Merchandising

*▶ by **Keith Evans***

Web sites sell cattle

One of your best marketing tools, next to having a potential customer visit your farm or ranch, can be your Web site. If you don't have one, get one. If you have one, make sure it is serving you the way it should.

Ways of the Web

The best registered beef cattle Web sites are interesting, stimulating, easy to navigate and very informative. They grab attention and make it easy for visitors to find what they want and to ask questions or request additional information.

Unlike an advertisement that should be short and feature a single benefit, a Web site can be all-inclusive. It can cover as many subjects, in as much detail, as you wish, as long as it is well-written, properly illustrated and interesting. One of the biggest sins in marketing is to be boring.

The best sites I have seen start with an eye-catching home page (opening page) that is much like a good advertisement. Effective home pages use a photograph that grabs the visitor's attention, a headline that offers a benefit and copy that makes the reader want to learn more. The page also highlights additional pages that are available with the click of a mouse. Here is where the good sites really shine. Some have as many as 10 or 12 additional pages for easy reference.

Some of the best ideas I have found for additional pages are:

1. **Ranch history.** People like to know where you have been, as well as where you are.
2. **Breeding program.** Tell what your breeding goals are and how you have reached them.
3. **Herd bull power.** Show the bulls you use, along with their records and other information.
4. **Outstanding dams.** Spotlight the cows that are the heart of your herd.
5. **Cattle for sale.** Take the viewer on a pasture tour of your sale offering.
6. **Commercial cattle program.** If you can help sell customers' cattle, tell them how.
7. **Newsletter.** Mail out your newsletter, but reproduce it on your Web site, too.

A Yellow Headline
on a black background is easy to read.

Red or blue type on a black background is very hard to read.

Script and **ODD LOOKING FONTS** are also hard to read.

8. **Advertising archives.** Display your ads for the past two years or so.
9. **Map to the ranch.** Printed instructions work, but nothing beats a detailed map.
10. **Meet our people.** Good photos introduce everyone who works with the herd.
11. **Satisfied customers.** Use testimonials from your most satisfied customers.
12. **Sale book.** Put your sale book online for all to see and use.
13. **E-mail us.** With one click, connect your address to the visitor's e-mail program.
14. **Information request.** Use a form to let visitors request additional information. Design the form so it provides facts you want to know about potential customers.

Appearance counts

Whether you are just starting out or are overhauling your site, use some professional help. Setting up a Web site requires computer knowledge for setup and ease of navigation. You'll need an expert on visual design. Photographs should look professional, not like snapshots. Writing must be clear, concise and persuasive. Every page should demonstrate a clear understanding of potential customers' needs and wants, and should offer solutions to problems. No one person has all the talent and knowledge required.

Fire up your computer and visit as many sites as you can before you start to design or improve your site. Discover the things that work and the things that don't. You'll see that a black background really sets off colored photos, and that yellow headline type on a black background is easy to read. Red or blue type on a black background is very hard to read.

Font selection is important (see Figs. 1 and 2). You will see that anything smaller than 12-point type causes eyestrain. In many cases, 14-point is better. Script and odd-looking fonts are also hard to read. Lines of type should be short.

Never let a line of type run the width of the computer screen. Instead, use columns of type for easy reading. Many newsletters are spoiled because the type is too small and the lines are too long.

Resist the temptation to put copy over a distracting background. It happens all the time in advertising and Web sites. It may look neat to the designer, but readers hate it. Begin each new page with a headline and photo. Don't get carried away with all the bells and whistles. It takes time for many computers to download motion pictures and other fancy graphics. Long waits can drive people away.

Web sites are no substitute for advertising. The best Web site is of little value if few people see it. Promote your site in all of your ads. Print your Web address on

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Fig. 1: Examples of fonts

Courier   Arial   *Script*
Palatino   Helvetica
Times   Trebuchet
     Swiss

Fig. 2: Examples of font sizes

6-point Helvetica

12-point Helvetica
14-point Helvetica

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business cards, brochures, sale books, stationery, etc.

Link your Web site with as many other beef cattle sites as possible. The better you promote, the more visits you will get.

Keep your site current. One that I visited this fall still had the spring sale book online. Delete old information and add new information at least once a month. Timely information can keep people coming back.

One breeder writes a monthly diary about what's happening at the ranch. It is one of the most read pages on the site. The diary includes photos, updates on people, growing conditions, weather and other activities. "We want people to know about us and relate what we're doing to what they're doing," the author says. "If we miss a monthly diary, people will call to let us know."

The owners of this ranch use an Internet service company to keep the site updated and to track visits. There are many individuals and organizations that provide Web service, ranging from setup to design to site maintenance and more. Before you select one, check their references and visit their best Web sites. Prices and service can vary considerably.

The world, as we all know, is well into the computer age. Your marketing program should be there, too.

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