

Keep Them Coming Back

Three top seedstock producers agree that these days it takes more than a good-looking bull to keep the customers coming back year after year.

Story & photos by Ed Haag

Competition for the bull customer with money in his pocket has never been tougher, so when the savvy seedstock producer finds a cow-calf operator who is partial to his product, it is in his best interest to maintain that relationship.

Greg Rathbun of Rathbun Angus, Moses Lake, Wash., cannot imagine maintaining anything close to his current level of production without his regulars.

"Seventy to 80% of our business comes from repeat customers," he says.

"We have commercial calf producers who have been buying bulls from us since we started our sales 20 years ago."

He and his father, Corrin, have been able to expand their operation through the years due to the success of their existing customers. The Rathbuns now breed more than 350 cows a year, 90% by artificial insemination

(AI). Of the male offspring, between 100 and 150 bull calves make the cut and are sold at the age of 13 months at the annual November bull sale.

Rod Wesselman, regional manager for the American Angus Association, notes that

it is the Rathbuns' reputation for providing their buyers with exactly what they need to run a profitable calf operation that has placed their bull sale in the top 5% in his territory.

"Greg and Corrin make their customers money," Wesselman

says. "And that keeps them coming back."

Like other top seedstock producers, Greg Rathbun credits his bull marketing success to his focus on three key elements: genetics, conditioning and customer service.

"You have to have all three to really make it work," he says. "Take away one [and] the other two don't mean that much."



Built to last

While the Rathbuns practice what they preach regarding genetics, conditioning and customer service, there is also a local slant to the Rathbuns' bull strategy. Sarah Smith, Washington State University (WSU) beef Extension educator, believes that the Rathbuns' efforts to breed tough, self-reliant bulls, well-suited to the Northwest has paid off in an extremely loyal customer base.

"Greg is not easily distracted from his goals," she says. "He is very focused on his market, supplying commercial beef producers with just the right kind of bull for their operation."

For Greg it all begins with high-quality genetics.

"We consider ourselves progressive in our approach, but there must be built-in predictability," he says. "We certainly don't follow the bull-of-the-month approach to breeding."

This means that the Rathbuns are not in the habit of changing sires when an existing one is at the top of its game and there is nothing better available.

"We take a pragmatic approach to genetics, looking for the traits that will give us bulls with longevity," Greg says. "How long we use a particular sire depends on how well it performs when compared to the competition."

In addition, the Rathbuns are firm believers in the benefits of bull conditioning. Greg notes that an animal can have the best genetics, but if it is not conditioned properly, the full potential of those genetics will never be realized.

"This all takes time," he says. "If you push a bull calf too fast, it will have longevity problems as an adult."

This is the reason the Rathbuns choose to calve in the early fall so that they have enough time to develop the bulls properly.

"Most of our customers' operations calve in the spring," Greg says. "Our bulls are in top form at 18 months — right when they are expected to go to work."

For the first seven months after calving,



▶ Corrin (left) and Greg Rathbun focus on three key elements: genetics, conditioning and customer service.

mother cows and their offspring remain close to home. This provides the Rathbuns with the opportunity to AI the cows and evaluate the progress of the bull calves. In March, at an age when most commercial calves are weaned from their mothers,

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— Greg Rathbun

mother cows teach their calves how to forage for feed on the range — a skill that their bulls will need as working adults. He adds that the desert environment also helps the bull calves develop strong legs and feet — a known contributor to bull longevity.

In June the bull calves are pulled off the desert, weaned from their mothers, weighed, scanned by ultrasound for conformation and then moved into the Rathbuns’ primary bull development center — a long, narrow, rock-strewn piece of ground, one-third of a mile long, with a steep hill at one end. Greg notes that with water at one end and food at the other, young bulls will walk the hill seven to 10 times a day when first weaned.

“With all those rocks, it is just great for developing their legs and feet,” he says, adding that when they leave his ranch his bulls are built to last.

