



Marketing in Action

Capturing video of cattle for sale is the latest advancement in the marketing world.

by **Christy Couch Lee**

It's been said a photo is worth a thousand words. But, what is it worth to see that photo in action?

To folks involved in videography, the answer is: priceless.

Video is the latest marketing tool to be utilized by progressive cattlemen across the country. Videos can be packaged as DVDs to be mailed to potential customers and uploaded to ranchers' Web sites for viewing around the world.

Mark Sneed, Maximum Exposure, Ewing, Ill.; Jason Barber, Superior Productions, Ft. Worth, Texas; and Joe Van Newkirk, Newkirk Herefords, Oshkosh, Neb., all have witnessed and experienced the success of video. They say by following a few simple guidelines, you, too, can find success with this latest advancement in the marketing arena.

How they began

Although they perform different functions within the cattle industry today, Sneed, Barber and Van Newkirk

all share a common thread — a lifetime in the cattle industry.

Sneed was born and raised in southern Illinois and exhibited cattle from an early age. After high school graduation, he began a consulting business — buying, selling and fitting cattle.

Realizing in recent years that more than 90% of his cattle sales were a result of photos on his Web site, he took matters into his own hands — taking his own photographs and building his own Web site.

"Neighbors started calling me, asking me to take pictures for them," Sneed says. "One thing led to another. And, five years ago, I bought a camera and went to the National Western Stock Show (NWSS) in Denver. I've been on the road virtually every day since."

Last May, Sneed discovered the possibilities of videography during photo shoots he was conducting in conjunction with Superior Productions.

"It was very obvious to me that this is where we're going," Sneed says. "No matter how good I am or any other photographer is in the country, not one of us can take a

picture as good as a video. The video doesn't lie. It is what it is."

Sneed says his video business has exploded, and he now runs four video crews across the country, which can be shooting simultaneously. Video now comprises 75% of his business, he says, and this year, he plans to triple his 2009 business of shooting more than 100 herds.

"There's such a demand for it — it's been really good to me," Sneed says. "And, I've had an awesome clientele, which has made me look very smart."

Barber was raised on his family's century-old Hereford ranch near Channing, Texas. Actively involved in showing Herefords on the national level, he served as president of the Texas Junior Hereford Association.

Barber earned his degree in animal science from Texas A&M University (TAMU), where he worked at the TAMU Beef Center and was a member of the 2004 national champion livestock judging team.

He began his career with Superior Livestock Auction in January 2007, editing videos and producing and directing commercial

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cattle auctions. The following November, Barber joined Superior Productions, a division of Superior Livestock Auction focused on marketing livestock through video production sales and private-treaty Internet listings.

In addition, he says, Superior Productions also produces television shows, including “The American Rancher” and live events mostly broadcast on RFD-TV, and videos for Internet or DVD. Today, Barber focuses much of his work on videoing cattle for sales, maintaining client relations, and interviewing and videoing segments for “The American Rancher.”

“Videoing your cattle is a progressive way of marketing cattle that accommodates today’s buyers,” Barber says. “I believe to be successful in any business you have to continue to adapt and you get left behind if you don’t take advantage of the technology that is out there.”

Joe Van Newkirk manages 400 Hereford cows on the ranch established by his grandfather in 1892.

For three years Van Newkirk has hosted his production sales through Superior Productions, broadcast on RFD-TV. He says using video was a matter of logistics, and it simply made marketing sense.

“When you try to have a bull sale in January in western Nebraska, weather can be a problem,” Van Newkirk says. “Travel can be a problem. It helps some of our customers who don’t want to fight the roads, and they seem to be very comfortable using it.”

Not only does it make logistical sense, but video also can make promotional sense, Sneed says.

Video victories

Sneed says he believes cattlemen feel more confident purchasing cattle via video versus photograph.



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“If they can just see them for 30 seconds walking around, that’s all it takes,” Sneed says. “If you’re a good cowman, you know whether or not you need to buy that animal.”

