



PHOTOS COURTESY OF JIM GILLES

# DIRECT MARKETING DEEP DIVE

An experienced Angus producer from Kentucky shares his journey to direct marketing.

by Kindra Gordon, field editor

**Y**ou have to be flexible,” says Jim Gilles as he talks about direct-marketing beef to consumers. Gilles raises Angus cattle in conjunction with his parents and operates Hill View Farms Meats as a custom meat sales business on the family farm. They are located near Owensboro, Ky., which has a population of about 60,000.

It’s a labor of love that began in 2013 by selling beef quarters, halves and wholes. Requests for smaller quantities of beef prompted Gilles to foray into retail beef sales via a booth on Saturdays at the local farmer’s market.

Today, the business has amassed a large following for its high-quality Angus beef and has expanded to include additional locally raised food products in a full-fledged retail store on the farm, as well as offering online sales.

Gilles notes that the journey to direct-marketing to consumers includes developing schedules with processors, creating USDA-approved labels, pursuing marketing efforts to attract customers, and a commitment to consumer education.

## The COVID effect

“COVID-19 bolstered interest of local food products with a bevy of new customers,” he shares. “We had several days of people standing at

our door waiting for us to open.”

However, it also created challenges. Gilles lost some processing dates and experienced product shortages for a time. He and his staff devoted time to customer education and explaining to people why there were shortages.

He added call-ahead and curbside options and quickly created an online store.

“You have to be able to pivot,” he says of the changing consumer needs.

Additionally, he tells others interested in marketing directly to consumers to be prepared — and knowledgeable — to provide customer education.

“Folks ask a lot of questions. They have a lot of wrong information, which they often get online, so you

Above: “You have to price the product in order to make money — which is usually above the grocery store prices,” says Gilles, “but you are also incurring a lot of costs that those grocery stores are able to spread out over multiple items.”

have to do a lot to explain why you do what you do.”

That said, building trust and relationships with customers is key to success with direct marketing, Gilles reports. “Consumers enjoy connection with the producer. They don’t get that at the grocery store checkout.”

Through word-of-mouth, happy customers share their experiences with family and friends, which helps attract new direct-sales customers.

## Growing the business

When Gilles first started direct-marketing beef in 2013, he was selling the retail equivalent of about one head every month and a half for the first six months. Today, he sells up to four to six head per month depending on time of year.

“Overall, with sides and retail, we are selling about 120 head a year,” he reports.

To others interested in direct-marketing ag products, he candidly shares, “I think the education aspect in terms of communicating to customers is one challenge a lot



Jim Gilles still has a booth at the local farmer’s market throughout the summer season, but his on-farm retail store has helped stretch beef sales to be a year-round business.

of people don’t think about, especially if you are one of the first folks in your area to offer this new service. The hardest part for me starting out in the retail sector was figuring out [how] to effectively move all of the beef cuts so you don’t have an oversupply of a few items. Today, it’s about employee management and customer

excitement in terms of offering new or different products and experiences.”

Gilles also cautions, “Don’t overlook insurance; it’s an important part of any business.”

Regarding economics, Gilles advises, “Keep a good record of your expenses, and watch your local markets and grocery stores. You have to price the product in order to make money — which is usually above the grocery store prices, but you are also incurring a lot of costs that those grocery stores are able to spread out over multiple items. This is where communication and education come into play, as the consumer usually does not realize what all goes into bringing that cut to them.”

On the cattle production side, Gilles is harvesting beef and pork every month for his business. He works with three different processors that are 1.5-2.5 hours away from his farm and store.

“Each one has their own way of doing things and also different rules,” he says, “but it’s good to

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In the beginning, Gilles says figuring out how to effectively move all beef cuts was his greatest challenge. Today, it’s employee management and creating customer excitement by offering new or different products and experiences.

have the options in case of scheduling issues.”

### Product source

Gilles says his family is primarily a seedstock operation, and all cows are bred by artificial insemination (AI).

“We are constantly watching our genetics for different reasons,” he notes. “As the meat side of the business has evolved, we have started looking at different ways the sires we choose help to develop well-marbled, lean muscle. Our feeding and finishing changes monthly dependent upon what a group of steers may be needing. We have different stages for each group, and their ration depends on where they are in that stage.”

### Tried and true tactics

For others interested in dipping their toes in the direct-to-consumer

waters, Gilles offers these tactics that have helped his business become viable.

- ▶ **Offering samples at a farmer’s market is a great strategy.** “It’s amazing how much product you sell when you do samples. Whatever item we sample, we sell a ton of that day,” he notes.
- ▶ **Good photography is key to marketing.** Gilles notes that photos of raw meat can be challenging to make look good for social media, and at the farmer’s market meat has to be in the freezer instead of on the table like produce. Thus, he suggests investing in good photography of both raw meat and prepared meat to help promote your product.
- ▶ **Be creative.** Hill View Farms Meats hosts various events — think school tours, yoga on the farm, educational sessions/classes, and an annual farm-to-table

dinner to draw a variety of clients to their farm and retail store.

- ▶ **Work with partners.** To expand his offering, Gilles has partnered with other local producers from pork, poultry, eggs, cheese and milk to spices, dry goods, fresh produce and bakery products.

“Most people come to our store for the meat products,” he says, but the additional products have helped increase revenue.

He also offers gift baskets of meat and other goods.

- ▶ **Think year-round.** Gilles still has a booth at the local farmer’s market throughout the summer season, but his on-farm retail store has helped stretch beef sales to be a year-round business. He uses winter as a time for education events and more one-on-one interactions with customers.

### Resources to get started

For those seeking assistance in starting their own direct marketing of beef, Gilles suggests their state department of agriculture is a great place to start, in addition to their state extension service. Both may have helpful information.

“Every state, and even county/city, is going to have different rules about sales of meat products,” he adds. “And it’s also good to check with your state and county health departments to see what regulations you may have to follow, as well.”

The USDA website has some good resources for individuals wanting to get started in meat sales, he concludes.

Learn more about Gilles’ business at <https://www.hillviewfarmsmeats.com/>. |

### Additional considerations for direct marketing

Finishing a few animals and selling beef direct to the consumer can help cattle producers earn some extra revenue. In addition, it can help meet the demand of consumers seeking locally raised beef and wanting to know the producer. A checklist of considerations includes:

- Consider the effort required to produce cattle that offer a quality end product. This includes genetics, feed and finishing ration, and health of the animals, as well as working with a processor to establish processing dates and details for packaging the product.
- If selling quarters, halves or whole carcasses, consider providing customers a form that allows them to specify the type and size of cuts desired — such as steak thickness, roast size in pounds, and how many pounds in hamburger packages.
- Consider offering information to help educate. For example, customers new to this experience may need recommendations on the packaging decisions, as well as education on how much freezer space their beef will take, and how to properly thaw frozen beef. Recipes and cooking tips may also be welcome information.

Editor’s note: Kindra Gordon is a freelance writer and cattlegirl from Whitewood, S.D.