

Merchandising

by Keith Evans



Do good, and take credit

A few years back, a college student who was trying to find employment that didn't involve real work hit me up for a job. At that time my title was director of public relations (PR). "I could do a great job for you because I really like traveling and meeting and talking with people," he said.

Like many others, he viewed PR as traveling around the country, attending cocktail parties, staying in five-star hotels, eating in expensive restaurants and smoozing with influential people. Glad-handing, a gift for gab and a capacity for booze, he figured, were the most valuable assets of a PR person.

On the other hand, some media people see PR as a tool to keep them from the whole truth or, worse, for promoting half-truths and even untruths.

I know there are enough misguided people in the PR business to lend credit to these views. But PR at its best always involves working with the public, including reporters and editors, to help them get the facts and a clear understanding of your business. Deception has no place in PR.

■ Everything you do

The truth is that all of us in business are involved in PR. When you deal with the public, you leave a distinct impression about yourself, your employees and your business, either deliberately or by default.

You can't afford to ignore this and fail to learn what it takes to create a highly favorable public image in the minds of your customers and potential customers. It's a force that puts power into your marketing program.

Someone once defined PR in its most simple terms as "doing good and getting credit for it." It is one thing to build a genetically superior seedstock herd. It is quite another to get the recognition it takes to sell genetically superior cattle at full value.

Good cattle don't sell themselves, and good advertising won't sell a poor product — at least, not for long. Advertising is most efficient when it promotes a high-quality product offered by a business with a favorable public image.

Everything you do as a cattle breeder, and most of what you do otherwise, affects the public's perception of your business. People like to do business with someone they like and trust.

Being liked doesn't require that you be a boisterous glad-hander, just that you are friendly, courteous and thoughtful and that you stand behind your product.

Honesty is simple. My friend the late Fred Francis once explained, "If you sell your reputation, get a very high price for it, because you can only sell it once."

Doing good can come in many forms. It is essential to breed outstanding cattle, but it is also essential to do good in the beef cattle community you share.

Being a leader in, or at least a strong supporter of, your local beef cattle organization is essential. Working with 4-H clubs and FFA chapters builds goodwill that lasts a long time. Consigning good cattle to a local association sale may not make the bull or heifer bring more money, but it makes you a reliable part of the local Angus business.

■ Work with others

Getting credit for good works is the second half of PR — a half that some cattle breeders would rather overlook. Farm and ranch people often feel uncomfortable accepting credit for the good things they do, let alone actually having a plan to promote them. But it's part of marketing.

If you are elected president of your local cattle association, work with your local media to see that both you and the organization receive some publicity. It can be as simple as telephoning the local newspaper with the results of the election.

If a group of 4-H livestock-judging students is going to work out with your cattle, let the media know in advance. Work with your breed association; their trained people can help you get credit for much that you do, whether it is being listed in the national *Sire Evaluation Report* or being the host for a state or local field day.

Get to know the media people in your area — the editor of the local newspaper, the

farm director or manager of the local radio station, even the writers for state and national farm and livestock publications. They are always looking for grassroots information on the beef cattle business, even stories about successful producers.

If they know you and respect you, they likely will use you as an informed source of information. Your name will come to mind when it's time to write a story about a beef producer or breeder.

Help is a key word. People who practice good PR know how to help others, both potential customers and the media. Moreover, they are willing to do it. Years ago when I wrote for the *Chicago Daily Drovers Journal*, I was assigned a feature story on an Iowa cattle breeder.

That man almost sent me away without a story even though we had an appointment. He thought he couldn't afford to stop planting corn for an hour or so. Eventually, with only a little effort, he arranged for someone else to run the planter while I did the interview and took a few pictures.

The real problem wasn't time but that he didn't consider PR important enough to be bothered with it.

The student who asked me for a job wasn't all wrong. A little low-key glad-handing does fit into a good PR program. A smile and a handshake mean a lot to customers and potential customers.

Be friendly with people who can help you sell cattle. Bankers, veterinarians, feed dealers and people like them, who regularly work with your customers and potential customers, need to know you and appreciate your business. Even the waitress in the local coffee shop can point potential customers your way if she knows you and where your place is located.

Paid advertising can accomplish only so much. In business it is worth money to be well-known and favorably regarded. Much of your success will depend upon your PR knowledge and skills.