

Forward Motion

The spotlight turns to the man behind Angus media and plans to move Angus Productions Inc. into a new era.

by *Crystal Albers*, director of communications

Eric Grant dislikes standing still, and this morning it's evident.

The president of Angus Productions Inc. (API) is itching to make some progress.

He calls to three of us tucked into our basement studio offices, editing video for the American Angus Association's two network television programs, his own creations. Other members of the API crew are set to meet in an adjacent conference room at Association headquarters in Saint Joseph, Mo.

Grant gives a sharp whistle like he's moving calves to a new pasture, but he's already down the hall.

The longtime ag writer, photographer and now leader of the Association's for-profit publishing firm spent most of the day before immersed in data, scouring financial figures, circulation counts, ratings, Angus sales trends — anything and everything that influences the effectiveness of API, a business charged with helping cattlemen market their registered-Angus animals and sharing valuable news and information with the masses.

He's a stickler for basing business decisions on hard data, and, again, he's beaten us all to the room.

Grant enjoys being a step ahead, and when we arrive his eyes signal the weekend's work was worth the effort. He's made some progress, and he's got something he can't wait to share with the team.

The gift

Saint Joseph, Mo., is a far cry from Grant's native Colorado — the pristine mountains near Steamboat Springs where every vista comes ripped from the pages of a nature calendar. He's a long way from home.

Ironically, though, it's the capabilities housed in the brick and glass walls of the unassuming 1950s-style Association building that bring Grant closer to his upbringing and what started him in the cattle business in the first place.

"I spent the summers and most of my free time as a kid with my cousins on my grandpa's place," he says.

Grandpa Hill's ranch proved to be the forming ground for young men, and an ideal



PHOTO BY CARRIE HEITMAN

► "Doing things the way we've always done them is a long, slow ride to our demise. This is a very tough business we're in. Complacency is our biggest enemy," says API President Eric Grant.

upbringing for a boy who fell in love with cows and photography.

"My grandpa, John W. Hill, was a little guy who had a quiet, unassuming way about him, but he could be pretty intimidating," he says. Like with most old-time cowboys, when Grandpa spoke, you listened, and you never — ever — wanted to let him down.

"He had an uncanny knack for getting people to do things they never thought possible," Grant reflects. "He always talked about the importance of 'knowing what to do next' as the key to success. He always seemed to be months ahead of everyone else and spotted opportunity where no one else was looking. He had a plan for where he wanted to be."

Hard work would get him there, and the young Grant took note.

At home with his mother, father and two brothers, he peppered his bedroom with bull sale ads and *Hereford Journal* magazines while

most of his friends hung posters of their favorite sports teams.

"By the time I was 13, I received a Kodak Instamatic camera," Grant says. "That was when my interests in cattle and photography really converged. It seemed like an eternity before the prints came back, and when I peeled open the envelope, it was like a whole new universe was opening to me."

The ranch provided plenty of subject matter, where the early morning sun set the meadow grass ablaze in orange, and purple-blue shadows sank across the mountainside. The sounds from far-off bawling calves sliced through the crisp mountain air, and the Instamatic impatiently jostled in his jacket pocket.

If he was lucky, he'd sneak a few photos in before Grandpa gave his usual orders to get up Salt Creek and check on the water. Irrigation was everything in the mountains. It was essential for growing feed and a disaster when ditches were untended. The latter meant a real tongue-lashing.

Perhaps the perfect shot would have to wait.

A calling

Grant graduated from Bethany College in 1987, young, married and hungry for a job. Times were tight, so he jumped at the chance to drive a feed truck and mix rations at a Kansas feedyard.

By the early 1990s, he moved on to a job at the then National Cattlemen's Association (NCA), writing articles for the organization's *National Cattlemen* magazine and interviewing some of the most influential people of the time — many of whom would become longtime friends and colleagues.

"I learned a lot about writing, journalism and got a broader view of the overall beef cattle business," Grant says. "It gave me a more well-rounded appreciation and clearer picture for the challenges producers face, and their passion for the food they raise."

Three years later, he delved further into the world of agricultural journalism, beginning as a writer and editor for *Beef Today*, then expanding into other publications through

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PHOTO BY ERIC GRANT

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his business as a freelance writer and photographer.

It was a golden era for the advancing journalist.

Grant toured the country interviewing what would result in hundreds of ranch and farm visits. His articles and photos made regular appearances in a vast array of publications, such as *Range* magazine, *BEEF*, *Beef Today*, *American Cowboy* — the list was lengthy and the experience valuable.

