

Merchandising

by Keith Evans



Making photos that sell

Luck can produce some great photographs. Most of us who have used a camera have taken some unexpectedly wonderful pictures. We just happened to be in the right place at the right time.

But when it comes to marketing your cattle, you can't count on Lady Luck to be at your side every time you take a photo for an advertising illustration. For consistently good photos, you must plan carefully, whether you will be the photographer or whether you will hire a professional.

The first thing to decide is how the photo will be used and what you want to communicate. The photo should illustrate the point you want to make in the ad. Some people use a posed photo of their herd bull whether they are selling range bulls, replacement females, mature cows or semen. That's simple, but it's not always effective.

Decide what you want the illustration to say, then plan a picture to make that point. Strive for a photo that will stop readers and

make them think, "I'd really like to have cattle like that." A professional photographer who understands the message you want to communicate will be able to stage and to photograph the most effective illustration.

The best photos make cattle look natural in a natural setting. That doesn't mean dirty animals in a weedy pasture, even if that's how your cattle often live. You want the animals to be clean and attractive (but not fitted for show) in a setting that is attractive, yet simple.

The photo should appear spontaneous even though it was staged. Decide far enough in advance where and when the photo will be taken so you can clip weeds and long grass, then allow the clipped grass to grow just a little before taking the photo.

Lighting is all-important. The best natural light comes right over the photographer's shoulder in early morning or late evening. At those times, low light should be distributed evenly over the animal's body with minimum shadow. You should avoid taking photographs in the middle of the day. Before the photographer arrives at your place, the two of you should discuss lighting and location.

Background clutter will ruin an otherwise good photograph. Computer technology can clean up many photographic mistakes, but don't use it as a crutch. Keep the background clean, particularly when photographing an individual animal. That means no fence posts or utility poles that can appear to be propping up an animal's belly or protruding from its back. Even trees that look nice in the background can be a distraction when the animal is photographed with a telephoto lens. A level

horizon line is also important, particularly for a picture of a single animal.

You have more flexibility when taking grazing photos. If the object is to make a beautiful picture of cattle on pasture, the overall scene is most important. Select a location with ample open pasture and an attractive background or interesting foreground, and allow the cattle to spread out naturally.

The best time to take a grazing photo is in the early morning. Hold the cows off pasture overnight, and they will be more than willing to graze enthusiastically come photo-shoot time. Don't, however, turn a herd of cows out into a "new" pasture. They may be more interested in exploring than grazing. They should be accustomed to and comfortable in the photo location. If you want to highlight mothering ability with nursing shots, separate the calves from their mothers overnight.

Have plenty of good help available, regardless of the kind of photo you plan to take. They should be people who not only know cattle, but who are patient and gentle. Never excite an animal. Once cattle become agitated, the chance of their posing for a good photo is slim indeed.

A few years ago, I had an appointment to take some cow-calf photos. When I arrived at the ranch, the manager had made no preparations. At that point he decided he would have to clip some long hair off the heads of the nursing calves. They were too small for a squeeze chute, so he restrained them with a rope halter while running the clipper over their heads. Then he drove them to a strange pasture. I might as well have stayed at home because neither the cows nor the calves cooperated from that point on.

The most natural individual-bull photo results when you turn the animal loose in a paddock or open pasture. Instead of using force, patiently urge the animal to move into a better spot or to reposition its legs. Once you start to push hard, the bull will become uncomfortable and will want to be by

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himself. It takes time and patience to get the right pose, which is why too many bulls are posed using a halter or a nose lead.

Noisemakers can be useful in getting a bull's head up and focusing his attention in the right direction. Over the years people have used everything from cricket-clickers to recorded cattle sounds. The most common method is for a person to simulate the sound of another bull, a cow or a young calf. Turn a

heifer or two into an adjoining pasture and you almost can be sure of attracting the bull's attention.

Just a word about exposure. Cattle with a dark hide must be overexposed to bring out detail in the hair coat. To overexpose, take an exposure reading from the lighted side of a dark animal and use that setting when you step back to expose the animal and the background. It takes practice to find the right exposure.

Once you begin taking pictures, don't try to save money on film. Shoot quickly and often. An animal may hold the most desirable position for only a couple of

seconds — if that long. So don't wait: Expose as much film as possible when an animal appears to be approaching the pose you want.

The "perfect" shot may never happen. So don't pass up those "almost perfect" ones. Even almost-perfect pictures will separate your advertisements and promotion brochures from run-of-the-mill cattle advertising, which is all too common.

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