

A Helping Hand Adds

HAT Ranch helps customers thrive with outside-the-box thinking.

Story & photos by **Kasey Brown**, associate editor



Angus cows and was very happy with the results. This two-breed system allows HAT Ranch to appeal to commercial cattlemen. They say that the Tarentaise breed offers something new and different, but Angus keeps the door open.

More interesting than simple purebred or crossbred cattle offerings is their merchandising system. Doug visits the operations of all of their customers, usually two to three times a year, and analyzes each producer's needs to help decide which bulls or females will work best.

Michael explains that during a bull sale, customers only see the bull on a good day, when he is groomed and shown in his best light. Doug adds that if you get outbid on the bull you

Many ranches have one or two specialties that set them apart from other operations. For instance, focus could be put on bull sales, productive females, customer service or marketing. One ranch, however, thinks completely outside the box and combines all of these to set itself apart.

"A lot of ranches in our industry model after the retail industry with a final product to sell. We model after manufacturing — we sell ingredients to our customers. Those customers can then create a product to sell to the feedlots and packers," explains Michael Honold of Honold Angus Tarentaise (HAT) Ranch in Coon Rapids, Iowa.

Michael and his dad, Doug, sell 95% of their bulls sight unseen, which means they have earned quite a reputation for HAT Ranch. How do they earn so much trust from their customers?

"Everybody talks today about how black's the only color, but my people like green," says Doug. "We try to help them make green, and there are lots of ways you can help them."

Helping through seedstock

HAT Ranch gains customers through many products and unique customer-service methods.

Doug started in the Angus business in 1956 with a 4-H project. In 1984 he expanded into the Tarentaise breed after a Purina® feed representative introduced him to the little-known Continental breed.

He decided to use a Tarentaise bull cleanup on some of his

want, what do you do then? You either buy a bull you don't want, or you go home without one.

To combat this, the Honold father-son team steps in. Doug knows what the customers need, and Michael knows the females behind the bulls. Doug discusses with producers the direction they want to go, and they work together to decide which bull would work best for their needs. Michael says that cattlemen have plenty on their plates, so it is his and Doug's job to know the expected

progeny differences (EPDs) of their purebred cattle.

Doug notes that they have files with all of the records of every freeze-branded animal that is sold from the ranch, and files for each customer, so



PHOTO COURTESY OF HAT RANCH

► **Above:** Doug (left) and Michael (right) Honold, of Honold Angus Tarentaise (HAT) Ranch, model their operation after the manufacturing industry. They provide their customers with ingredients to create the desired product.

► **Right:** Doug Honold started in the Angus business in 1956 with a 4-H project.

they have a good base of knowledge with which to operate. He recalls how customers have called to ask which of the bulls they've

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Value

bought are better to use on first-calf heifers, or how old one of their bulls was. Those records add value.

“Most producers don’t need a grand champion bull, they just need one that fits with their cow herd,” Doug explains. “Females are half the equation genetically. People need to base their decisions on both sides, and most often they don’t.”

Some new customers have no genetic base yet, so HAT Ranch can sell them 25 heifers to get started. A customer in Missouri enrolls his crossbred HAT Ranch heifers in the Missouri Show-Me-Select Heifer program every year and has done well.

The numbers prove that the method works. They sell 95%-98% of their bulls sight unseen, and the majority of their customers are repeat customers. Laughing, Doug says one customer with 800 cows hasn’t been to a bull sale since 1993. He calls HAT Ranch, tells them what he needs — Doug has been there many times and knows his cattle — and Doug delivers a bull straight to him. He’s very happy with that, and Doug says he has one of the most appreciated herds in that area.

HAT Ranch also offers a cash cow-leasing program. They liken it to renting an acre of land. Michael explains that it’s a great program for young guys who want to get into the cattle industry because it helps keep their overhead costs down while they are starting out. Investors own the cows, but the calf is the renter’s. Input costs like feed and care are covered by the renter, but they don’t have the biggest cost of buying the cow outright. Plus, the cows are part of the HAT Ranch identification program, and reports are also generated for the cows each year, so the investors know where his cows are and how they are performing. It works well for both parties.