“I was exposed to some of the greatest minds in the ag journalism field,” Grant says. Well-known editors like Bill Miller of *Beef Today* and *Range* magazine’s C.J. Hadley polished the young writer.

Miller was the patient but forceful editor who taught him to spot stories beyond the obvious; and Hadley was a hard-nosed ball of fire that left a well-manicured urban East Coast for the rugged West and offered a fresh perspective and a knack for assembling creative teams.

Then there was Hollis Williford, the only person who’d come close to rivaling Grandpa Hill’s influence.

Grant met the well-known sculptor and artist — whose work is displayed at the Gilcrease Museum and the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum — in the 1990s, and the two struck a friendship that inspired

Grant to start his freelance business.

“He taught me the value of individuality, personal expression and the importance of freedom,” Grant says. “He fought against conventional ways of thinking.”

These forces formed the basis for Grant’s prolific creativity, which flourished to nearly 130 articles a year and countless cover photos.

While his clients spanned agriculture, cattle remained the constant, and each ranch visit held a new revelation.

“I’d say every ranch you visit changes your life a little for the better,” he says. “Every ranch is its own little microcosm with its own way of doing things, its own traditions and vision for the future.”

Tucked into mountain valleys and at the end of each winding dirt road, those far-off ranches cradled some of the country’s hardest-working families. These were people living a truly American life, exercising the type of freedoms the nation’s forefathers intended.

“Ranching is the greatest expression of American freedom. I don’t think most people appreciate this fact. Very few places in the world have a system of private ownership in which a family can derive a living from land they own,” Grant says. “Every time I step on a ranch, I feel this deep down.”

He beat down dusty back roads and rock

ledges; fought heat, mosquitoes and pop-up storms — all to share these stories, to find the best interview, the best shot.

“It’s not what you tell them. It’s what you show them,” he says. “Too many people make the mistake of trying to develop a message for consumers.”

If there’s a common theme, it’s that ranchers love what they do, he adds.

“I’ve never met anyone on a ranch who wanted to be doing something else. You don’t talk to ranchers who tell you things like, ‘Gee, I wish I had taken that desk job at IBM.’ That says a lot about cattle people, doesn’t it?”

As time passed, Grant began to notice that it was an increasingly difficult proposition for people in his native West — people like his Grandpa — to make a living without outside pressures like urban encroachment, environmental activists and government regulation.

It became increasingly important to share their stories with others — but even that ability was being threatened.

There were tremors in the publications business.

A new era was taking shape and threatening the existence of those who made their living in black ink.

The perfect shot

The early 2000s ushered in burgeoning online resources and nearly rang the death knell for print revenue. The world was changing. Mobile devices and connectivity exploded and attention spans shrank. Magazines reacted to the new phenomenon by cutting resources.

“My relevance as a professional began to slip away with the digital age,” he says. “I assumed the rules of the game would always stay the same, but I was wrong.”

It was a tough time to be in the business. Then the phone rang.

“Terry Cotton and Shauna Hermel wanted to know if I wanted to start up a new division of API called Creative Media,” he says, recalling a subsequent meeting in spring 2007.

Grant and his wife, Patti, and their then 3-year-old son, Johnny, loaded their belongings and headed east to Saint Joseph later that summer.

“I never thought I’d live east of the mountains, or I-25 for that matter, but there I was moving everything I loved to start this new venture.”

The lifelong photographer picked up a

video camera instead and embraced the digital age to do what he knew best — share stories of those with a stake in quality Angus genetics and quality Angus beef.

The result was the formative elements of what would later become the American Angus Association’s highly popular *I Am Angus* documentary series, which the organization debuted on RFD-TV in 2010 shortly after Grant was named Association director of public relations and communications.

As director, he oversaw an expanded PR presence for the nation’s largest beef cattle association, a large-scale initiative unlike any in its category.

Angus would make another foray into television with a weekly news program, *The Angus Report*, as well as a broad social media presence; radio program, *Angus Talk*; audio and video news releases; and a newly in-house national advertising campaign — all in addition to the traditional functions of the department, which churned out everything from show results and photos to brochures to trade show details.

By early 2014, longtime API General

Manager Terry Cotton signaled his interest in moving the company to the next level and stepping into a sales capacity.

“It was really Terry’s foresight that started this process,” Grant says of his predecessor. “He wanted to see the company continue its long-standing reputation for excellence and expand its offering for breeders.”

The Association and API boards of Directors saw an opportunity to unify the PR department with the company, naming Grant president and placing him at the helm of the now expansive Angus Productions Inc.

It was the nexus for his greatest passions — cows, story telling and building teams.

