



PHOTOS BY STEVE SUTHER

A Reliable Connection

Building partnerships has led South Dakota ranchers to profit.

by Lance Zimmerman

You know the cattle business moves fast. The modern world is full of high-speed connections. Left unchecked, that world can spin out of control in the blink of an eye. Finding reliable partners who move at your speed can be tricky, but you have to start with trust and common ground.

Impossible? The local coffee-shop critics may say so, but their logic is often stuck in dial-up mode. Focused commercial producers ignore the mixed signals and become profit portals. They're the information and management link for like-minded seedstock and feedlot sectors.

Wade and Cleo Barry manage 300 Angus cattle near Carter, S.D., and connections are a large part of the success they enjoy today. They depend on local Angus genetics to meet their production goals and recently started marketing calves to a feedlot that understands quality.

The idea started with neighbor and Angus seedstock supplier Mike Assman, manager of Assman Land & Cattle, Mission, S.D.

"We try to point our bull customers to the different programs we know about," Assman says. "We attempt to help in a variety of ways to get our customers' cattle marketed, and we have some pretty good success in doing so."

Getting connected

Two years ago, he pointed the Barrys to S&A Feedlot Inc., a Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed feedlot near Plainview, Neb. Manager John Anderson purchased their fall 2004 steers at the

ranch, and followed up with feedlot and harvest results.

"The deal couldn't have worked out better," Wade says. "We are not designed well enough here to follow through with raising the calves. John helped us sort them at the ranch and took them on to the feedlot."

He says this year's pasture situation didn't mesh well with the feedlot's timing on available pen space, but next fall they have a plan to make sure Anderson can purchase the calves.

The partners share a relationship that is common among Assman connections.

Assman sells 250 bulls a year, with the majority going to South Dakota and

Nebraska producers. Linking his customers with market opportunities is always a priority.

"I realized several years ago that a nice group of bulls and an advertising campaign wasn't enough," Assman says. "Producers are more interested in service. If they are going to make an investment in seedstock genetics, the seller needs to be proactive and help them market the calves."

Sharing marketing prospects with bull customers is a twofold benefit. Assman says it's a service and a guarantee that says his genetics are more than average — they are profitable.

"Producers know the next time this market heads south, they will need proof that their cattle have a value beyond



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commodity prices,” he says. “Providing those opportunities ensures that they are not just sitting around losing value on their cattle.”

Assman is always willing to offer his customers marketing advice. He says lately the message has been simple — the more you know about your calves, the more profitable you can be.

“Seedstock producers need to find ways to get data back in customers’ hands to stay in the game,” Assman says. “Data tells them the direction they are going. We need to provide customers with market leverage, and data does that.”

The Barrys are eager to apply data to future herd generations. They sold past calf crops at the sale barn. It only took one year of working with Anderson for Wade to realize it was a perfect fit.

“It is just better to work with a buyer one-on-one,” Wade says. “A producer is far and away better off than going through a salering. Each party can negotiate a fair price, and it gets better as both parties follow through with feedback on how the cattle are doing.”

He realizes the sale barn route works well for a lot of people — he thought the same thing for many years — but developing a one-on-one relationship has too many advantages for either he or Anderson to ignore. He encourages producers to be proud of what they raise and follow through on how the cattle do.

Cleo says the carcass data will help them improve the herd’s already strong genetic base. Ten years ago, they purchased 15 registered cows from Assman to complement their commercial cows. The data will give them one more tool to see how the cattle perform.

Making the system work

Improvement comes quickly at the ranch with the use of artificial insemination (AI). Last year, Cleo bred 200 cows and heifers. She says it has been her and Wade’s responsibility for the last eight years, and AI has been a normal part of the ranch for a decade.

They consider carcass traits in selecting sires, but maternal and growth traits are still the priority. Wade says, “you can always go too far” when selecting for one trait, so balance is necessary.

The herd reflects those progressive breeding strategies, Anderson says.

“We met at Mike’s bull sale three years ago and had a real comfort level with each other,” he notes. “Wade said they were working to improve genetics through AI and buying good bulls. The steers we received represented that well.”



Mike Assman uses relationships to prove his genetics are profitable.

The steers performed on all levels — carcass, performance and health. Anderson says they are the kind his customers demand. They stayed healthy, gained 3.4 pounds (lb.) a day and finished 92% Choice and Prime. Steers that can do it all are a credit to genetics and management, he adds.

“The fact that they are so involved in AI is pretty unique,” Anderson says. “They don’t stop with the heifers. It carries clear into the cow herd. A lot of people AI, but when you talk about the cow-calf sector, very few people get involved like the Barrys.”

Anderson says he appreciates the homework they do to breed and manage the cattle correctly. The feedlot receives 95% of its calves “straight off the cow.” In that setting, mismanagement will show up quickly as a health problem, but there have not been such problems with Barry cattle.

Cleo realizes calf health is a market advantage for them. She works at a local veterinary clinic.

“I see all the health options available to producers and know what works and what doesn’t,” she says. “I know that what works for one ranch isn’t always practical for another, but my experience tells me that if it works, there is no reason to change. Our system works.”

Health is a ranch priority from day one. Pregnant cows receive vaccinations prior to calving. Newborns rotate to fresh pasture regularly. And, as they move to spring pastures, the calves get their preweaning shots. Anything that comes home in the fall receives a booster.

Wade says he hasn’t treated for scours in five years, and a bovine viral diarrhea (BVD) outbreak has never hit the ranch.

“We don’t give health problems a chance. If we did, it would really hurt more in the long run,” he says. “Once a calf gets

sick, it seems like their immune system is more apt to let them get sick again.”

A relationship system

Working with producers directly takes variation out of the purchasing equation for Anderson.

“I buy 99% of the cattle fed at S&A Feedlot. It’s not an advantage for me to buy cattle where there is going to be a lot of guesswork involved,” he says. “We will get 8,000 calves in a 50- to 60-day period, and I don’t have the manpower to handle that many sale barn calves.”

Anderson prefers “country fresh calves” for relationships he can build between investors and cow-calf producers. He says it is less work in the end. He doesn’t “waste time reanalyzing calves year after year,” and he knows exactly how they will do. It takes the risk out of buying.

“It helps the cow-calf guy, too. When I get an overall view of someone’s cattle, it is a little bit easier for me to sit down with them and make recommendations,” Anderson says. “I try to funnel back information when my investors let me, and in today’s market, that’s usually not a big deal.”

Customer ties are easily built because he maintains his own 400-head Angus herd. Anderson travels to purebred sales from Oklahoma to Wyoming, looking for the right genetics in his herd and seeking out similar commercial producers.

Relationships make the job fun, Anderson says. He talks to producers about the sires that work in their environment and brings that information back to his cow-calf customers. Every once in a while, he meets a new customer.

“You know it is real easy under these market conditions to get complacent,” Anderson says. “A producer can make money no matter what he does. That is what impresses me with the Barrys and the other producers I meet at sales. They are willing to look ahead and see where they want to be in the future.”

Cleo believes the future is about all producers receiving the price they deserve, whether good or bad.

“When a producer is doing it right and breeding good cattle, they should benefit more than the plain-Jane producer who doesn’t have a clue about what they raise,” she says. “We think this system is working well for us. It is just a matter of getting a few more years under our belt to coordinate these things.”