For producers who are marketing their cattle, video also offers the opportunity to answer potential customers’ questions.

“If someone has a question about your bull or female, just suggest they watch the video,” Sneed says. “There are often so many questions about how one walks or whether they have too much front. That customer can just watch the video. It is what it is.”

So, what are the best ways for producers to get a high-quality video? These cattlemen offer a few suggestions:

Steps for success

①— Be prepared

Sneed and Barber agree: first and foremost, a producer must be prepared.

“When the light’s good and the weather’s good, you’ve got to go,” Sneed says.

He recommends cattle be slick sheared at least five days before a scheduled shoot.

“If I schedule to be there on the 10th, you’ve got to be ready on the 5th,” Sneed says. “If I’m at another gentleman’s location and it starts raining, I need to come to your house, and we need to go today. It’s not going to be a factor if the cows have a little manure on them. Cows have manure on them.”

Van Newkirk says they do not wash their cattle before videotaping them. However, they do keep them in their larger pastures to prevent them from getting too dirty, he says.

②— Get on the calendar

Barber says it’s important to contact your potential videographer in plenty of time for them to get the job done. He says Superior aims for at least 30 days of lead time prior to an online sale and at least 60 days before a sale to be broadcast on RFD-TV.

“We recommend contacting us 30 days or more prior to the sale so that we have time to videotape the cattle, edit the footage, produce DVDs and also send our clients the information for their sale catalogs before they go to print,” Barber says.

③— Look the part

The animals to be videoed should be in proper condition for the environment they’re in, Sneed says.

“You need them to look like cattle that fit in that country,” he says. “You don’t need them to be overly fat. It’s what fits that country.”

For example, to show cows in production, shoot video in the spring.

“If you have an October sale, don’t worry about shooting video in September,” Sneed says. “Shoot the video when they look good — when you’re able to see their udder design.”

④— The perfect pen

Sneed and Barber believe the proper size of pen is critical.

“You can’t take proper photos or videos without a proper pen,” Sneed says. “The pen should be flat. You don’t want them going uphill or

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Joe Van Newkirk

downhill because they'll look coarser or they'll look off in their hip."

Barber says the sun should ideally be behind the photographer, and he aims to shoot video from 9:30 to 4, to harness the best lighting.

Sneed recommends pen dimensions of about 125 x 125 ft., as cattle have room to walk and are not nervous by being too close to people.

"A lot of people like to shoot in 40 x 40 ft. pens, but the cattle never get a chance to get out and stride," he says. "If I'm going to watch a video, I don't want them stopping and staring at me."

Ideally, Sneed says, a producer will have a lot of pen devoted to video and photography shoots.

"Many producers want to use a dirt feedlot," Sneed says. "Cattle just

don't look good on that. I like to have cattle out on deep grass, where they're meant to be. That ground is the most valuable piece of property a breeder has because that's going to be the appearance any potential buyer will see."

⑤— Harness the help

In addition, Sneed and Barber say, a producer must be certain he has plenty of help on video day. The number needed is dependent on how many it will take to have 20-40 cattle ready to go at a time, Sneed says.

"We're only going to take three minutes to video one, so we need to have plenty ready in a pen to video," he explains.

Producers should also not treat the video shoot as a showing,

with too many people in the pen working the cattle, Sneed says. Barber says about two people in the pen are adequate.

"I like to let them out and relax," Sneed says. "And when they come in, you'll get a more accurate appraisal of their movement because they're not as nervous."

Van Newkirk says their key to success is to work their cattle on horseback and to use a videographer that is also a good cattleman.

⑥— Use them effectively

Sneed says, without a doubt videos should be uploaded to your farm or ranch Web site.

"It's worldwide," Sneed says. "From a cost-effective standpoint, it's just a must."

Do-it-yourself dos and don'ts

Think you have what it takes to shoot your own video? Mark Sneed, Maximum Exposure, Ewing, Ill., and Jason Barber, Superior Productions, Ft. Worth, Texas, say it's doable, as long as you follow some words of advice.

