

New Generation Marketing



College students get experience in seedstock merchandising and sale management.

Story & photos by *Kasey Miller*

The purple-and-white-striped tent is bustling with activity. Prospective buyers are lining up to get their buyer numbers and sale books. The tent billows in the breeze, and the sale participants crowd inside, packing the bleachers and the surrounding areas with a standing crowd.

Conversations and laughter float in the air as old friends gather and new friends are made. Cattle enter the ring, and the auctioneer rattles off the rising bids while ringmen signal takers. This sale is much like any other sale, with one exception: Students did the behind-the-scenes work and planning.

The sale

The Kansas State University (K-State) Annual Legacy Sale has been in existence for 35 years — and each sale has had student participation and responsibilities. Dave Nichols, professor in the Department of Animal Sciences and Industry at K-State, says students are responsible for all of the

planning and conducting of the Legacy Sale.

An incredibly successful heifer was the catalyst for the whole thing. Nichols explains that K-State had a heifer named Manhattan Gal who won grand champion at the American Royal in Kansas City, Mo.; the North American International Livestock Exposition (NAILE) in Louisville, Ky; and the National Western Stock Show (NWSS) in Denver, Co. Winning the “triple crown,” so to speak, earned K-State much attention, and, with that attention, the department started the Legacy Sale.

The first sale was in 1977, and Nichols says he has been fortunate enough to be around for every sale since then, starting as a graduate student.

Back then, he explains, the first sales were breed-specific (Angus, Hereford and Simmental) and featured heifers, yearling bulls and some 2-year-old bulls to help increase lot numbers. Essentially, they conducted breed sales every third year. The sale grew, and in 1987, it evolved into a three-breed annual bull sale

with added select female lots, all of which are from K-State stock. Quarter horses have been the newest addition.

The sale used to be in April to give the students more class time prior to the sale. However, because the long-standing Cattlemen’s Day program was hosted on the first Friday in March for so long (2013 marks the program’s centennial), Nichols says it was only logical to move the student-driven sale to the same day. Cattlemen’s Day has garnered quite a few participants and, he adds, there aren’t many local sales on that day with which to compete.

Because early March weather is always unpredictable, the sale has been conducted in a large, purple-and-white-striped tent at the Purebred Beef Teaching Unit on K-State’s campus. Next year should mark its first year in the new Stanley E. Stout Livestock Marketing & Learning Center. Construction on the new center should begin this spring.

The class

The sale is a big part of Cattlemen’s Day, but the class is an even bigger part of the sale. Typically, about 25-30 students enroll in the two-semester Livestock Sales Management



► **Above:** The Kansas State Annual Legacy Sale has existed for 35 years, and each sale has had student participation and responsibilities. Here, a student (top left) helps keep track of lots sold.

Class each year. It is important to have enough students to get everything accomplished, but not so many that jobs run out.

“The students are in charge of everything but the breeding program and the auctioneering,” Nichols says. “A big lesson for anyone working with the sale is how far ahead of time you have to make decisions.”

Because these decisions are made so far in advance and the sale moved from April to early March, plus how involved the students are in the decision-making process, the class became a unique two-semester schedule. Nichols says the class starts in mid-October and ends in mid-March, a week after the sale to wrap up things.

Sarah Jane Abatti, Holtville, Calif., says the class has a lot of guest lecturers, so students can see the marketing and management techniques of surrounding-area operations. The class focuses on designing and distributing advertising, marketing techniques and photography.

Nichols emphasizes that the class is half learning from experts who have had successful sales and half planning the sale. The students study different types of sales (open, private treaty, video, direct marketing), but the class is more heavily geared toward auctions because that is the format of the Legacy Sale.

Dustin O’Neill, Spearville, Kan., says that a big part of the class is learning about and marketing the sale. He says the students learned how to build a sound management plan and how that is the basis for marketing the product.

A successful marketing campaign, O’Neill says, has to involve listening to customers to find out what kind of marketing plans work best to keep current customers and to gain new

Other student-managed seedstock sales

Kansas State University isn’t the only university with a student-managed sale. Here are some other universities with livestock merchandising classes through which students fully participate in the planning and execution of the sales, along with the type of sale and when it is generally scheduled.

Colorado State University — bull sale, March

Cornell University — beef replacement sale, October

Iowa State University — livestock production sale, January

Mississippi State University — livestock production sale, November

University of Nebraska — bull sale, April

Oklahoma State University — livestock production sale, April

Pennsylvania State University — Angus production sale, October

Virginia Tech University — livestock production sale, October

ones. The class used print, word-of-mouth and online advertisements, and worked with the American Angus, Hereford and Simmental associations and the *High Plains Journal* in placing and creating ads for the sale. Working with the three breeds turned into an opportunity for more exposure.

Abatti adds that many of the assignments had real-world applications, like actually designing their ads for publication in magazines. O’Neill says they had a company make the sale’s website, but the students learned aspects of building a website, too.

Nichols explains that the class uses web, direct mail and traditional print media to market the sale, but it is branching into social media, which is the biggest change to the class and sale.

“We have the advantage that these young people are the best to be doing that,” he notes. “They are much more comfortable using social media.”

The use of social media has had an effect on total costs, too. Nichols says total dollars spent on print media may have decreased this year due to the cost-effective use of social media.

Abatti says they are lucky to have a strong alumni base that comes back for the sale. O’Neill adds that they are trying to add more regional customers from Nebraska, Missouri and Texas. Students are continually trying to increase exposure for the sale.

Biggest lessons

O’Neill says he learned the most about using different media to connect with people who couldn’t attend the sale. Technology, such as the Internet and cell phones, can play a large part of the sale. The class asked Brad Fahrmeier of LiveAuctions.tv to broadcast the sale online to allow potential customers who couldn’t be there in person the opportunity to watch the sale and to bid on lots.

Abatti says she learned the most about sale preparation, both before the sale and the day of. Each of the students was assigned a responsibility for sale day. Generally, the guys were in the back, preparing the cattle and lining them up in sale order, and the girls were up front with registrations and buyer information, but all of them learned about the different aspects that go into sale production.

“My favorite part of the class was getting to meet different producers and learning more about what makes their sales successful,” Abatti says. “The class gained new ideas and helpful advice that we can take back to our own operations in some way.”

Nichols gives much credit to Ryan Breiner, who made the breeding decisions for the cattle in the sale, and Dan Moser, who is the faculty member in charge of the beef unit. The three are all instructors of the Livestock Sales Management class. He thanked the many experts in the industry who came to share their experience with the students, including Galen and Lori Fink, Mark Gardiner, Barb Downey, Mary Ann Kniebel, Brad Fahrmeier, Debbie Norton, Kim Hoffman and more. The credit doesn’t stop there.

“I’m very proud of the students at the sale. They put a lot of work and pride into this sale,” he concludes.



► Dustin O’Neill waits to push a bull to the salering lineup. The girls in the class were up front helping with registration and buyer information, and the guys were in the back preparing cattle.

