

Looks Can Be Deceiving

Hays Feeders goes beyond looks to pursue quality.

Story & photos by Lance Zimmerman

Producers don't tell feedlot operators their calf crops look average. Kendall Hopp hears all the stories and sees good-looking cattle fall short of premium profits too often, but that doesn't mean he has given up on looks. He only works harder to show producers that information can add value to the look they sell.

Hopp tells producers that looks will only carry profits so far — information is the selling point of the future. As general manager of Hays Feeders LLC,

► “Producers are going to need more information about how their cattle perform in the feedlot,” says Kendall Hopp, general manager of Hays Feeders LLC, Hays, Kan. “Looking good doesn't mean they will make it in the feedlot. The more information we can pass back and forth, the better we will be at producing more consistent, higher-quality product.”

Hays, Kan., he has seen data come to the industry forefront. He says it is the only way people can be sure they are getting quality cattle.

The feedlot can acquire the right cattle and get the data they need through being a Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed feedlot partner. Last year the yard was among the Feedlot-Licensing Program's

(FLP's) top five in volume, and this year it earned the Runner-up Feedlot of the Year for yards with more than 15,000-head capacity.

Hopp represented the company at the CAB Annual Conference Aug. 18-20 in Baltimore, Md.

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A new focus on information has more producers interested in retained ownership and data feedback. Being involved with CAB gives the yard an advantage over others when producers want to know how their cattle harvest.

“The industry is seeing more and more black-hided cattle,” Hopp says. “Just because they have black hair doesn't mean they are good to us. Even if they are Angus,

producers realize they need records to set themselves apart from the crowd.”

Producers interested in learning about cattle can trust that Hays Feeders will deliver with data from CAB. Selling ranchers on the benefits of knowing more about their cattle is easy. Sharing the payoffs of retained ownership is the challenge.

Hopp says the opportunities in owning feedlot cattle became less clear to some producers after the record-high calf prices offered this year.

“Feeding cattle is a new step for a lot of guys to take. My job is to show them that calf prices today make it a perfect time to try it out,” he says. “Higher calf prices mean greater profits for the cow-calf producer.



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This allows them to retain ownership while minimizing losses.”

Even if markets dip below the high prices of the year, Hopp believes producers could still benefit from owning some of their cattle through the finishing phase. Retained-ownership cattle make up 75% of this division of Pratt Feeders LLC, Pratt, Kan., and that percent continues to grow.

Hopp adds that producers gain unexpected incentives through feeding cattle.

“It helps to know what a guy is producing on the ranch. It’s kind of like buying a piggy bank,” he says. “You don’t know what is in there. It might not be worth a thing, but for all you know there could be a hundred-dollar bill hiding in there.”

Producers don’t always hear \$100 news. Hopp admits it is a reality of the business today, but knowing what you produce is half the battle if the goal is to produce beef the consumer values. He sticks with customers who are willing to improve.

“It can be pretty eye-opening for guys when their good cattle aren’t as good as they thought,” Hopp says. “You enjoy working with those people that stick with it. They want to make changes and do things right. It is nice to help them move forward.”

Ready to roll

When interested producers come to the yard, Hopp suggests “setting the cattle up right from the beginning.” A vaccination and backgrounding program are the first steps to ensure “a win-win for everyone.”

Hopp works with producers so their cattle come into the yard “ready to roll.” He also has customers who know “exactly what it takes to raise them right.”

Jerry McReynolds falls into the latter group. He is a dedicated Hays Feeders customer who operates a 300-head commercial Angus operation and backgrounding yard near Woodston, Kan.

Hays Feeders is the destination for his home-raised calves.

McReynolds tried other yards and even finished the cattle himself before turning to Hays Feeders. He couldn’t compete with the marketing, labor and input cost advantages that come from working through the 28,000-head feedlot.

Some large feedlots have a habit of losing track of customers. McReynolds says he has found the opposite is true.

“On the marketing side, I like my cattle to go through U.S. Premium Beef,” he says. “And I don’t have to talk the feedlot into doing that. I like working with Hays Feeders. The staff understands what I am trying to do, and they find out what I need and get it done.”

Data gives McReynolds a better picture of what he produces. He has a goal of raising “beef instead of just cattle.” That means examining more than pounds gained. Feed efficiency, average daily gain (ADG) and carcass data all weigh into his breeding decisions, and when it comes to meeting his expectations, Hopp and the staff at Hays Feeders rarely disappoint.

The relationship has continued throughout the years, and Hopp has even relied on McReynolds to background some cattle for the feedlot.

“It is nice to work with a feedlot and crew that you can trust,” McReynolds says. “You know how the cattle are

going to turn out based on past experience with the feedlot and your cattle. It helps ease your mind, and it works out well for us.”

Hopp says his staff deserves most of the credit for keeping producers satisfied and supplying them with information they need. Secretary Becky Metzler keeps track of customer cattle and the paperwork that goes with them.

“Becky is the one that really makes the



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CAB program work for us,” Hopp says. “I help her identify the cattle, but she keeps everything moving in terms of requesting information and sending it to the producer.”

Hopp manages the feedlot as a team, and each employee has a vital role in the success of each calf. Teamwork is one element Hopp believes brought the feedlot recognition.

CAB Feedlot Specialist Gary Fike identifies with the yard’s strong sense of mission.

“The feedlot’s efforts in enrolling cattle targeted for the brand are exceptional,” Fike says. “The staff always works toward a goal of feeding quality, Angus-influenced cattle that meet our rigorous carcass specifications.”

The feedlot enrolled 6,659 head in the program this year with a data capture success rate of 99.6%, among the highest in the FLP. Fike says all feedlots appear to be the same on the surface, but it takes behind-the-scenes follow-through to keep customers coming back.

“It is hard to deny the success Hays Feeders has in procuring for the brand,” Fike says. “They get cattle enrolled in the program and help producers get information back in their hands. They understand what it means to be a CAB feedlot partner.”



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