



PHOTOS BY STEVE SUTHER

# Service and Leadership

by *Miranda Reiman*

**K**nowing their customers' needs, successful seedstock producers proactively lead customers to the best information and marketing options in a changing industry.

"We're trying to add value to our customers' calves," says Kevin Hafner, vice president of operations for Express Ranches. The 8,000-head commercial and registered Angus and Limousin business at Yukon, Okla., sifts through all the promises to find alliances and programs that reward customers.

"We've had to be pretty diligent in trying to get aligned with some that had the staying power and the reputation to make the whole thing work," Hafner says.

One option they point customers toward is targeting cattle for the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) Natural brand through a retained ownership program with the Beef Marketing Group (BMG). The network of 14 feedlots in Kansas and Nebraska currently has five yards devoted to natural production.

"We have a customer ownership package that fits many quality-focused Angus bull customers," Kenny Wiens, BMG procurement director, says. "The producer of cattle with high-quality genetics will benefit the most if they can sell them to a packer with a grid that's favorable for that type of cattle."

BMG sells on a proprietary grid with Tyson Fresh Meats, and all retained-ownership customers have the option to take the related premiums and discounts. They also get a \$100-per-head-premium for all calves that remain in the natural program and still more incentives for those that are source- and age-verified.

"We want to build relationships with progressive producers that have integrity,"



► "You can have the best cattle in the world, but if you don't take care of them (customers) after the sale, they won't be your customer for long," Hafner says, pointing out service still drives the bus when it comes to marketing.

► "We're trying to add value to our customers' calves," says Kevin Hafner, vice president of operations for Express Ranches.

Wiens says. "By doing so, we should get higher-quality cattle and more opportunities for profit at every stage of beef production."

BMG looks to ranches like Express to find Angus bull customers who want such relationships.

"The right purebred suppliers add quality to the product, and they can draw attention to the program," Wiens says. "It's also one tool that breeders can use, helping market the calves of their bull customers."

## Taking the opportunity

Hafner sees that opportunity and is encouraging customers.

"Everybody asks me, 'How do I get data back on my calves?'" he says. "The reality is that you should explore possibilities of retaining a percentage of the ownership through the feeding phase to take advantage of the genetics you have purchased."

Calves must meet strict qualifications to be eligible for CAB Natural: They must be individually identified, and never receive antibiotics, implants, ionophores or animal byproducts. Along with the qualifications for natural, to be accepted they must also meet all CAB specifications.

"We are very stringent with our quality control program," Wiens says. "Our quality control staff requires affidavits and supplier approval forms. They also conduct supplier evaluations."

And before they even get that far, they have to pass the Wiens gate. "I need to make sure that the quality of the cattle meets our specifications and fits into the available harvest slots," he says.

BMG tracks all its cattle in a database, so

CONTINUED ON PAGE 196

## Service and Leadership

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 195

its staff will know if they want them back next year.

“If we feed a set of cattle and they do poorly, we’re not too interested in buying them the next time,” Wiens says. “The reverse is also true. If they have good cattle that perform well in the feedlot and the packing plant, with a high percentage Choice and CAB, then we’re going to aggressively pursue those cattle.”

Hafner knows Express customers who fit that mold and want to get involved with a program that sorts to hit its precise target. The BMG program offers a percentage (partnering) or full ownership, and shares the carcass, performance and health data with

**“The [customers] who  
are truly happy are the  
guys I got lined up with  
AngusSource, because it  
worked for them.”**

**— Kevin Hafner**

producers who retain some ownership or have “verified” calves.

Express customers already find value in documenting their calves through the source-, age- and genetic-verified AngusSource® program.

“The ones who are truly happy are the guys I got lined up with AngusSource, because it worked for them,” Hafner says. “It

didn’t cost a lot of money, and aside from the little bit of paperwork, there’s no up-front extra work.”

Express helps customers with some of the required documentation and can serve as a link connecting the commercial producer to the feedyard.

“At the end of the day, although they buy cattle from Express, they want to deal with a person,” Hafner says. “They want the relationship and to know that, if there’s a problem, one of our staff is going to take care of it.

“Service still drives the bus,” he says. “You can have the best cattle in the world, but if you don’t take care of them after the sale, they won’t be your customer for long.”

For Express Ranches, that added customer service includes pointing them in directions that will help add value.

