

Satisfying the Neighbors

Nebraska Angus operation focuses on keeping local bull customers happy.

Story & photos by **Troy Smith**

It's hammered home in "Marketing 101." It's fundamental. Any sales professional will attest to the fact. Whether you're selling widgets or beef cattle, you've got to understand your audience. In other words, you've got to know your target market.

That wasn't too difficult for Ostrand Angus. The Mason City, Neb., seedstock operation entered the business, not too many years ago, by raising a handful of bulls for neighbors. And there are quite a few similarities among neighboring outfits and the Ostrand operation. To be sure, every operation is somehow unique, but Ostrand Angus is finding a measure of success by raising and marketing cattle that suit producers much like themselves. They understand each other.

"I've heard people say you can't sell to your neighbors and keep them satisfied," says Kory Ostrand. "But our first customers were people just down the road, and a majority of our bulls still go to buyers located within a radius of maybe 30 or 40 miles."

Just 27 years old, Kory is a fifth-generation stockman whose registered Angus herd has developed from a nucleus of females purchased for 4-H projects. When he was a high school junior, 13 bulls were offered



► "A lot of people talk about balance. Our balance calls for easy-fleshing, fertile females, but sufficient growth and carcass merit," Kory Ostrand says. "So we're collecting feedlot data, ultrasounding all of our bulls and heifers and using the information to keep and improve the balance."

at auction. This year, 80 registered females were calved and 38 bulls will sell through the annual sale. Still building their herd, Kory and wife Danielle are aggressively retaining home-raised heifers. They are optimistic about the future, particularly since a sixth generation of the Ostrand family will arrive in April.

The couple is quick to credit a strong family support system. Their registered cattle enterprise is part of a diverse family operation involving Kory's parents, Neal and Julie, and his aunt, Kathy Ostrand.

Maternal grandfather Keith Hogg also plays a role in the farming and commercial cattle enterprises. They all understand how things work around here.

Straightforward needs

Cows and crops fit together pretty well in the loess-covered hills of central Nebraska. Where the lay of the land allows, center-pivot irrigation enhances production of corn, soybeans and forage crops, but much of the area is pasture. A "typical" producer grows crops for the cash market but also harvests supplemental feed for a commercial cow herd. In most cases, calves are marketed at or shortly after weaning, after topping the heifers for herd replacements.

Custer County ranks second in the nation for beef cow numbers, with some 100,000 head. But there aren't many really big cow outfits here or in neighboring counties. Like the Ostrand family, most area producers manage small- to mid-sized herds with minimal hired help. Some are true "mom-and-pop" operations. Their seedstock needs can be stated simply enough. They want bulls that will sire calves that are born easily, grow rapidly and weigh heavily on a sale barn scale. Disposition is important too, but calving ease definitely heads the list. A quick analysis of past bull sales provides the proof.

"Calving ease is the biggest customer concern. When potential buyers call, or come to look at bulls, that's what they ask for.



► Calving ease is his customers' first priority, Kory says. "So we pay a lot of attention to calving ease, but it needs to be balanced with performance. For most of our buyers, that means weaning weight."

“Our first customers were people just down the road, and a majority of our bulls still go to buyers located within a radius of maybe 30 or 40 miles.”

— Kory Ostrand

Bulls suitable for breeding heifers out-sell all others. Last year, they brought up to \$1,500 more,” explains Kory. “So we pay a lot of attention to calving ease, but it needs to be balanced with performance. For most of our buyers, that means weaning weight.”

Suited to their environment

Customers also like to know they are selecting bulls born to cows suited to the commercial environment. Ostrands believe in managing the registered herd’s nutrition much like commercial cattle, with an emphasis on grazed forage. By cross-fencing large pastures and applying rotational grazing, they achieve better forage utilization. Weaning the calves in August or early September allows the cows ample time to gain condition, while still on grass.

Cornstalks provide late-fall and winter grazing, with wet distillers’ grains as a supplement. As a rule, little hay is fed until the



► Cornstalks supplemented with wet distillers’ grains provide late-fall and winter grazing. Then, from the January-February calving period until May, cows are expected to graze pastures reserved for calving, supplemented with alfalfa-orchardgrass hay and distillers’ grains.

January-February calving period. From then until May, cows are expected to graze pastures reserved for calving, supplemented with alfalfa-orchardgrass hay and distillers’ grains.

Wanting the genetics to show and the cows to do their part, the Ostrands have stopped providing creep feed to calves. Mother’s milk, grass, water and mineral supplement comprise their calves’ diet until they are fenceline-weaned. Then, bull calves are grown

and developed on a high-roughage ration. Maximum weight gain is not the goal.

“Our best advertisement is by word-of-mouth, when a satisfied customer tells his neighbor that his bull did the job, held together and stayed sound. That’s what we want, and we think it’s what keeps customers coming back,” says Kory.

While a few different heifer development

CONTINUED ON PAGE 162



► The most recent set of cattle that the Ostrands sent to harvest — a pen of mixed steers and heifers — all graded Choice and Prime, and 68% qualified for the Certified Angus Beef® (CAB®) brand.

Satisfying the Neighbors

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 161

strategies have been tried, Kory favors a simple approach. Wintering heifers on cornstalks and supplementing with wet distillers' grains has been economical and has set the stage for good conception rates to synchronized artificial insemination (AI). The cows, however, are inseminated on natural heat.

"We AI for 30 days and turn out cleanup bulls for 30 days. Anything that doesn't get bred is culled," Kory adds.

No excuses

Similarly, no excuses are allowed and no reprieves are granted to the Ostrand family's two commercial herds. Kory's parents and aunt own the spring-calvers and a set of fall-calving cows is leased from his granddad. But rather than selling at weaning or after a backgrounding period, the commercial calves are fed to harvest weight. Additional calves from Ostrand Angus customers are purchased and added to the finishing yard.

Feeding customers' cattle, as well as their own, provides a marketing option for Ostrand Angus customers. It demonstrates confidence in the genetics and shows

the cattle will work in all phases of beef production. It also generates feedlot performance and carcass data, which can be used to make future selection decisions. Data is shared with sources of purchased cattle, too, so those bull customers can use the information to their advantage.

Is feedlot performance and carcass merit important, when a seedstock supplier's customer base consists largely of calf sellers? Kory thinks bull buyers are increasingly aware that it's important to the industry. Conversation with cattlemen visiting the Ostrand Angus exhibit at the Husker Harvest Days farm show and feedback from bull buyers suggest heightened interest in producing cattle that ultimately fit a high-quality beef market. They want to produce that kind of cattle more consistently.

The most recent set of cattle that the Ostrands sent to harvest — a pen of mixed steers and heifers — all graded Choice and Prime, and 68% qualified for the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand. It's only the second time that all members of a home-finished pen have graded Choice and better. That kind of thing doesn't happen often, but the Ostrands consider it a worthy target.

"We don't want to chase carcass traits to excess. It can cost you in other ways, like lost fertility. A lot of people talk about balance. Our balance calls for easy-fleshing, fertile females, but sufficient growth and carcass merit. So we're collecting feedlot data, ultrasounding all of our bulls and heifers, and using the information to keep and improve the balance," says Kory. "Add calving ease and good disposition and we think we're getting the balanced package our customers want."



PHOTO COURTESY KORY AND DANIELLE OSTRAND

Kory and Danielle Ostrand are finding a measure of success by raising and marketing cattle that suit producers much like themselves. They understand each other.



► Good dispositions are a priority among Kory Ostrand's customers.