



PHOTOS BY STEVE SUTHER

In the Middle of It

Texas seedstock supplier makes connections.

by *Miranda Reiman*

A middleman isn't always a bad thing. Rather than take a cut of the profits or add complexity to an otherwise simple process, Angus seedstock producer Tommy Donnell does the opposite for his bull-buying customers.

"We don't buy calves from our customers, but we help them sell the calves if they want us to," the Graham, Texas, rancher says. "We do as much or as little as they want."

Donnell and his wife, Janet, operate Donnell Cattle Co. with the goal of helping customers make more money.

"Customer service has to be our key," he says. "These guys place a lot of confidence in us when they buy our bulls. We tell them the calves will be worth more, and if they'll cooperate with us, we'll help get them marketed where that can happen."

Donnell will make the phone calls or put his customers in touch with buyers.

"We're trying to get ranchers to work more directly with marketing groups or feedyards," he says. "It helps them get a better price, and the feedlots have a shortage of these high-quality cattle."

Understand customer needs

Before taking on full management of the fourth-generation family ranch in 1994, Donnell owned an animal health business. When he took over the cattle operation, it still included a commercial herd. Both of

those experiences helped him understand today's commercial customers, he says.

"With production costs fixed or rising, the only way ranchers can improve their situation is to raise a more valuable product," he says. "That's where we can fit, to help them offset some of those higher expenses that they don't control."

Breeding goals at Donnell Cattle Co. include a "focus on all of the economically important traits," he says, "starting with maternal function. That's the group of traits that affect the main functions of the cow — fertility, adequate milk,

sound feet and legs, moderate mature size, good disposition."

He also includes efficient growth and carcass traits.

"All those things are important in the beef animal," Donnell says. "We tend to balance those traits of economic importance, in order of importance. Our customers

can address all those issues with the same animal."

Value added

Keeping good records is the first step to ensuring he's producing the right kind of bulls.

"We are continuously collecting data over each animal's life, either performance or ultrasound measurements of the carcass," he says. "By the time we get those animals raised, we likely have 30 pieces of information on them. It's said more businesses fail for lack of good information than any other reason."

Donnell customers may be less likely to have that problem, and they use data to improve their herds.

"Some of these commercial folks can use the numbers better than registered guys," he says. "They're using the data and making good matings. As a purebred Angus operation, we provide them with the bulls to complement their cows and produce a more desirable product."

That means everything from calves that gain and grow to animals that marble and satisfy beef eaters.

"When a consumer goes in and eats a steak, he's looking for the best quality piece of meat. He doesn't want to be disappointed, ever," Donnell says. "Certified Angus Beef® (CAB®) is leading the industry, being in tune with that consumer demand. Along with the leadership and database of the American Angus Association, we have a formidable

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► **Above:** Tommy Donnell takes issue with the thought cattle all look the same when the hide comes off. That's when you notice the differences, he says.

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force in the beef industry.”

He often shares the perspective that cattle should be more than commodities.

“I was talking to a sale-barn operator one day and he said, ‘You know, they all look the same when you get the hide off of them anyway,’” Donnell recalls. “I had to take issue with him, because that’s when you do notice a difference — they look a lot more alike with their hides on than with their hides off.”

That difference is the real basis for value-based marketing, he says.

That’s why Donnell aims to sell genetics to make his customers’ calves worth more, on the hoof or on the rail.



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