



Service and Solutions

Customer service before and after the sale provides solutions.

by *Kasey Brown*, associate editor

As soon as you walked into this shoe store when I was growing up, the owner greeted you warmly by name and asked about your family. After a few moments of small talk, he would ask what he could help you with. He would carefully listen to what type of shoes you needed, and would measure each foot to ensure a perfect fit in the shoes he would bring out for you from the back.

He watched you walk in them and noticed if they didn't look comfortable in your stride. He never made you feel rushed to decide which pair you liked best. He took your preferences into account when finding your shoes. While this type of attention rarely gets paid at big box stores, fortunately, it is still prevalent in the beef industry. Service like this has not gone to the wayside.

In a time when the Angus business is booming, there are more and more Angus genetics being used. How do you set your herd apart? Customer service is the solution.

Bookend of service

Steve Stratford of Stratford Angus of Pratt, Kan., spent 20 years as a cattle order buyer before returning to his family's farming and cattle operation to be the fourth generation on the ranch. Formerly a dairy and then a Simmental operation, Stratford switched to registered Angus 12 years ago.

As an order buyer he was asked to find bulls with specific traits.

"It was a natural migration. I was helping some customers find bulls, so I decided to start raising them myself," he says.

The operation had a tradition of embracing technology. His parents were early adopters of artificial insemination (AI) in the 1970s, and he embraced genetic profiling even before Angus Genetics Inc. (AGI) was formed.

Stratford is a big believer in gathering all available data. The added genetic information benefits his customers and his own genetic decisions. Every animal on the place, including the 750 females, has a high-density genomic profile. This much data on the cattle helps him provide the necessary genetics for his customers, and to know exactly which animals might benefit his customers most.

He sells primarily to commercial customers. While many of those customers are in Kansas or adjacent states, he sends bulls, feeder cattle and bred heifers all over the country. He works hard to provide the genetic solutions his customers need. He delivers about 90% of his bulls to customers and gets to see about 75% of the progeny of the bulls he sells.

Relationships are a big part of the cattle business. Most of his bull customers are a direct extension of his order-buying business, so they have been with him for 15-20 years — they are near and dear friends. During drought years, he has helped procure hay or native grass. He adds that he's helped customers find anything from mineral to trucking.

While he is starting a production sale offering "heifer bulls" and several females, he plans to keep many bulls for private treaty. Most of his clientele like private treaty, and he says that if something happens and a customer needs a bull at a specific time during the year, he'll have some available.

However, one of the biggest areas he helps with is marketing. He never really left order buying, because he uses his experience to help market his customers' calves.

"We can't buy them all, but if I've got a customer in my trade area who is selling their calves, we either buy them or we run second," Stratford explains.

All told, he calculated that he buys about 15,000 of his customers' calves per year. His extensive relationships with feedyards help him place that many cattle.

"I work really closely with a lot of these feedyards, so I get the data back — the feed conversions, the gains, health, how they perform on the grid, so on and so forth," he explains. "Then I can get that information back to our customers."

In addition to passing the information back to his commercial customers to help improve their genetic selection decisions, he passes information to the feedyards about those calves.

"I'm going to relay on the breeding information, performance data that we have, the health care protocols, some things that the everyday rancher doesn't know the avenues to go through to list those things that add value to their calves," Stratford adds.

"The cattle business to me is somewhat





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started Lemmon Cattle Enterprises. Now, in addition to providing strong genetics to his commercial cattlemen, he helps market his customers’ calves and bred heifers, and by figuring out the best way to maximize the income on open heifers.

If customers have open heifers, he suggests that they feed those heifers for freezer beef instead of selling them at the sale barn. This way the heifers don’t get sold to someone to go into a herd, and his customers make more from the freezer beef sales than they would have at the sale barn.

“We’ve always been up front that we will help work through problems. We’ll make things right; it’s important to have a good relationship with your customers,” Lemmon explains.

Relationships with customers help them get the bulls they want and need. His experience has shown that smaller-scale breeders tend to do the most research on their bulls because they don’t want to make a selection mistake.

“If you try to convince them to buy a bull, they’ll never be as happy as if they had picked him out themselves. We give a few options based on what they are looking for, but we never try to push a bull on them,” he offers.

This summer will be the 44th year in business for Lemmon Cattle Ent. Experience and heavy industry involvement have taught him much about the industry, and he shares that information with his customers. Lemmon has participated in cattlemen’s associations and the Beef Improvement Federation. He has served several terms on the state and national cattlemen’s beef boards for the Beef Checkoff Program, and he has served on the American Angus Association Board of Directors, serving as president of the organization in 1988.

Using industry tools like expected progeny

differences (EPDs) since their inception has built a reputation of quality. He has proven that quality by participating in nearby bull tests for many years.

“We all have good black bulls, but the reputation and 30 years of selection focus on carcass, performance and reproductive, EPDs show that there is more behind these,” he explains.

“I think it’s all about customer service. There are too many people that have cattle for sale; people can buy cattle anywhere, but they are looking for more than that. I want them to rely on our predictability and assurance of having good cattle. The Angus business is a people business, and people want to know that the cattle will perform and they can trust the people they are buying from.”

Providing solutions

Customer service is just as important before the sale as it is after. Donnell Brown of R.A. Brown Ranch, Throckmorton, Texas, says, “It is easier to sell what people want to buy than it is to try selling what you want to raise. It is our duty to help customers get what they need more efficiently, effectively and profitably to produce beef using their available resources.”

All too often, he adds, seedstock producers think of themselves as genetic providers instead of solution suppliers. He recommends shifting the thought process behind many aspects of seedstock production. Instead of focusing on providing purity for the customers, he says think of providing profit for the customer.

For example, instead of just using DNA in place of measuring traits, he suggests using DNA because it measures traits so you can continue making the fastest progress possible. With an abundance of EPDs, it is easy to select single traits for maximums without regard to the consequences of increased input costs, he noted. Selection indexes that include both output and input can lead to a multitrait genetic selection for increased profit for customers.

Ultimately, he shares, he realized a shift in the primary reason to be in the cattle business once he changed his goals to become a solution supplier. Instead of being in the cattle business to enjoy the lifestyle as a byproduct of land ownership, he said a solution supplier more efficiently feeds the world and enhances profitability of the business model that can make it more sustainable.

Customer service, both in genetic selection decisions and customer relations, is a mainstay of the beef business. Impeccable service can make customers feel like they’ve found the perfect pair of shoes.



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of a network of marketing. It’s a system of who you know and people and contacts. Bull customers buy bulls from people — they trust you and they rely on you. They’re very loyal people. If you are vested in their business and they know you’re working hard for them — not just when you’re selling the bulls, but you’re there to help them market their calves and there when they need advice — you’re going to have those people forever unless you do something to lose their trust.”

Lifetime of knowledge

Harvey Lemmon of Lemmon Cattle Enterprises, Woodbury, Ga., agrees. He has a lifetime of cattle knowledge that he works to share with his customers.

“Cattle was my thing since birth,” Lemmon laughs. He grew up in Virginia next to the Mount Regis Angus Farm. The herdsman, Caroll Grove, took Lemmon under his wing when Lemmon was about 8 years old.

Lemmon got a job as a herdsman at Millarden Farms after graduating from Virginia Tech in 1969, which took him and his new wife to Georgia. In 1971, the pair

