



# Outside the Box

► by Tom Field, professor of animal science, Colorado State University

## Wanted: Bulls

*One of my favorite cattlemen on the planet, Bart Strang, Meeker, Colo., believes it takes at least two visits to a potential seedstock producer's place before a purchase should be transacted. The first trip is to check out the people, and the second is to evaluate the cattle. His pragmatic approach to selecting breeding cattle is underpinned by the principle that buyers want more than just a bull — they want a bull backed by a philosophy and management program that aligns with the goals of the buyer.*

### Buyers want to know

Imagine all of your buyers took Bart's advice and used their first encounter with you to assess whether or not they wanted to enter into a business relationship. What questions might they ask? For the sake of argument, let me suggest the following direct questions that buyers might ask:

- What are your breeding program goals?
- What is your herd health program?  
How many sick cattle did you treat last year?
- When do you calve? Why?
- How do you develop heifers? What ration do you use? How much money is invested in a bred heifer's development?
- What process do you use to select herd sires for the artificial insemination (AI) program?
- What criterion was used to determine the females to be flushed in the embryo transfer (ET) program?
- How many heifers needed assistance at calving last year?
- What do you feed the mature cow herd?
- Do you guarantee the breeding cattle you sell?
- Were the calves creep-fed?
- What do you do with open cows?
- Can you provide me with a production summary on the dam and her mother?
- What data will be available on the cattle offered for sale?

### Developing an opportunity

These direct questions are an obvious approach to capturing detail about the cattle and their management. However, my experience is that many buyers are either too polite or not comfortable asking

questions that might be perceived as excessively inquisitive. As such, the development of a document, web site or other communication instrument would be an effective way to provide information to prospective buyers that anticipates their desire for answers to these questions. The process of developing such a document also provides the opportunity for breeders to revisit their management philosophies and protocols.

Prospective clients also develop their perceptions of seedstock suppliers from non-direct communication and observation. Understanding the power of these nonverbal cues is important to increasing sales. Giving serious attention to the process of designing the experience of prospective buyers is an important step in building long-term business relationships.

We need to take a few minutes and drive onto our own farms and ranches and ask the questions "What image am I projecting? What does the client encounter in terms of sight, smell, sound and experience? Is the environment inviting? Does the ranch project professionalism, attention to detail, and alignment with the stated goals and objectives of the breeding plan? In essence, does the ranch project the right 'staging' to assure that the product is presented correctly?"

### Compare and contrast

**Ranch A.** The lane to the headquarters is filled with potholes and the surface is a washboard. A calf puller is propped against the barn door. The first employee to encounter the client fails to shake hands and mumbles one-word responses to questions. The barbed wire fence is slack. When the manager provides a tour of the herd, he can't find a calving book, much less a dam summary on the best cows. The cull cows are

grouped with the replacement heifers, and the manure hasn't been cleaned from the alleys or working facilities for months.

**Ranch B.** The lane to the headquarters is graded, and a sign points visitors to the office. Every employee on the farm has been trained to greet visitors warmly, to offer them a cup of coffee until the manager arrives and to ask good questions about the client's interests. The place isn't all white paint, but the fences are well-kept, the equipment is in good working order, and the place exudes pride of ownership. Cattle are well-presented, the data is at the manager's fingertips, and the client is encouraged to discuss goals, needs and limitations relative to genetics.

Prospective buyers who have taken their first visit to 'check out the people' will not likely return to Ranch A to take an in-depth look at the cattle in preparation for making a purchase. Ranch B, on the other hand, is likely to get a return visit as well as receiving word-of-mouth praise for being an outfit that has something positive to offer.

Rich Teerlink took Harley-Davidson from nearly dead to market superstar with a simple management philosophy — tell the truth, keep your promises, be fair, respect the individual and encourage curiosity. These foundation principles allowed the company to understand the questions that people need to have answered, to set the stage for success, and to move the company forward by creating memorable experiences for clients. The same approach can be used to assure prospective clients make the second visit to check out the cattle.

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**Editor's Note:** Tom Field is a professor at the Colorado State University (CSU) Department of Animal Sciences, where he is responsible for the seedstock cattle breeding program of the university teaching herd. He directs the Seedstock Merchandising Team and teaches Food Animal Sciences, Beef Production and Family Ranching. He is a contributor to the research efforts of the CSU Beef-Tec program. A frequent speaker at beef cattle events in the United States and internationally, Field is also a partner in his family's commercial cow-calf enterprise, which uses Angus as an important genetic component.