



Merchandising

► by Keith Evans

Avoid those late advertising jitters

The telephone rang the other morning just as I was getting out of bed. I'm not an early riser because I have no cows to feed or waterers to check. But still, it was before sunup.

On the other end of the line was a registered beef-cattle breeder in an earlier time zone who had already been on the job for several hours. He was now back in the house to work on his advertising, and he was concerned about what kind of last-minute ads he should run to attract buyers to his upcoming sale, which was less than two months away.

A last-minute attraction?

Joe (not his real name) told me that he is a regular reader of this column, so if he recognizes himself, I want him to know that I am not using our conversation to make light of him. Rather, I want to point out that his predicament is all too common among breeders and marketers of beef-cattle seedstock. And furthermore, that it can be avoided.

I assume Joe had already done some advertising. I know that his sale catalog was printed and ready to mail. But he wasn't sure about what he should do next. He wanted to convince more cattlemen to come to his auction. Unfortunately, I wasn't much help.

The problem is that a month and a half before an auction is held, almost everyone who will attend has already made up his or her mind. Certainly a few people are on the fence and may attend if things work out. In addition, someone who may have never heard of Joe could read his last-minute ad and decide to come and look over his sale offering — but it's not likely.

Those who will attend probably already have the sale date written on their calendars. All they might need is a final reminder or a little inducement. Something immediate — radio, direct mail, or an ad in a daily or weekly newspaper — probably works best for last-minute reminders. Ad copy should be taken right from the owner's letter in the sale catalog. Maybe something like, "Joe's Ranch features 15 sons of Excellence out of our top EPD cows in our spring 2003 bull sale. Sale starts at 11 a.m.,

March 25. Come, enjoy breakfast, and inspect the bulls, beginning at 7:30 a.m."

Convincing cattle producers from scratch that you are a good seedstock source has to be done well ahead of the sale — we are talking months ahead. Some cattle producers may actually study you and your business for a year or more before they decide to give you a call or to come to your sale. That's why a long-range marketing plan is so essential.

Advance planning

Joe wondered what kind of pictures he could use. He knew that the standard shot of his herd sire wouldn't do the job. Nearly every magazine ad uses this type of illustration. But in late January, as he pointed out, it was nearly impossible to get attractive cattle photographs.

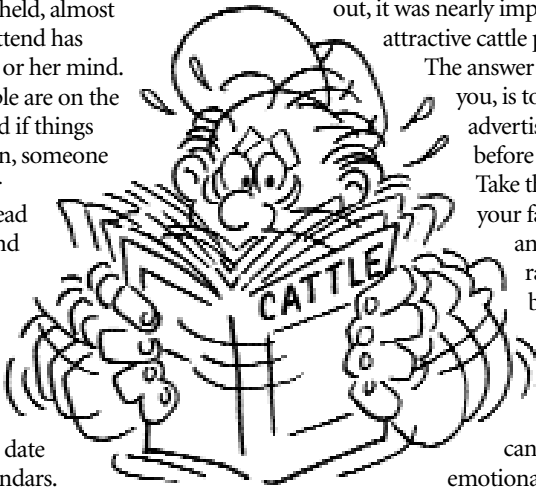
The answer for Joe, and for you, is to take your advertising photos long before they are needed.

Take them when you, your family, your cattle

and your farm or ranch look their best for the type of photo needed. A talented photographer can take beautiful, emotional photographs of

baby calves and their mothers. But there is only one time of the year to do it.

Later, there is an ideal time for taking herd photos on pasture. Close-ups of big sappy calves with their mothers should probably be taken just prior to weaning. Photos taken when you work and weigh your calves can help highlight your performance program. This may sound expensive, but I can assure you that really good photographs are cheap.



The most expensive ads you pay for are the ones with poor illustrations.

This doesn't just apply to photos. Advance planning is essential to every phase of an effective advertising and marketing program. Start by defining your primary market area. The easy way is to take a map and plot the location of every one of your customers for a three-year period. This will show where your current primary market area is. Accept the area as it is, or make adjustments if you want to expand it. Next, figure out how to reach every potential customer within this area with a sales message of one sort or another at least six times a year.

You can use whatever media are most effective and economical. This can include, but isn't limited to, direct mail, herd visits, an open house, a field day, e-mail, a Web site, and advertising on radio and TV or in newspapers and magazines. Costs and coverage are big factors, so research the advertising rates and coverage of all advertising media you might use. Then set up a practical budget.

Finally, use all of this information to develop a marketing plan for the coming year. Decide what benefits you can offer to bull buyers, and rough out advertising ideas. Determine what media you will use, when you will use them and when the deadlines are. August ads in monthly publications will have to be ready by the first of July, if not earlier. That means you will finalize your August ad in May or June. Put all of this down on paper or in your computer.

A plan that includes a calendar of when things must be done will simplify your life for the rest of the year. It will show you each month which ads to prepare and when and where they will appear. The photos will be ready. If someone tries to sell you advertising in a publication or a special edition that isn't in your plan it is much easier to say, "Sorry, that isn't in this year's budget."

With this kind of plan you won't wake up early one morning worrying about where to advertise. That decision will have been made months before when there was less pressure and more time to think things through.

Keith Evans
E-MAIL: evans34@ccp.com