

# Technology-driven Seedstock Marketing

Customer satisfaction is still No. 1 goal.

by Joann Pipkin, freelancer



►Whether via private treaty or production sale, it's all about customer service, Galen Fink maintains.

**G**alen Fink remembers a time when marketing his seedstock began a couple of weeks before his production sale. Today, it's a different ballgame.

"It's 365 days a year," Fink says. "Basically, how much you put into it is what you get out of it."

Fink isn't alone. While nearly swallowed whole in a sea of technology-driven marketing trends, fellow Angus breeders Randy McCabe and Dru Uden also realize the value customer service has on seedstock marketing.

From websites and social media to online private-treaty sales and video auctions, successful seedstock marketing still comes down, first and foremost, to customer service.

## All about customer service

Fink, who along with wife Lori, and daughter Megan, operates Fink Beef Genetics near Randolph, Kan., knows marketing Angus seedstock is all about the customer.

"If you don't take care of your customers and do things to try and help them, then you're probably not going to have a lot of extra customers, or those customers will find

another seedstock supplier that will take care of them," Fink explains.

The Finks started their Angus herd in 1977 and have literally built their operation from the ground up, having begun with "one cow and debt," he says.

Early years in the Angus business found the Finks marketing cattle within a 50- to 75-mile radius of home, especially the bulls.

"That's really changed," Fink says. "A couple of years ago I looked it up, and within 100 miles of our place there were 17 Angus production bull sales. Obviously, there are more bulls [on the market] than what can be sold in this area."

It would seem, though, the Finks have brought a little foresight full circle. Back in 1988 they began an extensive embryo transfer (ET) program, a visionary move when it came to cooperating with other cattlemen. By leasing cows from other breeders, Fink was able to grow his herd with limited land, equipment and labor.

Through the years, he's gone from selling seedstock via private treaty to a full-fledged production sale. His first bull sale back in 1990 featured 35 bulls with buyers bidding atop bales of straw and the bulls housed in

simple hotwire pens. Gradually, growth took the Finks to a tent and later to a sale barn before constructing their own on-site sale facility.

"I think private treaty is great if you have a lot of time, but from the aspect of getting the job done, the sales really work well for us," Fink says.

**"Customer service is a huge, huge part of what we do."**

— Randy McCabe

Whether via private treaty or production sale, though, Fink maintains it's all about customer service.

"We always try to come up with something new that will keep customers glued to our program," he says.

Today, the Finks market about 700 bulls a year — primarily through a production sale — and thanks to technology, do so without ever putting an animal in the salering.

Prior to the sale, all of Fink's bulls are filmed on video. At auction time, eight large TVs mounted in the sale arena display video of each bull, one at a time, as buyers try their hand at the bidding. Fink says it takes an average of 35 seconds per bull for the sale to be complete.

"The video is a lot less labor out back," Fink explains. "People like that they can load their bull and get on their way."

CONTINUED ON PAGE 64





► Fink says effective marketing comes down to personal contact, word of mouth and personal herd visits.

All in all, for Fink, effective seedstock marketing comes down to three keys:

1. Personal contact. “You can’t beat it,” he says.
2. Word of mouth. According to Fink, “What people say about you is life or death.”
3. Make herd visits. Especially with new customers, Fink says getting to their farm is incredibly important within the first year or two. “You have to look beyond your own fence,” he says. “Honestly, I can’t help anybody market (their cattle) until I’ve been on their place and know how they operate and what their cows are.”

### Call it creative expansion

Fink isn’t alone with his “customer-driven” mind-set. Fellow Kansan Randy McCabe knew changes needed to be made in his operation to make room for children that wanted to be involved in the family business.

A previous family partnership dissolved in 2005 and the operation became McCabe Genetics, which today includes sons Flinton and Ethan. Flinton is responsible for purchasing one to two potloads of calves each week — many of which are from the operation’s bull customers. He then implements a risk-management plan for those cattle at the time of purchase. Ethan manages an on-site starter yard, where he tackles everything from health protocol to preparing the cattle to go to commercial feedyards 45 days later.

“We get a lot of information back on

how the cattle perform,” McCabe says.

