

# Common Goal

Three herds share common goal of building and maintaining a reputable seedstock operation by satisfying customer niche.

by **Troy Smith**, field editor

**B**esides sharing the same first initial, what do T.J. Curtin, Tim Ohlde and Ty Byrd have in common? Well, each of these men is associated with a successful seedstock operation, so all must be pretty good at the people business.

It's been said that raising and marketing seedstock really is a people business, because it's all about satisfying people. Whether a seedstock supplier calls them customers, clients, patrons or buyers, the target audience consists of cow-calf producers seeking satisfaction of certain needs and wants.

Of course, cow-calf producers are a diverse lot. No two of them run operations that are exactly alike. Their production environments can vary greatly with regard to climate and feed resources. Management methods and marketing goals also vary. Consequently, it behooves a seedstock breeder to know his or her people — that segment of the market they can best serve.

Let's look at how the aforementioned breeders do it. The operations of Curtin, Ohlde and Byrd are divergent geographically, and so are their core clientele. How does each define his particular portion of the seedstock market and keep his customers satisfied?

## Curtin Land & Cattle

Located amid the flat farm fields of central Illinois, Curtin Land & Cattle includes grain farming and trucking enterprises, as well as a registered-Angus herd. Angus cattle have been a part of the Blue Mound-area operation for almost 80 years. Most of the

60-70 bulls offered annually sell through the firm's annual auction, along with 30-40 females. Additional bulls are marketed through the Midland Bull Test in Montana and at private treaty.

Curtin says his customer base is composed primarily of cow-calf operators located in the Corn Belt.

"One of our goals is to raise some high-end bulls that could complement other seedstock operations, but producing bulls that will work in commercial herds is our main focus," says Curtin, noting that most of the bulls go into herds of modest size, including many "mom and pop" operations with 25-30 cows.

While raising cattle may not be their primary endeavor, Curtin's customers are serious about it. They aren't shy about telling him what they want.

"Time and labor are limiting factors for most buyers, so calving ease and gentle dispositions are really important to them," says Curtin. "Since most sell calves at weaning, they want rapid, early growth.

They like to see big spreads between birth weight and weaning weight. Eye-appeal is important, too. So, while it's not a major

focus, we try to not lose sight of the show-cattle industry."

Curtin conducts customer surveys and the results help drive his breeding program. Customer response shows a growing desire for information customers can use to make selection decisions. They use performance data and expected progeny difference (EPD) values, but they are

interested in additional information. DNA-testing has become a routine practice, with DNA profiles provided for all sale animals. Curtin also has hosted meetings to explain genomics and how genomic information is included in the calculation of Angus EPD values.

"DNA-testing isn't cheap, but I believe it's worthwhile," says Curtin. "Our survey showed that over 80% of our customers think genomic information has value. They like it, and I find that encouraging."

## Ohlde Cattle Co.

Tim Ohlde hasn't always raised the type of cattle for which Ohlde Cattle Co. has become well-known. Forty years ago, the Palmer, Kan., cattleman was involved with progeny testing of large numbers of cattle representing multiple breeds. He raised some "big-framed" cattle that were popular at that time and sold club calves as well as feeder cattle. It was profitable, but Ohlde really didn't like it.

"I had been around some really good performance Angus in the 1970s, and they were truly moderate-framed cattle. By the mid-'80s, I decided that somebody needed to preserve some of that kind," says Ohlde.

Starting with a handful of cows and a few carefully selected sires, Ohlde focused

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on producing particularly efficient, fertile females, while maintaining optimum rather than maximum growth. Stacked pedigrees afforded consistency of type. Ohlde soon found that his type preference also resonated with a growing segment of commercial producers.

“Our customers want bulls that produce females of moderate size, but with a lot of capacity and exceptional fleshing ability. With that comes lower maintenance costs,” Ohlde states, noting that his customers want low-input cattle that work on grass.

Many Ohlde bulls go to “tough country,” including eastern Wyoming, southeastern Colorado and northeastern New Mexico. Buyers from these areas often run extensive operations where cattle graze year-round with minimal supplementation. Typically, they feed little harvested forage. Some Ohlde customers are calf-sellers, but many hold onto their weaned calves and graze them as yearlings. Ohlde genetics also have gained acceptance among Argentine and U.S. operations producing grass-finished beef.