Good equipment is essential

Sneed says if you choose to shoot your own video, invest in good equipment.

"You can get by with a relatively cheap \$300 camera for still photos," Sneed says. "But, for video, we're using TV cameras. The editing programs we use are also high quality. There's a big difference between going to Best Buy and buying a video camera versus purchasing professional video equipment."

Sneed says a major difference between professional-grade and lower-quality cameras is the zoom.

"When you go with a cheaper camera, you have to be pretty close to them, because they can't zoom in," he says. "I like to be quite a distance from those cattle — 100 to 125 feet from them. They don't get nervous, and you get a more gentle and realistic movement. With these high-end cameras, we can pull them in very close, and it's still very clear."

Analyze all angles

Sneed says a good video provides a view of the animal from every angle.

"Sometimes that's not the most flirtatious look, but it's an honest look," he says. "We want to show testicles on bulls and udders on females, and coming at us with the chest floor, and going away with the hock set. We don't try to cover anything up. We're just trying to show all the positive and negative

aspects of an animal. It's only fair to the customer to be able to see it."

Composition is critical

Sneed says a basic understanding of good photography composition and techniques serves a videographer well. He and Barber recommend using a tripod rather than holding the camera in your hands.

"People try to walk around the cattle with the camera — I've even tried it," Sneed says. "You need Dramamine® to watch the video because your camera is bouncing all the time. Make the camera stable."

Patience is also critical, Sneed says.

"Cattle are uncontrollable," he says. "They really don't understand you're shooting a video and exactly what you want. The people in the pen need to be easy and low-key. Just let the cattle walk."

Camera height is a detail often overlooked, Sneed says. If your camera is at the same height while shooting calves and mature bulls, the camera angle will be off.

"We try to shoot from the natural stance where you'd look at cattle," Sneed says. "For calves bring the camera lower, so you're not just looking at their backs and tailheads."

Barber says the shot should be cropped tightly on the animal but not so tightly that the head, feet or tail is cut off. In addition, the camera movement should be fluid with no fast zooms or jerks of the camera.

Whether you hire a professional or take matters into your own hands, video promotion is the next generation of cattle marketing. Take the proper steps, and see how it can be worth more than a thousand words to you. **HW**

In addition, many ranchers are now packaging DVDs of their offering with sale catalogs and flyers.

“That’s really the next generation,” Sneed says. “Breeders don’t need still photos of anything not in the top third of the catalog. The cattle look better on video.”

Van Newkirk says they typically mail out about 100 DVDs in the weeks previous to their sales.

“People call and request the videos, and they seem to like them,” Van Newkirk says. “I’ve never had any negative feedback.”

Packaging DVDs with catalogs works well for ranches with slow Internet connections or ranchers who may be intimidated by the Internet, Sneed says.

“Ranchers can sit down in the recliner with a cheeseburger, a bag of chips and a drink and pop the DVD into the TV and watch cows walking around,” Sneed says. “That’s where their heart is, and that’s what they love doing.”

⑦— Time it right

An advantage of videography is how quickly it can move. While it can take up to four days to photograph 150 head, it’s no problem to video that same number in one day, Sneed says.

Sneed and his crew typically shoot three to four minutes per animal and edit it down to a 30-second clip for DVD or online viewing.

Barber agrees. He has shot video for breeders offering 60 to 800 head. Once, he was able to video more

than 2,200 head in two weeks for breeders in Montana.

⑧— Make sure it’s worth it

Van Newkirk says the investment can be significant in broadcasting your sale on RFD-TV through Superior Productions. So, he says, you must ensure you have a quality product that’s clean and attractive. In addition, he says, you must have the volume to warrant the expense.

“When buying time on Superior, we didn’t want to be rushed in the sale,” Van Newkirk says. “We are still running the bulls through the ring on sale day. We bought plenty of time because we didn’t want to start hurrying the bulls through — that’s counterproductive.” **HW**