

Marketing Angus



Wulf Cattle leverages its marketing power by purchasing bull customers' calves to stock its feedlot.

by **Paige Nelson**, field editor

Marketing is everywhere. We can't get away from it. Someone's always trying to sell us something. What if the company behind that marketing wasn't selling a product solely to make money from its customers? What if that company was actually selling a product to its customers, so that it could in return purchase its customers' end product, thus becoming its customers' customer?

Sounds complicated, right?
It isn't.

Wulf Cattle of Morris, Minn., was first and is foremost a cattle-feeding company, but the casual observer wouldn't know it.

"Since we advertise as a breeding company, and we don't need to spend a lot of money advertising as a feeding company, people think that we feed cattle so that we can sell more bulls," says Jerry Wulf, partner in Wulf Cattle. "We sell bulls (around 600 of them), so that we can feed the kind of cattle that we want to feed."

Basically, says Wulf, they got into the seedstock business to "promote and sell and propagate the type of genetics that we want to see back in our feedyard."

Sale strategy

Because they will sire the next generation of feeder calves, Wulf Cattle does its best to sell the best bulls.

Wulf's Opportunity Bull Sale lands on the last Friday in March every year. All Wulf bulls

are developed in Nebraska, but the sale is hosted at ranch headquarters in Minnesota, explains Casey Fanta, Wulf Cattle seedstock manager.

In years past, every bull went through the ring. Last year, Fanta shipped only 80 bulls to Minnesota for the sale. The rest stayed in Nebraska and sold on video.

This hybrid sale — mixing traditional ringside reality with video bidding — was new for Wulf Cattle, but, Fanta says, they tried to keep things familiar.

"We did have an open house at the ranch, so people had the opportunity to come look at the bulls ahead of time, if they wanted to."

Even with the style change, Wulfs still hosted 800-900 people on sale day.

Wulf's Online Female Sale is on the Tuesday before Thanksgiving and has been strictly an online sale for the last three years.

Transitioning to online-only was a big move for Wulf Cattle, but Fanta says it hasn't discouraged customers.

"We just find more and more that people are busy and don't have the time to get away from home. It allows them to buy at their convenience. I think we've also opened up to some new customers that maybe wouldn't make the trip all the way from the West Coast or the East Coast to a sale, but once it's an online sale, they feel like they're pretty much on an even playing field with everyone else," he asserts.

"If people aren't comfortable getting online, they still use one of our salesmen or let us buy them on order for them," he adds.

Wulf semen and embryos are also up for grabs throughout the year; and, according to Wulf, one-third of the bulls sell via private treaty.

Private treaty is the only way Ivan Howard, GSC Livestock managing director in Wrightsville Ga., and owner of Howard



PHOTOS BY WULF CATTLE

► The Wulf Cattle customer-service team includes (from left) Tammy Mikkelson, Casey Fanta, Nate Knobloch and Jerry Wulf.

From All Angles



► **Above:** While there were some skeptics when Wulf Cattle decided to change its sale format from a live auction to a video auction, the sale still attracted 800-900 people.

Cattle Corp. in Felda, Fla., has ever purchased Wulf bulls. While he has looked through the catalog, he prefers to use Fanta as his reference sheet.

“Ever since the first year purchasing bulls from them, we trust what they say about the bulls,” says Howard.

Basically, Howard says, he explains what he expects, and Fanta finds it for him. It’s a deal that hasn’t disappointed yet.

Advertising

In Fanta’s opinion, the best advertising is word of mouth. Howard couldn’t agree more.

“In this business quality travels by word of mouth faster than it does by advertising. If you purchase bulls from a supplier, or someone you know has purchased bulls from a certain supplier and speaks highly of those bulls, then that to me tells me that the bulls are already proven,” affirms Howard.

Still, Wulfs use other advertising outlets to keep brand recognition strong.

The Wulf Record is published spring and fall. The newsletter features results from the bull and female sales, a customer profile, employee profiles and industry-related topic articles.

“People like the fact that we send something direct through the mail. We also do some direct advertising on private treaty bull sales later in the spring,” says Fanta.

