



by Bruce Gordon

Signs of the Times: Taking a cue from the commercial sector

Commercial cattle producers have always wanted problem-free cattle that produce the most amount of return. Unfortunately many seedstock producers — no matter what breed — often lose track of this basic fundamental.

For instance, I often see seedstock producers who tend to focus too heavily on one or two traits, and it eventually costs them customers.

Another mistake I see is producers who do the same thing year in and year out with their genetics and marketing. Because of this, little advancement is made and no new customers are attracted.

Thus as a purebred breeder, it's important to ask yourself from time to time if you are meeting the commercial industry's needs and adequately servicing that clientele.

Meeting the need

How can you offer problem-free cattle? It is a reputation that is earned by herds over time. It includes putting all the little elements together in cattle matings to excel over your competitors. Competitors are not only those within your breed, but also other breeds, because you are all vying for commercial customers.

Examples of the problem-free details include exceptional udders, sound feet and legs, fleshing ability, calving ease and disposition, along with the major traits of growth, maternal and carcass. These are all important because commercial producers are not going to spend the time or dollars to deal with things like problem udders or sluggish calves at birth. Instead,

they'll look for genetics in the future that are proven to require less maintenance.

I knew one purebred breeder who explained the balance of genetic selection using a wagon wheel with eight spokes. Each spoke was a trait: 1) Fertility;

- 2) Maternal; 3) Growth;
- 4) Carcass; 5) Disposition;
- 6) Soundness;
- 7) Repeatability (the ability to produce progeny as good or better as the cow herself); and
- 8) Longevity.

He said, "I'm looking for an animal that ranks an 8 to 10 in all of those categories. A cow that has a few 10s in some of those areas and 2-4s in other areas represents a wheel with some weak spokes, and that wheel will eventually break."

To further the analogy, he said a wagon wheel with weak spokes would have never gotten the pioneers across the country, just as a cow with weak traits will not do well in the long run for a seedstock producer.

That said, to put together a purebred herd with a problem-free reputation you need to know your direction and cull rigorously. Also, keep an eye on other purebred breeders who have been successful raising problem-free cattle and emulate their actions — without getting sidetracked with trends that don't match your goals.

As you set the course for your herd, integrate that focus into your marketing efforts so customers know what the emphasis is with your cattle.

Service adds value

Another aspect of meeting commercial producers' needs is

providing service and helping them capture more dollars. This gets back to that fundamental — commercial producers place value on calves that generate more returns be it at weaning, harvest or heifer replacement time.

Providing service has been talked about a lot in the industry in the last couple years, but I still only see a handful of elite seedstock leaders doing an exceptional job at this.

What services are lacking? We need to go beyond herd visits and offer assistance in marketing our customers' calves. This might include helping call (or e-mail) potential buyers about the calves, introducing your commercial customers to feeders and other industry leaders or even inviting them to go to industry conferences to learn more about issues and improving the genetics in their herds. I also know several seedstock producers who send their customers a gift subscription to industry publications to help keep them in tune with current beef issues.

Being at the sale barn when your commercial customers sell their calves is also a powerful message of your support back to them. Doing so creates a long-term relationship between you and your customer for years to come.

All of these actions translate into purebred breeders who have successful sales year after year because they are providing problem-free cattle and services that add value for their customers. Our industry has several breeders who have done well at achieving this status, and it is because they listened to the commercial sector.