Helping through technology

The duo offers a tracking program for source and age premiums called HAT Trax. It’s an Internet-based program on which their customers can keep cow records. It adds value in its simplicity. Programs must be simple,

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PHOTO COURTESY OF HAT RANCH

► **Above:** HAT Ranch has been hosting field days, modeled much like those for seed corn, since Michael was 10 years old.



► **Left:** Topics range from pre-conditioning, nutrition and low-stress handling to farm financing, cornstalk treatments and packer information.

PHOTO COURTESY OF HAT RANCH

► **Below:** Females are half the genetic equation. Doug and Michael Honold help their customers analyze what they need and help pick a bull based on their records.



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Doug says, or cattlemen won't use them.

HAT Trax is tied with the electronic identification (eID) recordkeeping system. It was geared to gain premiums for source and age verification, though now age verification isn't as big of an issue since Japan modified its age restriction. Even though age premiums may be changing, the program still has its uses.

"It's a good traceability program. All of our bulls are also eID, so we can trace them back to the ranches where they've gone," says Michael.

Ranchers can input data themselves with the online format, but HAT Ranch offers to input data for customers if they can't or don't want to do it themselves.

The program helps keep track of carcass data, too. Doug says records are important — they used to collect carcass information before it was popular. He would wake up

before 4 a.m. to travel to the packing plants and write down the carcass information of their cattle, and those of his customers, himself.

"Most producers don't need a grand champion bull, they just need one that fits with their cow herd."

— Doug Honold

Helping through education

Everyone knows the old adage, "If you give a man a fish, he'll eat for a day. If you teach a man to fish, he'll eat for a lifetime." HAT Ranch adds value to their program by teaching cattle producers "to fish" by hosting educational field days for customers and potential customers.

The duo has been hosting field days, modeled much like those for seed corn, since Michael was 10 years old. The same Purina representative who introduced them to Tarentaise has helped kick off their field days.

Doug says they try to teach cattlemen something at each field day, so they will want

to come. They rely on help from resources like Purina, Zoetis (formerly Pfizer) and Kent with whom they've developed relationships during travels throughout the years.

Topics range from preconditioning, nutrition and low-stress handling to farm financing, cornstalk treatments and packer information. They try to bring in speakers on topics that are timely so participants can take the information home and use it.

Topics can be about other interesting aspects of ranching, says Michael. His wife spoke about agility training dogs, and they also brought in someone to talk about herding dogs and even rolling pigeons.

Participants always want to see cattle, Doug emphasizes, so they arrange to see nearby feedlots or packing plants, depending on where and when they have the field day that year. They used to have a February field day and visited feedlots to learn about fat cattle and carcass data, though those across the Ohio River balked at the weather.

Now, they generally host the field day in early August, though having participants from 15 states means that scheduling can be difficult, especially trying to avoid state fairs and the start of school.

Michael attended the American Angus Association's Beef Leaders Institute (BLI) a few years back. The three-day conference is somewhat similar to their field days. He says that the Angus Association does things well and he wanted to learn more. He even brought back ideas from the conference to use on their field days, like using buses to go to the packinghouse.

The field days are popular, and 50-125 people come each year. Michael says they have a large mailing list to advertise the field days, and anyone is welcome. If a breeder is willing to bring in education to make sure their customers succeed, it definitely sends the right message.

Doug says they act somewhat like regional managers or seed corn representatives, and not many breeders think like that.

Explaining their marketing philosophy, Doug says, "I need to take them value. That might be nutritional help, it might be genetic help, it might be pharmaceutical help. It might also be helping market their calves, it just depends on what their needs are. I have these types of resources in my toolbox — if I don't know the answer, I know I can get it for them."

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