

# Masters in Their Field



Ranch, meat and sales education rolled into one unique course.

by *Miranda Reiman*

**A** meat industry veteran paces his hotel room, practicing for the oral portion of a final exam.

Six months earlier this salesman rode along with Kansas ranchers to experience what they do every day to produce the high-quality beef he markets. In between, he was breaking down a carcass into retail cuts and learning new facts about the fabrication process.

It might sound like an unconventional MBA education — but that's because it is.

Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) launched its Master's of Brand Advantages (MBA) program in late 2010.

"The driving force behind development of our MBA was looking at how we could grow our foodservice sales," says

Deanna Walenciak, CAB marketing director.

Although the real story is in that "how," it is set up by the "why."

"One of the obstacles we identified is that meat experience in sales is not as in-depth as it used to be," she says. "As our industry has changed, there are not as many people working their way up through the cut shop to the sales role."

That void makes people less prepared to face sales objections or confidently sell a premium meat product like the *Certified Angus Beef®* (CAB®) brand. The company set out to change that through an intensive, hands-on course that encompasses three in-person sessions covering everything from cattle production to beef sales.

## Outside the classroom

"They need to understand production agriculture, and they need to have experienced it," Walenciak says. "They need to be on the ranch and meet the people so they can see the passion that goes into it and get a spark of that passion for themselves."

The first two classes have taken a trip to southwest Kansas, where they break down into small groups and spend a half day with Angus ranchers, visit a CAB-licensed feedyard and tour a Dodge City packing plant.

## The producer experience

Berry Bortz, who runs CB Farms near Preston, Kan., with his wife, Carla, hosted a handful of the students this summer.

"We felt if they wanted to take the time to



# Learn Ours

learn about our products, we owed it to the industry, and those people in particular, to tell them the truth," he says. "We do have a good story to tell. It's a wholesome industry with lots of family ties."

"We've had the extremely good fortune to learn from those who were willing to share, so now it's our turn to share what we've learned," he says.

The day started with an informal conversation where the family got to know the visitors. They printed out a production calendar that they walked through before driving out to the pastures where they keep their registered and commercial Angus cattle.

"They were awestruck at how many decisions and how much hands-on stuff actually happens out here," Bortz says. "One of the guys made a comment, 'The next time somebody asks me why a steak costs so much, I'll tell them it's cheap. It should be twice as much for all the work that goes into it.'"

CB Farms also includes a small feedlot, so they looked at the fed cattle and talked about the closeout sheets, even explaining carcass premiums and discounts.

"All we're doing is showcasing what we have every day as an industry, and that's people committed to raising great beef," Walenciak says. "There are so many misperceptions out there. The people that are in this class are the ones who are selling the ranchers' products every day to the best chefs in the country. If they've never been to a ranch, they can't tell the great story that we have with passion and enthusiasm."

Prior to the production segment, Andrew Corsi of Sysco-Cleveland said he thought feedlots lacked organization and were solely focused on getting cattle ready for market without any standard operating procedures. That thinking changed.

"It's like a well-run day-care center," he says. "It became very apparent to me that

the feedlot managers are concerned with the well-being of their 'kids.'"

And he's not alone. Tom Chamot of New York-based Palmer Food Services says the experience taught him about the level of animal care.

"They are well-designed and managed facilities for the finishing phase," he says, noting he now feels comfortable answering customer questions about this segment, including antibiotic and hormone use.

Each session follows a similar cram-packed schedule. In the meats-focused class, participants walk through the fabrication process.

"You need time, not watching somebody else do it or watching a video, but time with your knife in hand, breaking down a carcass," Walenciak says.

The final part is all about application.

"If we give them all this knowledge, we really have to help them connect the dots," she says. Role-playing and practice take center stage. "That's probably the biggest difference between this program and our other educational events."

Enacting their mini-dramas, the class tackles statements they might hear out in the field about topics ranging from implant usage and factory farms to price and quality.

"If we had a tagline," Walenciak says, "it would be, 'Product knowledge is the key to overcoming every sales objection.'"

## Rules and requirements

CAB licensees can apply for the MBA training if they've met a few milestones, including three to five years of protein sales experience, knowledge of beef and beef cuts, and completion of basic CAB education programs.

"This is an advanced-level class, so we want them to know the basics already," Walenciak says. "Plus, this helps the

companies identify their rising stars, the people who have a bright future with them."

People in the first class, who graduated at CAB's Annual Conference in Sunriver, Ore., in September, certainly fit that description.

Although it's a simple pass/fail system, it wasn't an easy ride. The students completed tests at the end of each segment and then took a morning-long final exam. It included a 20-page written test, giving the hour-long "Science Behind the Sizzle" presentation and an oral exercise in overcoming sales hurdles.

"It was a really intense morning," Walenciak says. "People were nervous. They were studying — it was cool to see how serious everybody took it."

## Looking ahead

If surveys of the first class are any indication, it's an undeniable success.

"I'll take this information back to 145 salespeople, convince them and give them confidence to go out and sell," Corsi says.

That's the goal, Walenciak says: "If you know the beef industry inside and out, you'll be better at selling beef. If they feel they're educated on the industry, they will become more valuable as a consultant to their customers."

Chamot plans to spread the word on the East Coast.

"Producers have an unbelievable amount of care and integrity and pride in what they do and they do it for us, the end user," he says. "I'm empowered with knowledge and confidence. It gives me more ammunition — my gun is fully loaded to answer questions I normally wouldn't have been able to answer."

The second class started in June, and Walenciak hopes the first alumni are just the beginning.

"While first two classes of 20 each are phenomenal, we can't change the world with 20 grads," she says. "In the very near future we want to have many, many more classes rotating through."



**Editor's note:** *Miranda Reiman is assistant director of industry information for Certified Angus Beef LLC.*

