



For Granted

► by **Eric Grant**, freelance writer

The detractor

Old Clarence is a highly acclaimed local gossip. He spends his mornings at the coffee shop, spreading all the news that's fit to print to anyone who'll sit and listen, and his afternoons tootling along the highway on his four-wheeler, keeping a close eye on everything that's happening in the valley.

Cowboy heckler

He's a cowboy newsman. It's in his blood. And he'll fight to the death for his First Amendment right to know what you've been up to.

He also has his opinions, and his news is chock-full of editorializing. He's a master of what's already known, not a dreamer of what could be. With a few, well-targeted words, he shoots down creative initiative quicker than Manfred Von Richthofen.

"It looks a little worse every time I come down here," he told me last summer as I was rebuilding some 40-year-old corrals. "I'd never use those oak ties; they're just too heavy and hard."

Clarence also has his opinions on cattle, especially if you ask him about it. He has opinions on every bloodline, breed and bull. He knows everyone's cow herd, and he can recite from memory everybody's "problem cattle" in the valley.

But his opinions are generally guided by conventional wisdom, where it's safest to take a stand and where he knows he won't take heat from his own neighbors.

The result is sameness and stagnation, like a long stretch of droopy fence that hasn't been fixed in years. Problem is, every small town across America has its share of Clarences.

Differentiate and innovate

But being a seedstock producer depends on your ability to differentiate and innovate — two things that to Clarence are like garlic to a vampire. If you can't make your breeding program stand out, then there's no point in doing it. If you can't make your genetics unique in the marketplace, there's little chance you'll survive.

Ask any banker, and he'll tell you the same thing: It's a difficult proposition building a profitable seedstock business. It hemorrhages money most of the year, and hangs on to a glimmer of hope that cash flow will be better sometime, somewhere in the future.

And it's even more difficult when you're dealing with a Clarence, who happily bad-mouths your cattle to anyone who will listen.

Undoubtedly, it's human nature that most people will eagerly drive 500 miles to buy a bull before they'll walk across the road to buy one from you. But it's also a reality of the business, and one you'll have to contend with sooner or later. Striking a balance between expanding your market locally and building one regionally or even nationally is your business's most pressing challenge.

I worked all summer finding a solution to overcoming Clarence and the difficulties he creates for my business locally. The best I've come up with is to ignore his meddling ways and to simply keep marching on.

To acknowledge the fact that he occasionally gets under my skin only makes him more powerful. Kind of like Darth Vader, there's a dark side to everything.

I heard an adage once that sometimes I agree with: Any PR (public relations) is good

PR. So long as Clarence keeps me on the front page, there's always a chance he might strike a chord with someone who just might buy a bull from me. In any event, it's hardly worth my time or energy to worry too much about it.

My grandpa once told me that survival in the seedstock business depends on your ability to identify the kind of cattle that best fit your program and to stick with them no matter what. That takes guts. That takes time. That requires a lot of financial sacrifice. And, it takes enduring a lot of small-minded criticism to finally stabilize your breeding program and settle in with genetics that best fit your market.

"Every seven years or so you'll hit the market right," Grandpa said. "If you're chasing the trends and doing what everyone else thinks you should be doing, then you'll always be seven years behind."

Striking a balance between expanding your market locally and building one regionally or even nationally is your business's most pressing challenge.

E-MAIL: epoldwest@aol.com

Editor's Note: "For Granted" is a monthly column written for the Angus Journal by Colorado-based freelance writer Eric Grant. The column focuses on marketing beef, the beef industry and seedstock in particular — aspects of the business that are often taken for granted as day-to-day tasks take center stage.