

Tune in to your Customers

Satisfaction requires good listening skills.

by Barb Baylor Anderson, field editor

When Cimeron Frost helped develop the Illinois Beef Expo years ago, he says some of the best ideas for the event came from people with random interests making random comments. Just like small children learn in school, using your listening ears can make a big difference.

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“You have to listen to customers to succeed. You can’t dismiss anything someone might say because those are the comments or observations that often develop into great ideas. You never know what could turn into something worthwhile,” says Frost, who recently retired after spending nearly 20 years in charge of industry relations for the Illinois Beef Association (IBA). “Write things down and think about them. I carry a spiral notebook in my pocket just for that reason.”

“Not all ideas will work for every person,” he continues. “Air them out and wade through ideas to determine what works for you. You need a good set of ears to succeed in this business.”

While Frost has retired from his industry position, he remains in partnership with sons Nathan and Tony as Frost Farms near Tallula, Ill. The family has a 150-head herd of purebred Angus and Hereford cows and Simmental-cross cows.

“The boys do the heavy lifting now. I spend my time with customers and selling our locker beef, and I enjoy woodworking,” he says.



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Just as Frost uses his talents to craft items in his woodshop for others, he uses his longtime experience in the beef business to offer these tips to producers.

Tip No. 1: Provide convenience and service.

Frost Farms sells cattle and locker beef to local buyers all year round, but they’ve been able to expand their customer base the last four years by hosting an online sale of primarily show heifers and some steers. They work with Breeders’ World Online Sales to

promote and manage it.

“We get to interact with a lot of interesting producers from farther away with an online sale. We’ve sold cattle from Maryland to Oklahoma, as well as in closer states. People don’t have to necessarily drive 400 or 500 miles to an actual sale at a farm anymore,” says Frost.

The family has learned to wean calves early so the cattle can be viewed by prospective buyers who attend the Illinois State Fair in August. They also begin advertising months

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in advance of the December sale so producers who want to travel to the farm on fall weekends to have a look at the calves can plan ahead. To accommodate visitors, the calves are cleaned up and on display every weekend. Information also is made available on the Breeders' World website.

"Sale day for live events is utter chaos. Online sale day is quiet, unless we have local people come take one last look at the cattle. We spend sale time in front of the computer, not in the barn, and we can watch what unfolds during the sale instead of running around," he says.

Tony and Nathan Frost follow up with heifer buyers participating at Illinois-based shows and national junior shows to help them prepare cattle for the showing, as well.

Tip No. 2: Don't be afraid to try something new.

Frost's purebred sales experience transitioned him comfortably into another role early on in his career. In 1986, Frost and his wife, Rachel, chaired the National Junior Angus Show (NJAS) hosted in Springfield at the Illinois State Fairgrounds. Having coordinated many purebred Angus sales helped them meet participant needs and introduced them to other Angus breeders from around the state. That leadership served Frost well when Bud Hobbs, Illinois Angus Association president, asked him to serve as the Angus representative on a committee working to develop the Illinois Beef Expo. Frost was chosen to serve as manager of the new event.

"Angus numbers in Illinois were down. Producers wanted to reinvigorate interest in the breed, so we did some brainstorming and decided to try something new. Most of the major beef breeds at the time were struggling with sales attendance, and most of the breeds were holding their sales at the Illinois State Fairgrounds," Frost says. "We decided to create a 'shopping mall' of sorts where producers could come to shop at one 'store,' but have several other 'stores' they could visit and see what else was for sale."

There were other benefits to combining sale efforts with other breeds. Frost says, for example, if a producer came to buy an Angus bull and was not able to get one, often he might head back to the barns and buy another breed bull. After the first two Illinois Beef Expos that were just sales of breeding cattle, Frost says they listened to folks and added a junior show and calf divisions to the sale. That doubled the sale's size. Related ag companies also sold merchandise and

services to attendees during the Expo, which helped cover sale expenses and reduced costs for breeders.

"I enjoy interacting with people," says Frost. "With these types of events, you work with a lot of volunteers who bring fresh enthusiasm. Just as with potential customers that come to your farm, these producers are excited to build the beef business. Don't be afraid to try something new."

Tip No. 3: Provide firsthand experience to increase understanding.

When new tools or programs are introduced into the industry, Frost says one of the best ways to learn about them is through firsthand experience you can share with your customers.

For example, when grid pricing was introduced, Frost and his colleagues at IBA borrowed an idea from Texas A&M University to help producers understand it. The Beef 2000 program took place at the University of Illinois Meat Science Lab, where producers were invited to understand the carcass breakdown. Producers saw live animals, then carcasses on the rail, and finally helped cut them into subprimals so they could see and understand fat waste by yield grade.

"It was an excellent learning tool at the right time," he says. "We also brought in grocers to talk about the size of steaks and roasts, and the challenges and opportunities that are presented to them with carcass size. Producers got a better understanding of the quality grades and yield grades and how the grid-pricing system could work for them."

Similarly at home on the farm, Frost has an open-gate policy.

"If you are a customer buying your first junior heifer, a half of beef or a breeding bull, we will do our best to answer all your questions or show you how we do things to help," he says. "I have gotten some of my best ideas asking another beef producer how he did something or how he fed a certain product."

Tip No. 4: Watch the industry for trends and respond to signals.

"Producers have fine-tuned the Angus breed. We have good cattle that are hardy and efficient and produce a good carcass," says Frost. "That can change. We don't want to focus too much on one thing, like a specific EPD. We need to find a happy medium and remain customer friendly."

Frost warns that producers need to be tuned into industry demand, so the breed

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does not take a trend too far. For example, he says, their locker-beef customers have noticed packaged beef cuts seem to be getting bigger. Grocers also prefer a specific portion size. While he says it appears beef consumers have been willing so far to accept higher prices, at some point that will meet with resistance. Beef producers should prepare to address any impact on beef demand.

Tip No. 5: Work in partnership with other commodity producers.

As grain prices have declined and cattle prices have risen, Frost reminds producers that everyone still must work for the good of agriculture to meet all customer needs.

Frost remembers during the 1980s when the ethanol industry was getting started that cattle producers also were looking for a more economical feed source because of a drought.

"We figured out that wet gluten, a byproduct of ethanol production, was a great cattle feed at a good price," he says. "We have been using wet gluten in our feeds ever since."

In Illinois, Frost notes cattle producers must compete for pasture with crop producers.

"My sons want more cattle, but that means we have to negotiate for more pasture. We continue to make improvements to pastures so our landlords will continue to rent it to us, but grain farmers would also like to have those acres and to plant them to corn and soybeans," he says. "As commodity producers, we must partner together to understand each other's needs and work to successfully co-exist."



Editor's Note: A former National Junior Angus Board member, Barb Baylor Anderson is a freelancer from Edwardsville, Ill.