

CHB — Gaining Market Share



Retiring CHB President Jim Mickelson says the continued growth and success of the CHB program is all about the people behind the brand.

by *Christy Couch Lee*

Success isn't based on one person or one action. It is the culmination of many hardworking, driven and focused individuals working together for the greater good.

And according to retiring Certified Hereford Beef (CHB®) President Jim Mickelson, Santa Rosa, Calif., that is exactly the scenario for his term on the CHB board of directors.

His term has been marked by a multitude of staff changes and a revised marketing approach now focused on the consumer. These strategic marketing adjustments are leading the way to continued growth in the marketplace, and are ultimately laying the groundwork for a successful path for the future of the CHB brand.

"We appreciate the support and direction Jim has provided for the brand," says CHB Chief Operating Officer and General Manager Amari Seiferman. "His tremendous insight helped take the brand to the next level."

The man behind the brand

Mickelson and his family own and operate Sonoma Mountain Herefords, a registered Hereford operation that currently consists of 250 head of mother cows.

In 2003 Sonoma Mountain Herefords got its start with the purchase of the remainder of the Kunde Herefords herd, which dated back to the 1940s.

"My wife's family had been producing cattle for more than 50 years, purchasing the Kunde herd really set our own cattle operation in motion," Mickelson says.

Jim and his wife, Marcia, oversee the operation, while their son, Bobby is in charge of day-to-day activities as the ranch's herdsman. Jim and Marcia's daughter, Jamie, is involved as well; she's responsible for the show string and their branded beef product — Sonoma Mountain Beef Co. Bobby's wife, Heidi, also helps when needed, along with their two sons, Weston and Carter, who are already showing enthusiasm toward cattle production.

While not involved extensively in the showing, the Mickelson family shows cattle at local, regional and national shows including the Western Nugget Hereford show in Reno each year.

The Mickelsons implement extensive use of artificial insemination (AI) to top national horned and polled Hereford sires, as well as execute an active embryo transfer program for both their spring and fall cow herds.

Bulls are marketed each year as long yearlings or 2-year-olds in the ranch's production sale, through which they market about 50 head each fall. Select bulls are consigned to the Red Bluff Bull Sale, where Sonoma Mountain has had several grand champion and reserve grand champion bulls.

The Mickelsons also market females to commercial and registered breeders throughout the western United States.

Sonoma Mountain Herefords has been a Gold Total Performance Record (TPR™) Breeder for several years. In 2007 the operation was selected as the California Beef Cattle Improvement Association Seedstock Producer of the Year.

To educate the public, the Mickelsons operate sustainable tours in conjunction with their winery operation so that the public can see firsthand how the cattle are raised, including during calving season.

“We host farm-to-table events, and often pair Kunde wine with our daughter’s Sonoma Mountain Beef product,” Mickelson says. “We also have a video playing in our wine-tasting room, which shows not only the winery and vineyard operations, but also photos of Hereford cattle. The consuming public likes to feel good about the product they bring into their homes to feed their families, but they also want the knowledge that the producers take good care of their stock. Sustainability and compassionate animal practices is important in California, and we see this trend only continuing to gain in traction throughout the United States. It’s really worthwhile to educate our consumers.”

Mickelson not only operates Sonoma Mountain Herefords but also serves on the Kunde Family Winery Board of Directors, and is president and chief operating officer of Jerry and Don’s Yager Pump and Well, a water well pump and drilling business, which operates throughout northern California — he purchased the business in 1984.

Mickelson has served as the California-Nevada Hereford Association president and was on the polled and horned merger committee for that association. He has been a junior advisor for the California-Nevada Junior Hereford Association, currently serves on the Western States Hereford Association, and is a past director of the Sonoma Marin Fair. He has also been a member of the American Hereford Association nominating committee.

The vision

When Mickelson accepted the task of CHB president, his goals were simple: to see CHB become more strategic with marketing plans and continue to ensure its growth and success.

“When I came in, CHB was struggling a bit from an organization and staffing standpoint,” he says. “But through these last three years, CHB is now focused.

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The Mickelsons market females to commercial breeders throughout the western United States.



