

Merchandising

by Keith Evans



Good salespeople never go out of style

There's a lot of talk these days about the Internet and how it is going to revolutionize business. In some areas of business, it already has.

However, I don't know of any registered beef cattle producers who have sold bulls sight unseen to Internet shoppers. It may happen some day, but in the registered cattle business — and many other businesses that sell big-ticket items to buyers who demand service before and after the sale — it is the salesperson who brings in the business and the repeat customers.

I was reminded again of this fact by an article written by James Surowiecki in the July 2000 issue of *The New Yorker*. Surowiecki wrote that when John Patterson bought the National Cash Register Co. (NCR) in 1884, he soon discovered that no one wanted to buy cash registers. In an effort to make a return on his investment, Patterson decided he must educate people about the usefulness of his product.

Advertising alone couldn't accomplish the job, he concluded. What he needed were salespeople who would call upon business owners to demonstrate his product and to convince them it would make their lives easier. His success has been well documented.

That was then. What about today? Surowiecki told of a decision by Xerox's new CEO, not long ago, to reorganize the Xerox sales force. Instead of salespeople covering geographical territories and developing long-term relationships with their clients, a new plan was devised.

Under the new program, a salesperson dealt with one type of client, over a larger area of the country, which made it more difficult for the salesperson to get to know the clients personally, and vice versa.

A few weeks after the reorganization, sales started to decline. Wall Street took note, and stock prices fell by two-thirds. As a result, the new CEO was fired. "The lesson

here," Surowiecki wrote, "is that salesmen still rule. Most business gets done on a one-to-one basis..."

My guess is that Surowiecki's words are as true for your business as they are for NCR or Xerox. There's no question that advertising is indispensable. Your Web page with all of its information is also invaluable to seedstock shoppers. However, bull buyers still want to evaluate cattle up close and in person. They want to see your cattle in the pasture or lot, not on a computer monitor or in an advertisement.

An effective cattle photo promotes an animal's strong points and minimizes its weak ones. Everyone knows this. That's why

good photos grab readers' attention and why buyers still want to see an animal before they invest in its genetics.

By the same token, people who are going to invest real money in cattle that will help shape their business well into the future want to see the breeder and owner eye to eye. We all want to do business with someone we know, someone we like and trust and maybe even admire. For every breed of cattle,

there are individual breeders who are widely admired, not only for the kind of cattle they breed, but for their honesty, integrity and openness.

These breeders are good salespeople. They call on their good customers. They take them to dinner if the opportunity presents itself. They ask customers about their children's 4-H or FFA projects. They want to know how the kids are doing in college. They know that their customers are the most important people in their business — and they let their customers know it.

Buyers also want the assurance of a guarantee. If a bull can't perform as advertised, they need to believe that the seller will make good on the deal. Many bull customers don't understand everything about cattle breeding, genetics and

performance records. They want to buy from a breeder who does — someone who can and will explain how their cattle will perform in the buyer's herd.

If you are like most breeders, you are a jack-of-all-trades. You are not and cannot be a full-time salesperson. But that doesn't mean you can't master the business of personal selling. Start by learning what talented salespeople do and how they get results.

We have covered a few points here, but there are hundreds of books devoted to teaching salesmanship. Go to your library or local bookstore and do some research on the subject.

Study the salespeople with whom you deal. Analyze what they do that attracts you and your business.

Automobile salespeople take a lot of flack, but the good ones are experts not only in selling you the first car, but also in bringing you back as a repeat customer. Observe how good auto salespeople approach you and build your confidence in them and in what they have to sell.

Cattle breeders who always seem to get more for their cattle "than they are worth" also may have something to teach you — specifically, how to add value to cattle beyond the worth of their basic genetic package.

No, you never should overlook the value of the Internet. Web sites and e-mail are here to stay. However, the Electronic Age when customers buy and sell and dominate product selection with a click of a computer mouse is not likely to take over the registered beef business.

Good salespeople will dominate seedstock marketing for years to come. Pressing the flesh, meeting the customer eye to eye and building confidence in what you have to sell never will go out of style.

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