

A Phone Call Away

Sunny Valley's Chris Earl believes there's no better communications vehicle than speaking to customers person to person.

BY ROSE SUBAT

Chris Earl, general manager of Sunny Valley Farm (SVF) in Yorkville, Ill., sits at his desk with his ear to the phone. His voice sounds sincere and accommodating, yet business-like, as he deals with one of the farm's many clients.

"I must have had at least 12 calls to return this morning," he says. "The phone never quits ringing."

It's a good thing, too. SVF depends heavily on telecommunications to run their business, Earl says. "The main form of communication is this phone sitting in front of me. Customers, potential customers, partners and past customers are continually calling me, and I continually call them."

As a fax pours in, he adds, "The fax is getting to play a bigger part here."

He explains that he has just returned from a weekend trip to California. There, he tracked purchases of recent customers to ensure satisfaction, and he visited Sunny Valley's 50 bulls at G-Bar Angus. The two operations will hold a joint sale in September.

"I try to follow our program, our cows

and our bulls, and how they work for people," he says. "I try to get out and see as many customers as possible each year."

■ Large market area

The farm applies their personal touch to a wide market. "We believe our market is from the Pacific to the Atlantic," says Earl. "That's the approach we've always had."

With such a great number of out-of-state buyers, SVF relies on name recognition and the reputation of its genetics.

"The cows do a lot of our communication. People read off our genetics what they need to know about our program," he says. He's quick to add that the fact their cattle have worked for other people has been the No. 1 thing building their reputation for "cattle that leave here at reasonable figures and go on for customers to make them money."

According to Earl, the farm reserves advertising for large events like their annual female sale in November. SVF mainly advertises in breed publications: the *Angus Journal*, *Angus Topics* and *Illinois Angus News*. They also may place an advertisement

in a general agricultural magazine, like *Prairie Farmer*.

"We do a fair bit of advertising; [but] there are people who do quite a bit more than us," Earl says. "I'm not a real believer in advertising every month just for the sake of advertising. We only advertise when we have a point."

Last year SVF started to send out an annual newsletter. It was sent to 4,000 customers and potential customers to inform them about the farm and its breeding program. The first newsletter offered an opportunity to tell potential customers about the practices SVF uses for genetic improvement, such as embryo transfer (ET) and fetal sexing, along with standard industry practices like artificial insemination (AI).

He intends to disseminate the newsletter once a year. Next year, he adds, the newsletter will have a point, rather than just being informative about the ranch.

Earl doesn't believe in the higher-tech communication tools, rare for a breeder so advanced in science.

"I've got a computer, but I'm computer illiterate," he admits with a laugh. "For what we do genetically, the Internet does not do a lot for us."

■ Person to person

Earl says he's more comfortable speaking person to person vs. looking someone up on a Web site. And though he does have access to e-mail, he never uses it.

"The cattle business to me is about personal relationships," he explains. "If I were to e-mail somebody ... why don't I take the extra minute and call them on the phone? I like communication between people. To me, that is 50% of business."

The farm strives for personal relations with customers and each other, Earl says. "I talk to Mary [Block, the owner] every day. She knows everything that's going on with the farm, every aspect."

Brett Vickery, an employee of more than two years, says he attributes his job at Sunny Valley to good communication skills.

"Serious buyers and people that we want to do business with, and that want to do business with us, have direct communication," says Earl. "If people want to know something, they can call us; or if I want to know something, I can call them."

"Even with today's technology, personal relations plays an important part in any communications plan," says Del Dahl, professor at the University of Illinois. Dahl teaches the university's agricultural sales class. "It can be the cornerstone of your business."

