

The Shot That Sells

Five tips to transform picture-day stress into success.

by Miranda Reiman, director of digital content and strategy

Good cattle marketing photos get people to click on your sale book link, look up your program and head to your sale. It's no wonder they carry a lot of weight, and why many families cite picture day as one of the most stressful days of the year.

But it doesn't have to be that way.

There's more to making a good image than just dumb luck, and although the photographer gets the credit when it all goes right and the blame if it goes wrong, a ranch owner can help ensure a good outcome.

"The reality is there is much prior to it that is out of the photographer's hands ... whether the cattle are in good condition, whether they're clipped well, whether there is somebody in the picture pen helping getting them stopped," says Radale Tiner, American Angus Association regional manager for Texas and New Mexico. "If they come in there and run the whole time, I don't care how good your camera is or who the photographer is, there's not much you can do."

To avoid that, Tiner suggests making a plan and sticking to it. Whether you picture cattle yourself or hire a professional, here are five tips to implement next time around:

1. Count on the calendar.

Everybody's timing is different, but well-known livestock photographer Chris Mitchell says two and half months out from sale time is a generally a



good window that still allows him to meet sale book printing deadlines. That helps balance the need for the cattle being ready, while also allowing enough time for him to process the photos following the shoot.

"There's more time spent on the computer than there is in the picture pen by the time you do lighting and cropping and things like that," Mitchell explains.

Knowing the picture-day deadline also gives cattlemen a chance to gauge when they need to have animals in shape for the shoot.

"The condition of the cattle is a big, big thing, and having them easy to handle. You can't just go get them out of the pasture the day before.

People try that and it doesn't usually work," Tiner says, adding they don't need to be halter broke but "somewhat settled."

2. Lay out your location. One of the most controllable aspects of the whole process is where the photos are taken, says Tiner.

"To start with, it helps if you have a picture pen with an open background or just trees, not the old tractor graveyard."

Pay attention to the surfaces, he says, such as keeping weeds down or mowing the grass far enough ahead of the shoot that it can green up. Then consider how the sun falls on that space, and how it changes throughout the day.

In the summertime, Mitchell suggests backgrounds to the

east and west, and in winter he'll prefer to shoot more northward.

"I like an area where we can have control of what's going on and the cattle don't have control," he says, suggesting a 70 by 100-foot pen to give enough space to work around an animal's flight zone.

3. Clip your cattle. Getting the stock prepared isn't something that should happen the day or two before the photo shoot.

"I tell people to clip them at least a week out," Tiner says; a fresh cut sticks out in print.

4. Call your crew. Two to three solid people can help the day run smoothly, especially when they come with some patience and cow sense.

"It's important to know how to adjust from one cow to the next, some are more flighty and others are interested in

eating grass, and so you have to adjust," Tiner says.

5. Do away with distractions.

Once Tiner showed up to take pictures the same day a welding crew came to work on neighboring fences.

"One of us had to go, because it was not going to work," he laughs, recalling the noise.

Tiner had more luck the following day.

Similarly, it would be easy to overlook fly control, but it can make all the difference.

"It's hard to get a picture when their tail is going back and forth," Tiner says.

Making it count


Even with all the preparation and forethought, you're still dealing with animals and Mother Nature, so don't rush the process, Mitchell says.

He aims to picture about 20 to 25 animals in a day.

"A lot of people worry about how it's going to work because they've never done it before," Mitchell says. "We work with people and train people as we go. Each situation is different."

No matter an operation's goals, a good picture is more valuable than ever in today's image-driven society.

"When somebody sees an ad or opens a sale book, the first thing they're going to see are the photos," Mitchell says. "If they're bad, the cattle aren't properly conditioned or prepared, that's the first mindset somebody has. If [the pictures are] good and the cattle look good, and the mind's satisfied, they'll continue to look."

That's a first impression that's worth taking the time to get right, he says. 

We Can't Edit That Later

After the photos are taken, only half the work is through.

Most will require a basic set of edits, adjustments for lightening and cropping, for example. However, setting up the animal to showcase his or her best features is a task that should be done in the pen — not on the monitor.

Gail Lombardino, Angus Media Print Services team lead, explains that some edits are acceptable, but others violate the Livestock Publications Council photo ethics policy that the team operates under.

"For advertising, we accept cutting out a background, or putting them on a different background, like greener grass or removing a fence," Lombardino says. "We can clean up minor mud, but we won't touch any of the integrity of the animal." That means if an animal is so muddy that removing it changes muscle shape, they can't do it. If an

animal has pinkeye or won't stand quite the way the producer wants, they can't fix it, she says.

They operate on an honor system, but if the designers find an alteration of the animal, they request the original.

It boils down to protecting the buyer and seller.

"You don't want a customer finding they were misrepresented in the advertising or in the sale book," she says.

Just as the Association works hard to keep the integrity of the database, her team works toward truth in advertising.

"As Angus, we want to make sure that we're pushing out the best product and the most accurate product for our clients," she says. "We do the same thing with our pedigrees, which are directly downloaded from the database. So, we feel the same way about our pictures."