Progress in motion

The latest chapter for API starts with a focusing of its efforts.

Grant and his unified team are aiming to pioneer new ways to help Angus breeders more effectively obtain information and market their animals.

“Doing things the way we’ve always done them is a long, slow ride to our demise. This is a very tough business we’re in,” he says.

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“Complacency is our biggest enemy.”

Moving ahead begins with taking stock.

“We’re going to look at this from the perspective of our members and our readers, and we’re going to work hard to make this about them, not us,” Grant adds.

There’s much to assess. Today, API is among the most expansive organization-owned communications centers in agriculture, with a vast platform of media

properties housed under the “Angus Media Center” title, including two successful print publications, *Angus Journal* and *Angus Beef Bulletin*; two network television shows; a satellite radio program; a Special Services department that produces industry-leading sale books; a revamped Web Services Department; and a host of additional marketing services and communications and PR pieces.

“The big opportunity long term will be bringing all of these assets together and making them work in improved ways for our members. We’ve got a lot of things in development,” he says, smiling.

The north wing of API hums with daily activity, where more than 30 people operate the well-oiled machine that produces invaluable brand exposure and sales services. Grant says that’s API’s real golden egg — it’s people.

“We have a lot of very talented people here. I think if every Angus breeder could spend a day with me, visiting with the individuals we have at API, they would feel blessed as I do to have this much expertise and commitment at their disposal to advancing the interests of the Angus breed.”

And the interests of the Angus brand. Today, brands that tell the best story win.

“They have greater customer loyalty, command premiums in the marketplace and weather market downturns more effectively than brands that don’t,” he says.

That translates to a marketing advantage for Angus breeders.

“I want API to be the industry’s indispensable source for information and advertising. It’s that simple. The opportunity is there,” he says. “We just need to bring all of our platforms and people together.”

That’s partly what motivates Grant, assembling a team of talented people then creating opportunities for them to grow.

“You’re always better off helping people find a path to their own professional happiness, and if you have happier people in roles that are better-suited for their talents, you have a more productive team,” he says. “I like working with talented people. I like being surrounded by people who are better at all this than me.”

In the morning conference room, surrounded by some of the now-assembled team, Grant presents his synopsis of the company’s performance and how he’d like to move forward.

“If we can look at the data a few years down the road and see that the Angus breed is growing, that the average Angus herd size is increasing and that the average Angus breeder is making more money — and we’ve played at least a small role in that — then we’ll be successful,” he tells us.

“There’s progress to be made if we’re not afraid to embrace change and find new paths to our own relevance. That’s the road to progress.”

That’s the path forward.

A Q&A with API President Eric Grant

What do you enjoy about what you do?

The things I enjoy the most have changed with time. Ten years ago, all I wanted to do was write from the dining room table and shoot photos of beautiful ranches. I’d say helping develop young people is the most rewarding thing I do these days. I never thought I’d manage people. I never thought I’d be working in an office, but what I’ve found, in spite of my love for writing and photography, is that the most rewarding thing I’ve ever done is watching people on my team get better at what they do.

What does it take to become an innovator?

You have to be willing to take a lot of hits. If you can take the hits, you can innovate. It’s that simple.

What do you consider to be your greatest accomplishment thus far?

I have two sons. Ryan, who’s 25, is a writer. John, who’s 10, is an entrepreneur. Genetics is a funny thing, you know. Ryan came to writing on his own terms, and John has always dreamed up ways of building a business. Both are staunchly independent, and I like that about them. I like that they are reflections of some of the things I’ve done with my life, but they’re also their own men. They’ve followed their own paths.

What motivates you?

I like having something to do each day. I like having a problem to solve, or something new to build. I get claustrophobic when I’m in situations that aren’t moving forward.

Competition also motivates me.

Competition makes you better. Media is a highly competitive business. We have to earn the business of our advertisers. I like the fact that we have to wade into the marketplace each day and earn our audience’s trust.

How do you measure success?

The greatest risk for all professionals is believing that they are successful, then taking that position for granted. I use a lot of data to analyze whether something we’ve done is actually working or not, and I’m not afraid of walking away from something if the data says it isn’t working.

In terms of my personal life, I think you measure success in your kids. I’m blessed my wife, Patti, is such a good mom to John. There’s a point along the way where you realize your kids are going to be ok, and it’s a very rewarding moment when that happens.



► Eric Grant and his wife, Patti, and their now 10-year-old son, Johnny, loaded their belongings and headed east to Saint Joseph in summer 2007.

PHOTO BY CARRIE HEITMAN