“I’m a fanatic about udders and structural soundness, and most of our customers think the same way,” adds Ohlde. “They want longevity — cows that might stay in the herd until they’re 17 or 18 years old. They don’t want to cull young cows because of bad udders or foot-and-leg problems. And a lot of guys are telling us that they don’t want a lot of milk. They don’t want a milk EPD that’s over 15.”

Ohlde says most of his customers want to produce calves that exhibit fast, early growth, but not the kind that keep growing frame. Consequently, they don’t want bulls with really high yearling weight EPDs. When choosing bulls, many buyers use the \$W multi-trait selection index, a bioeconomic dollar-value (\$Value) index representing weaned calf value. They also pay attention to \$EN, representing cow energy value.

Summing it up, Ohlde says his bull buyers are content with a little less production output when that is more than offset by lower input requirements.

### **Byrd Cattle Co.**

With headquarters near Red Bluff, Calif., Byrd Cattle Co.’s circle of influence reaches into 16 states, but the heart of its customer base consists of commercial cow-calf operations in northern California, southern Oregon and northern Nevada. Within that region alone, Byrd bull buyers manage commercial herds on coastal ranges, in the mountains at elevations up to 7,500 feet and on the high desert of the Great

Basin. All of those production environments can be harsh, with conditions reaching extremes with regard to both temperature and precipitation.

Ty Byrd says his family’s seedstock operation faces the same challenges, particularly the effects extreme weather conditions have on forage resources. They understand why customers seek seedstock that can perform on what a ranch produces. Like their customers, Byrds graze their cattle “rough.”

“We’ve had to breed low-maintenance, feed-efficient cattle, because we’ve often been in situations where we had more cattle than feed,” says Byrd. “We’ve been forced to eliminate cows that were open — anything that couldn’t perform under extreme conditions.”

The Byrd breeding philosophy shuns extremes for any single trait or EPD, preferring to optimize production. Buyer feedback confirms the need to focus on convenience traits, including temperament, mothering ability and udder quality.

Customers want bulls offering low birth weights and above-average growth. Bulls must be capable of siring females with the ability to deliver a calf and breed back year after year in an unforgiving environment.

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Byrd says the \$W selection index serves the goals of most bull buyers, but even calf sellers are increasingly cognizant of the need for carcass merit.

Due to their customers’ need for low-maintenance cattle, as well as their own, selection for feed efficiency is emphasized. During development, Byrd bulls are tested for residual feed intake (RFI), a measure of net feed efficiency that can be used to select for lower maintenance and feed consumption, without affecting body size and growth rate, and without affecting carcass characteristics. Byrd Cattle Co. lays claim to one of the largest privately owned RFI databases in America.

“We think it’s essential to customer profitability that we push for greater feed efficiency, considering that feed accounts for up to 70% of production costs on most cow-calf operations,” states Byrd. “Data shows that, through improved feed efficiency, a ranch’s carrying capacity can be increased by 10% to 15%.”

Byrd says customers now look to the family firm for more than seedstock. Many seek advice in developing breeding programs to achieve their respective goals. Many customers also turn to Byrd Cattle Co. for marketing assistance.

“We now place or help with placement of over 80% of the calves raised by customers using our genetics exclusively,” explains Byrd. “We aren’t just a supplier of genetics anymore. We feel we have to do more, and that means we have to know our customers well.”

### **Final thoughts**

Curtin and Ohlde also see growing expectations for customer service. The seedstock supplier must be prepared to take on the role of consultant. Increasingly, customers want advice — not only with regard to genetic selection but marketing, too. Knowledge of all beef industry segments and business savvy makes the seedstock supplier a more competent advisor. It also inspires customer confidence.

The seedstock industry is competitive. Long-term success hinges on not only the product, but the breeder’s willingness to stand behind it. Curtin, Ohlde and Byrd say that is an essential element of customer service. It’s the stuff that builds and maintains a good reputation.



**Editor’s Note:** *Troy Smith is a freelancer and cattleman from Sargent, Neb.*