The Mickelsons market their bulls through an annual production sale on their ranch.

The staff knows exactly what should be done under the direction of Amari in order to ensure success of the brand. Under her leadership, the program has grown, and she has done a tremendous job of bringing on a talented staff to help her do just that.”

The promotion of CHB has seen great advancements as well, Mickelson says.

“The time and energy our staff puts into marketing and promoting CHB is amazing,” he says. “They’re on the road a lot, and they’re away from their homes and families a lot. It’s not easy to find people as dedicated as our staff is. We have a great team.”

Focused branding

With strategic marketing of the brand, a new premium CHB website has been developed and launched.

“The website has a new, updated premium look and functionality,” he says. “Its main job is to help market beef, as well as serve the breeders, who must get involved and demand the brand.”

Mickelson says the enhanced packer relationships are among the greatest accomplishments of the organization during his time on the board.

“Our packers are doing a great job for us, and Amari has worked to ensure we have a successful ongoing relationship with those companies,” he says.

The development of the CHB Premium program has also brought great benefits to the CHB brand, Mickelson says.

“With a premium package, it shows we aren’t just another product — we are a premium product,” he says.

“Also, ready-to-eat foods are in demand, as people don’t take the time to cook as they used to. The marketplace is definitely ready for our product, and we are definitely ready for it, too. We are right where we need to be.”

The role of the breeder

The advancements made within the organization are beneficial. But the greatest promotion of the CHB brand occurs with the breeders, Mickelson says.

“The new website is a great tool, but the strongest way for the brand to advance is by breeders communicating the benefits of their product — by getting out there, talking about CHB and demanding the brand,” he says. “Because of the way CHB is structured, we can’t afford to put a large staff into the marketplace, and that’s where breeders can help. When you’re out to eat in a restaurant, ask for CHB. When Marcia and I travel, we talk about wine and CHB to restaurateurs, wait staff and nearby patrons. Then, we drive people to the website to get people connected with CHB.”

Mickelson says consumers trust those in production agriculture when they have the chance to visit face to face.

“The more we talk to the consumer on a daily basis, the more trust and confidence we build,” he says. “When we’re traveling, shopping or enjoying a meal — stop and talk to the consuming public. They are your ultimate consumers. You have to eat it and sleep it and talk Hereford cattle with whomever you meet. We must tell our story. The more awareness we create, the more people will ask and seek out CHB products.” **HW**

Q&A with retiring Certified Hereford Beef (CHB®) President Jim Mickelson

Q: What has been the greatest challenge during your term as CHB president?

A: Our greatest challenge is getting our premium product recognized in the marketplace.

What we have to offer is a superior product — it’s unique, it’s wholesome and it’s produced by Hereford breeders who are passionate about Hereford cattle.

Q: How would you summarize your tenure on the board and as president?

A: As directors, we meet and give direction to the staff. Ultimately, the staff does the heavy work and makes it all happen. Our job is oversight.

We have been fortunate to have good people on staff, and our goal is to bring great marketers and business-minded



people onto the board to give the staff the tools to go out into the marketplace and to position CHB as a premium product.

Q: What do you see as the greatest strengths of the Hereford breed and its breeders, as a whole?

A: The greatest strength of Hereford cattle is the longevity of the Hereford bull and the breed’s docility, as a whole. Our children are hearing impaired, and it means a great deal for them to be able to walk into a herd of Hereford cattle or bulls and not worry about them being out there.

The product produced by these Hereford cattle — CHB — is second to none. CHB beef is tender and flavorful. It truly is a premium product.

Q: What do you see as the future of the CHB program?

A: I see the potential for tremendous growth, but it will take more bodies in the field to do that.

We used to market toward the commercial cattleman and the purebred breeder, and not as much toward the consumer. The biggest thing we have done in the past couple of years is change that marketing focus to the consumer.

As we continue this strategic switch, we will need more cattle being certified into the CHB program. By marketing to the consumer, our hopes are that we will enhance the demand and change CHB from being a push brand to a strong pull brand in the premium beef arena.

Going forward, purebred breeders and ranchers must get out and talk about CHB and the importance of it. **HW**