

Small Can Be Mighty

Marketing strategies for smaller seedstock operations.

by **Kindra Gordon**

How can seedstock operators with a small cow herd market their genetics and stay competitive in today's beef industry? *Hereford World* posed that question to three individuals to share their insights, including Marilyn Lenth, Lenth Herefords, Postville, Iowa; Shannon Worrell, Worrell Enterprises, Mason, Texas; and Kansas State University (K-State) Professor and Cow-calf Extension Specialist Bob Weaber.



From Iowa

Marilyn Lenth's secret to marketing is, "I take a lot of time with our customers, and I enjoy it," she says. She and husband, Doug, run 85 registered Hereford cows and have the herd split to calve in winter and fall. Doug

and his parents, Elden and Bea, started the cow herd more than 50 years ago and sold bulls and females via private treaty throughout the years. When Marilyn and Doug married 11 years ago, she brought a love for cattle and technological talent to the operation.

Now retired from a former career in information technology, Marilyn has created her own database on the cows and tracks everything from rate of gain to herd health — information which is also shared with customers. She has even created color-coded stats sheets for customers, allowing for easy review and comparison of various expected progeny difference (EPD) traits.

The Lenth's still sell private treaty, but they have added their own personalized service. For example, many customers will reserve a heifer or bull prospect from the herd even before the calf is weaned. The Lenth's winter the calf and allow

it to develop before delivering it to the customer. On a heifer they may even work with the client to determine a suitable breeding sire and artificially inseminate (AI) the heifer for the client.

"I like to say it's our own version of a heifer development program," Marilyn says. Sometimes customers will select a package — a group of heifers and an appropriate outcross bull. She notes this process works well because many of their customers are also small commercial or purebred operators.

Recently, the Lenth's have had several new younger customers who are getting started as well as a few who are newly retired and, because of the docility of the breed, love having Herefords around. A few years ago, Marilyn was even contacted by a gentleman in China. Originally from Ohio, he was preparing to move back from overseas and wanted to have a group of Herefords ready for delivery when he returned.

Marilyn credits their website for bringing in such an array of customers. "Our website is our primary marketing tool," she says. Her tracking reveals about 60 percent of their sales are related to their web presence.

"Find your niche," she advises other cattle producers. "It's not going to be the same for every operation."

Additionally, she encourages, "Get involved in your state association, state sales, consignment sales. That opens doors."





From Texas

Shannon Worrell recommends marketing efforts include a combination of digital and print. She calls a website “a must,” adding, “Have a place on social media. Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are free,

but there’s also a time and place to spend money on a full-color ad in your breed magazine.”

Shannon and her husband, James, and son, Jarrett, are fifth- and sixth-generation Hereford and Angus breeders. Worrell Enterprises includes show and sale cattle, an AI and embryo facility, a private sale ring and guestrooms. The enterprise holds an annual online sale with a focus on selling steer and show heifer prospects to youth — about 50 head per year — as well as selling a limited number of bulls. To boost the numbers in their sale offering, they have partnered with another breeder. Shannon notes finding a partner can be beneficial for smaller operators.

Building relationships is key for anyone in the seedstock business. Over the years, she and James have worked with and mentored many young exhibitors who were, or became, clients. “You have to go to the stock shows and participate in state and national breed events,” she says.

To further promote a program at these events, Shannon is also a fan of offering swag like hats and sweatshirts branded with a company logo to youth. Additionally, she says it is of utmost importance for smaller producers to cull inferior quality and only sell their best stock in order to keep a top reputation.

From Kansas

Admittedly, smaller-size seedstock operators can find it difficult to market 10, 20 or 50 bulls on their own. And a decade ago, a source quoted in one *BEEF* magazine article forecasted these producers would need to “get bigger, get aligned, or get out.” When asked if that statement still has credence, K-State’s Bob Weaber offered these remarks.

“Marketing a small number of bulls is challenging. As a smaller breeder it’s hard to offer some of the services like a calf buy-back program or nationwide free delivery. But, it may be easier to provide a high level of customer attention and service since you’ve got a smaller number of clients

with whom to connect,” he says. Thus, he advises smaller breeders to actively cultivate a local market for bulls.

Weaber is a professor and cow-calf Extension specialist who has been at K-State since 2011. Weaber also serves as central regional secretary of the Beef Improvement Federation and is a co-coordinator of the National Beef Cattle Evaluation Consortium education programs. The focus of his Extension and research programs has been to broaden the availability, use and understanding of genetic selection tools — EPDs, DNA markers and selection indices — and performance data collection schemes implemented by cattle producers.

Another strategy Weaber suggests for smaller breeders is to develop a set of cows with recognizable pedigrees through AI and embryo transfer work.

“As a small breeder, genomics can help significantly improve the accuracy of the EPDs used in selection and marketing,” he adds.

As a result, Weaber explains, the combination of recognizable pedigrees and a solid performance evaluation/genomics program helps bigger commercial customers have confidence in a producer’s program and products. “As a small breeder, the odds of producing the next ‘great one’ are pretty slim, instead, concentrate on breeding solid bulls that progressive commercial cattlemen will invest in with confidence,” he says. “Then when the great one shows up on your place you’ve got a reputation from which to market the animal to another seedstock breeder or AI stud.”

Additionally, small-size seedstock operators may consider aligning with other breeders to put on a joint production sale. “This can be very effective,” Weaber says. “Some work together to sell a larger number of bulls from one breed; others put on a multi-breed marketing event with breeds that are complimentary to each other and fit in a planned crossbreeding system. Alignment in pedigrees, bull development, vaccination/health protocols, guarantees and delivery all add to value of the program.”

As well, working together can help spread the expense of advertising and producing a sale catalog across a larger number of lots pooled together.

Should your operation pursue this partnership sale strategy, Weaber advises making it easy for customers to do business with you as an entity by having a single point of contact or lead marketing person for buyers to contact. “Keep it easy for buyers,” he emphasizes. **HW**

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