Besides its own semiannual newsletter and sale books, Wulf Cattle also pays for print

and web advertising in prominent cattle industry media.

Along with web advertising, Wulfs manage what Fanta calls a “fairly sophisticated website (www.wulfcattle.com) that’s also quite simple.

“A good website is something that’s always up to date,” he explains. “We use it as a spot to put our sire directory or a sale catalog or to advertise our bull sale or female sale, embryo listings — whatever it may be. ... We don’t have featured herd sires, or featured donor cows because you just never want to get out of date.”

Fanta has found Facebook to be a nice way to direct traffic to the website.

He says social media is easy to get excited about when it comes to marketing, but he is skeptical about its effectiveness when it comes to cattle sales.

“It’s a social thing, and it’s still promoting Wulf Cattle. I just can’t think of anytime we’ve actually sold anything from a Facebook post,” he states.

However, when the timing is right, Facebook is the place to promote great genetics.

A few days before the 2016 bull sale, Wulf Cattle employees took some photos of a bull and posted them on Facebook. That bull ended up topping the sale, explains Fanta.

“I don’t know if it could happen all the time,” he clarifies. “I don’t think that just because we put a picture on Facebook made it happen. I think the timing was perfect, and just because it worked with one, doesn’t mean you could put another on the day after the sale and get the same response.”

Facebook may be the perfect example of good photography at work.

In Fanta’s opinion, a photo should depict the animal accurately. He says his customers care about what the bull looks like, not

necessarily that he is show-ready when the camera clicks. So, Fanta and his team are always ready to snap the photo when they see it. Those photos are stored on file for advertising purposes.

— **Jerry Wulf**

While some photography is hired out, like for the female

sale, Wulf employees do all photography for the entire bull sale book.

Seventy-five to 80 bulls are pictured in the sale book, keeping the cowboys camera-ready.

Occasionally, advertising happens on a more personal level at Wulf Cattle than what words and photos can convey. The ranch hosts an informational seminar called the Calf Run at the Wulf Cattle Depot in McLaughlin, S.D.

“We bring producers in for an evening and have some speakers and some industry reps and feed them a steak just to show them what we have going on,” says Fanta.

Creating incentives

Advertising pricks people’s interest, but who doesn’t love a great incentive?

The three-breed menu has made Wulf Cattle a full-service seedstock supplier. Producing the sires of eventual feedlot calves sold directly to packing plants has given Wulf the right to call his program an “integrated beef production system.”

Between the bull sale and the carcass data, Wulf Cattle offers enticing options to customers.



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The first is obvious. The Calf Buy-Back Program is the name. Buying Wulf-sired calves is the game.

“We have no contracts. We make no promises. We just market over 60,000 head of fed cattle a year. We want those cattle to be our genetics. Ranchers are ok with that,” affirms Wulf.

He says commercial ranchers like to hitch their wagon to Wulf Cattle because they know they will have a good buyer for their calves.

Wulf makes getting data back to his calf suppliers a priority.

Individual data and herd data help ranchers know how their cows and sires compete against each other. Entire feedlot data helps ranchers benchmark their calves against other ranches.

Benchmarking calves against other calves is made easier as feedlot management is the same company-wide. Most of the fed cattle qualify for a value-added program.

“We strive to be the best in the world at raising fed cattle without hormones or antibiotics,” states Wulf.

The strategy to get there, he says, is, No. 1, to start with tailored genetics and No. 2, maintain strong relationships with bull buyers/calf suppliers to allow for integrated health and nutrition programs between

home ranches and Wulf feedlots.

On the flip side, thanks to developed relationships with packers, Wulf Cattle offers incentives to customers on their retired bulls — called the Wulf Bull Retirement Program.

Every spring and fall, Wulf Cattle hosts a retirement party for beef bulls, even those purchased elsewhere. Ranchers bring their bulls. A major packer bids and buys each bull but writes the check to Wulf Cattle.

Ranches that brought one to four bulls receive a \$200 premium per bull on top of what the packer paid. Bringing five to nine bulls gets ranchers \$250. Ten or more bulls brought to the gathering get \$300 additional per head.

