't complaining, then they must be happy," says Mike, "but I want feedback. And it's really more important for me to hear bad news than good news. Even if the problems are small, I want to root them out."

Eighty-five bulls were offered through the Assman production sale this year, and Mike is developing a market for replacement females. The customer list includes discerning buyers who, for the most part, run commercial cow herds. This is cow country, with only 10% of local acreage under cultivation, and most of that is devoted to feed crops for cattle.

"Our customer base consists mostly of ranchers," Mike adds. "Some sell calves right off of the cows. Those that raise some feed might background their calves awhile before selling, and some own their calves all the way to finish. I think there is getting to be more interest in owning them longer. A lot of ranchers are becoming more aggressive, and that's the kind we've targeted — the kind we'd like to have as customers."

■ Attracting customers

Mike says a functional female foundation and solid sire selection help attract customers. With herdsman Chris Lovejoy's implementation of artificial insemination (AI) and embryo transfer (ET), Mike believes the program offers the cutting-edge genetics that lure serious interest. And thanks to the implement business, name recognition in the trade area sure doesn't hurt.

But keeping customers often boils down to service after the sale. Mike's service includes contacting customers and soliciting their input and their business.

"I like to deliver bulls because it's a good opportunity to visit with buyers again soon after the sale. I'll try to contact them again before fall to see how their bulls have been doing," Mike explains. "It's sometimes harder to establish that partnership

mentality with buyers who bring their own trailers to the sale. I miss that first good opportunity that comes with delivering the bulls myself."

Mike attempts to visit every buyer's place at least once a year, as that's the ideal situation for good communication. "You're face to face, on their turf, so they're usually more open to sharing their concerns. The things I learn on those visits really influence our breeding and marketing decisions for the future," he adds.

■ Feeding them out

Assman Land and Cattle now owns an interest in a feedlot located near Winner. Ample and relatively low-cost feed resources in that area should enhance plans to eventually double the facility's current 9,000-head capacity.

Mike anticipates that, within three years, virtually all of his family's commercial production will go through the feedlot. He believes marketing finished cattle most often provides the greatest opportunity for profit. And the performance and carcass data from the cattle are important to genetic selection.

Information about the feedlot has been included in the Assman sale book, and Mike has talked about it while visiting with customers. The feedlot manager attended this year's auction and made additional contacts.

"We're not trying to push anybody into anything, but the feedlot should enable us to provide some additional service to customers interested in retained ownership.

"We're looking at developing programs for partnering with bull customers who want to feed their cattle," explains Mike. "What we hope to do is help our customers take advantage of profit opportunities. We want to help them gain information about marketing and identify pricing grids that might work to their advantage. And we want to help them get data on their cattle, then use it."

■ Communication key

While functional cattle may be the foundation of a seedstock enterprise, Mike Assman believes it takes service to ensure long-term success. Important to service is productive communication between buyer and seller.

"Once a producer buys a bull from us, I try to remember that he has become our customer to lose. It's our responsibility to keep the communication going," says Mike. "If he doesn't come back to buy from us again, it's probably our fault."

