



Merchandising

► by Keith Evans

The power of customer service

Back when Ted Turner was growing his fortune as owner of the Atlanta Braves and superstation WTBS, he listed two factors that accounted for his business success. One would expect some exotic ideas from the colorful Turner about how to start and build a successful business. But no, he told a television interviewer back then that they were: 1) make your product easy to sell (that is, make it as good as possible), and 2) service your accounts properly.

Think about service

It has been my experience that most registered beef cattle breeders religiously subscribe to Turner's first point. During the years, breeders have devoutly designed and redesigned their breeding and selection programs to meet changing demand. Today, most use every sophisticated tool available to improve the quality, and thus the salability, of their breeding stock.

As for the second point, there is much less devotion. I know producers who take virtually no active interest in how their cattle

perform in commercial herds. They assume that all their breeding decisions have produced just what their customers need. Once a sale is made and the registration certificate is transferred to

the new owner, the seller has little or no further contact unless the buyer comes back later for more cattle. Some seedstock suppliers don't even transfer the registration certificate to new owners. The seller may save a few dollars, but miss the opportunity to provide documentation to buyers about the value of the genetic package they have purchased.

Failure to follow up after the sale can result in loss of customers to other, more motivated breeders. That's bad news, because every good salesperson knows that it is infinitely more expensive and difficult to develop a new customer than it is to keep

a current one. That's why every successful, growing business is led by people who know how to provide effective service after the sale.

Service after the sale

There are probably as many ways to provide top-flight customer service to cattle producers as there are successful registered cattle breeders. However, the following basic ideas should be a part of most successful cattle marketing programs.

1 Keep a computer file (or a card file, if you prefer) on each of your customers and each producer you would like to have as a customer. The file should include the producer's name, address, telephone number, e-mail address, the size of the producer's herd and the kind of cattle he has. If the person has a nickname, note that along with the name of a spouse or any children. The children may soon be in the market for project heifers.

In your file keep records of all purchases — what they have purchased and at what prices. This will indicate when they may need more bulls. It will tell you at a glance what genetics they have used in their herds, and what they have been willing to pay for cattle. Always consult the file before you deal with a customer, and keep the file up to date.

2 Ask enough questions to know what a customer will expect of your cattle when he buys them. This way, you can help him in making better decisions. You would obviously recommend a different bull to the person who will breed him to first-calf heifers than to the person looking for a terminal cross. There are other, more subtle

factors that, if you know about them, can help you provide seedstock that will meet the customer's expectations.

3 Follow up on the sale. If you don't deliver the bull, make a telephone call to see that the animal arrived in good shape. This allows you to discover minor problems before they develop into major ones. Check back at weaning time, either by telephone or in person.

4 Handle complaints quickly and, if humanly possible, to the satisfaction of the buyer. A dissatisfied customer, even one that is unjustifiably so, can do you great harm. On the other hand, a satisfied customer is one of your best sales representatives.

5 Personally visit the herd of each customer every year or at least every other year. It demonstrates your interest in and your concern for the customer. Perhaps more important, it lets you see how your cattle are used and under what management conditions they are expected to perform. This information will help you plan a better breeding program to make your cattle easier to sell.

6 Take the initiative. Don't wait for old or potential customers to show an interest in making additional purchases. Keep them informed about what is going on at your place. Mail or e-mail new information to everyone in your customer file about your herd — yearling results, new breeding stock, sale dates, etc. Ask them to check out complete details on your Web site, and encourage them to give you a call. It is a real service to provide potential customers with as much information as possible.

Customers are the most important part of your registered cattle business. Keep them happy, satisfied and well-informed, and they will stick with you for years to come.

E-MAIL: evans34@ccp.com