Wulf Cattle takes the value of the bull, plus the \$200-\$300 premium, and issues each ranch a credit slip to be used toward the purchase of a Wulf bull.

“It’s actually one of the neatest things we’ve done since we’ve been in the seedstock business,” explains Wulf. “We always look for win-wins. It’s actually a triple win. The rancher likes it. He gets to add value to his bulls. We like it, and we feel that it brings more customers to us. [The packer] likes it because we find them a lot of bulls.”

“In this business quality travels by word of mouth faster than it does by advertising.”

— *Ivan Howard*

“A good website is something that’s always up to date.”

— *Casey Fanta*

Marketing mantra

Incentives are nice, but all the incentives in the world, all the marketing schemes, all the time spent networking means nothing if it doesn’t generate return customers.

Fanta attributes Wulf Cattle’s effective marketing to three principles.

Customer service is No. 1. The Wulf Cattle seedstock program is customer-service focused. Wulfs aim to visit with each customer face to face. Customers know if they purchase a bull at Wulf Cattle, Fanta, Wulf or Nate Knobloch, cattle procurement specialist, will be showing up on their doorstep. That visit isn’t just to check on the bulls or find out last year’s average calf weaning weight.

“We work very closely with our producers and try to know what their goals are and have a good idea of what their cows are. ...

We sit down with them ahead of the bull sale and tell them what they might be lacking or where they need to be,” says Fanta.

“Any problems are taken care of as quickly as

possible. We make sure that our customers always think they’re getting treated in the best possible manner.”

Wulf says the company lives by the proverb: “No one cares how much you know until they know how much you care.”

Truly, their model doesn’t work without reliable, return customers, says Wulf.

“We can’t have a successful, value-added cattle-feeding company if we don’t have ranchers that are providing us with a good product to do it with,” he summarizes.

Besides the versatility and longevity of the bulls, Howard says he’s a return customer thanks to the follow-up service Wulf Cattle provides.

“I like their customer service in that if a bull did come off of a truck with a limp or some other type of ailment, you can call Casey, and Casey will give you several options on how to handle that situation,” he explains.

Howard is impressed by Fanta’s need to know how the Wulf bulls are performing, so he can use that information to improve the seedstock program.

Providing customer service is a team effort. Paperwork buildup in the office can cause just as much headache for bull buyers as a lame bull. Fanta attributes the company’s quick turnaround on registrations, transfers, etc., to office administrator Tammy Mikkelsen.

“She is super efficient, and this efficiency is



► While most think of Wulf Cattle as a seedstock program, partner in Wulf Cattle Jerry Wulf says the real motivation behind selling bulls is to be able to fill its feedlots.

very instrumental in customer satisfaction,” states Fanta.

Produce a product. “If you’re producing Coca-Cola®, it can’t taste different every time,” Fanta jokes. “You can’t just throw whatever in your machine and hope it comes out the way it’s supposed to.”

He says at Wulf Cattle, mating decisions are managed carefully. Because the company is creating sires for its future feedlot inventory, genetic lines must perform all the way to the rail and do so in varying environments.

Know demand. According to Fanta, a seedstock producer might know the type of cattle he or she wants to breed, but they must have customers that want the same thing. Then, those animals have to work for the customer. If they don’t, something needs to change to keep demand strong.

In Wulf’s mind, the feeding company creates the demand for the seedstock business by purchasing feeder calves from bull buyers. It then sustains demand by sending back health data, carcass data and feedlot performance data.

“A big part of price discovery depends on the track record, the history, that we’ve built



PHOTO BY GERRY KUGLIN FOR BROWARNY PHOTOGRAPHICS

►A photo should depict the animal accurately, says Casey Fanta, seedstock manager for Wulf Cattle. He says his customers care more about what the bull looks like than if he is groomed and show-ready.

on their cattle. As that report gets better, because their product gets better, we can reward them with a higher price in any given market,” says Wulf.

Marketing surely matters, and Wulf Cattle has certainly found a full-circle marketing strategy that refuels itself year after year. By

finding a way to become the customer of its customers, Wulf Cattle has ensured a steady future for the long-term.



Editor’s Note: Paige Nelson is a freelance writer and cattlemaster from Rigby, Idaho.