Masters of the custom fit

Like the Rathbuns, the operators of Stevenson Genetics of Hobson, Mont., estimate that 70%-80% of their business is generated by return buyers.

“We are entirely focused on establishing long-term relationships with our customers,” says working partner Clint Stevenson. “We have found that this works best for everyone.”

Clint explains that in spite of their volume — Stevenson Genetics’ sale book for its Dec 2, 2008, bull sale listed more than 800 animals — he and his partners make every effort to familiarize themselves with each customer’s herd.

Partner Darrell Stevenson notes that Stevenson Genetics’ commitment to service often extends beyond Hobson, adding that it is not unusual for someone from Stevenson Genetics to spend time observing a new client’s operation in order to better

Rathbuns’ cow-calf pairs are turned out on native desert range for an additional three months.

To the Rathbuns, the three months on the desert is a very important step in the development of their bulls. Greg points out that it is then that the



understand his seedstock requirements.

“We want to provide the customer with what he needs to make his operation work right and add value to his product,” he says. “That is the first step to developing a long-term working relationship.”

Darrell believes their customers are in a position to take advantage of the best of all worlds. In addition to receiving the personalized service, having a large number of

animals to choose from offers additional perks to the buyer. Not only does it help keep prices realistic for the average commercial

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producer, but the diversity of genetics available translates into a better, more specific fit for each customer.

Because Hobson is not easily accessible to a large number of Stevenson Genetics customers, establishing a bond of trust between seller and buyer that transcends distance is

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particularly important to the Stevensons. Those who are unable to attend the auction in person have an opportunity to purchase bulls long distance through Superior Livestock Auctions.

“We sell roughly 20% to 30% of all the bulls through Superior one way or another,” Darrell says. “A high percentage of those sold over the video are past customers or customers who come prior to the sale, mark the catalog and buy from home.”

Besides offering reasonably priced bulls, a wide range of quality genetics, a helping hand with herd development and the convenience of long-distance bull purchasing, the Stevensons also pride themselves in being able to help their regular customers get the best price for their product.

Team Angus all the way

Mike Umbarger, owner and operator of Flying U Angus Ranch, Powell Butte, Ore., is proud of the fact that he still retains, as regular customers, the first two individuals to put money down on his bulls 18 years ago. Since then he has managed to expand his customer base so that he is marketing, through private treaty, more than 250 bulls a year.

Umbarger attributes his success to superior Angus genetics, which goes hand and glove with the growing demand for quality beef.

“My job is to add value to my customers’



►The one universal truth that applies to all relationships is trust, Mike Umbarger says. “It is the glue that holds it all together. You can’t have a long-term business relationship without it.”

cattle and produce a product the consumer is going to desire,” he says, noting that with his encouragement more of his clients are participating in branded beef programs. “I try to help market their cattle, whether it is through video auctions or through a quality beef program.”

In addition, Umbarger works with his regular customers during the year, helping them with their herd improvement programs. By remaining in close contact

with his customers’ operations, he can predict their future needs and respond with the appropriate genetics.

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To keep up with the demand for high-quality bulls, Umbarger works cooperatively with several seedstock producers spread out over four states who would rather sell the majority of their bull calves at weaning and leave the development and marketing to someone else. Half of the bulls he sells are from his herd. The remainder is purchased from his cooperators.

“You can’t do it all,” he says. “If you are going to take proper care of your customers, you need a team.”

Umbarger notes that one major marketing advantage to using the Angus breed in tandem with his geographically broad business strategy is the breed’s ability to adjust to a variety of environments. “We can raise an animal in central Oregon, and it can adapt to a ranch in Florida,” he says. “Our breed is unique that way.”

Umbarger admits that sometimes working with such a broad range of producers and locations can be demanding. “If you include both cooperators and bull purchasers, I am probably working with more than 100 ranches,” he says, adding that the one universal truth that applies to all his working relationships, both with cooperators and customers, is trust. “It is the glue that holds it all together. You can’t have a long-term business relationship without it.”