Another change the McCabes made to their operation was in partnership of bulls from their cooperator herds.

“As time goes on, it gets more and more difficult to buy another ranch and stock it with cows,” McCabe explains. “The writing is on the wall. If you want to bring someone else into an operation, you obviously have to create more cash flow. This was a way we could do that without going out on a limb.”

Today, the McCabes market about 500 bulls a year with more than two-thirds of those being cooperator bulls.

“We bring these in from herds that share our goals in the kind of genetics that we want to offer at weaning, develop the bulls and then market them through our program,” McCabe explains.

Instead of marketing bulls from 250 cows they own, McCabe says working with cooperators allows them to substantially broaden the number of cows they have producing bulls.

Ultimately, McCabe calls it “creative expansion,” as these programs helped them not only expand their own operation, but also offer added service to their customers.

“Customer service is a huge, huge part of what we do,” McCabe explains.

Flinton spends considerable time on the road and McCabe says that’s also helped

them improve their customer service.

“If you want to set yourself apart,” McCabe says, “[offer] customer service and bull development, and then back up your product if there is a problem with it down the road.”

### Know your customer base

Franklin, Neb., Angus breeder Dru Uden echoes McCabe’s comments.

“Customer service is everything,” he says. “It’s more than doubled the requirement of my time, staying in contact with the customers, helping them market their calves.”

Uden has seen the gamut in seedstock marketing. In operation for 66 years, TC Ranch itself has hosted a production sale for coming up on 44 years.

“Before I was even around, no one had production sales,” Uden explains. “Marketing was done via consignment sales. Then, it moved into production sales.”

Overall, Uden says the size of production sales has grown. Breeders also have more marketing options now with online sales and video auctions among the growing trend in selling cattle.

“These options have allowed more people to participate in our sales without having to be here,” Uden explains. “It gives us a better way and ability to provide a customer service and helps expand our customer base.”

Uden goes on to say marketing technology has brought more interest and inquiries to

**“The options in seedstock marketing are always changing. It’s an ever-evolving industry. Everything anymore is driven by technology.”**

— Dru Uden

their program and has helped them reach out to people that perhaps knew about their program but hadn’t had an opportunity to connect with them.

“Customers today are more informed, more knowledgeable,” Uden says. “They’ve spent twice as much time researching

their purchases than they used to. Part of that is due to the data that is available now.”

One tip to successful seedstock marketing, according to Uden, is knowing your customer base and what they like.

Uden says cattlemen are in a transition time right now between those producers who are technology driven and those who are not.

“Our job as seedstock producers is to make sure that data is correct and accurate, and that technology is, number one, cost-efficient.”

### An everyday job

For Angus breeders like Fink, McCabe and

Uden, having industry connections is top priority as they seek to provide quality service to their customers.

“When someone calls and wants to sell 200 head of commercial Angus cows, knowing where they can go with those, having the connections, is a huge part of it,” McCabe explains.

“We used to be so caught up in the everyday aspect of raising cattle that we didn’t think about all of that,” McCabe continues.

Fink was a pioneer in the seedstock industry for helping customers market their calves. Beginning in the mid-1990s, the Finks sponsored a sale at their local livestock

auction, where they organized and grouped customer cattle.

Over the years, the feeder-calf sales went by the wayside and Fink now offers an email blast that is distributed to about 250 stockers, feedlot operators and others in the beef industry.

“Any time our customers sell calves, bred heifers, cows, if they let us know, then we can get that information out for them,” Fink explains. The email blast covers customers from Florida to west Texas and places in between.

“The options in seedstock marketing are always changing,” Uden emphasizes. “It’s an

ever-evolving industry. Everything anymore is driven by technology.”

As customers become more comfortable buying cattle via technology-based options, McCabe says it’s vital for producers to stay proactive, educated and on the cutting edge of that technology.

“If we’ve learned anything, it’s that preparation for next year’s sale starts the day after this year’s sale,” McCabe says. “Marketing is an everyday job.”



**Editor’s Note:** *Joann Pipkin is a cattlemoan and freelance writer from Republic, Mo.*