

GET MORE BIDS ON VIDEO



In his calves' description on the video sale, Jordan Willis informs the buyers what type of feeds the calves will be on prior to shipping day: native range, crop aftermath, etc.

Wyoming cattleman shares tips for selling on video, starting with Angus genetics.

by Paige Nelson, field editor

Imagine shopping for a new stock trailer online. You visit the dealer's website and right at the top of the page is a nice 24-foot (ft.) aluminum trailer made by a well-known manufacturer. You've seen these trailers used all over cattle country. On the specification (spec) sheet there's information about where it was built, the materials used, weight tolerances, warranty information, etc.

Just below the "reputation" trailer sits an equally beautiful 24-ft. aluminum trailer. The pictures look great. It's got all the visible features you want. The manufacturer is one you've never heard of, and a quick internet search doesn't provide much more than a basic website. The spec sheet is sparse at best. No warranty.

You get the sales representative on the phone. He doesn't know

much about these trailers other than he's sold a few of them here and there to people you don't know.

Which trailer do you buy?

Obviously, even if you do purchase the off-brand trailer, you're not willing to pay the same price for it as you would the brand-name one. It doesn't have a reputation. It doesn't have a warranty. What tempts you into

taking the risk on the off-brand trailer is, ultimately, its lower price.

Selling and buying commercial calves on a video livestock auction is no different. The calves' genetics are their reputation. Their husbandry history is their warranty. Their written description is their spec sheet.

Reputation

When it comes to feeder calves, "black Angus sells," says Van Burtenshaw of Terreton, Idaho, and a Superior Livestock Auction representative.

"There's a reason behind that, and it's partly because of their ability to grade. ... A good uniform set of black calves has the eye appeal. It doesn't mean they all grade the same, but it has the eye appeal that attracts buyers," he says. "Hereford cattle struggle to sell at as high a premium as blacks

do. Part of that is their ability to grade that animal.”

Not all the calves have to be solid black to garner a premium on the video, clarifies Burtenshaw. Black baldie calves compete right along with solid black calves on sale day.

Knowing what his buyers want and meeting that desire on sale day has helped Jordan Willis, a commercial Angus producer at Cokeville, Wyo., garner better prices for his straightbred Angus calves through a video auction for the past 10 years.

His spring-born calves sell in the mid-July auction with a shipping date of Nov. 10. He sells his steers and heifers at four different base weights — heavy steers and heifers at 640 pounds (lb.) and 575 lb., respectively; light steers and heifers at 525 lb. and 500 lb., respectively.

On shipping day, Willis and his crew sort out roughly 1,550 calves from their mothers.

“It’s a big day, but we get it done,” he smiles.

After the calves are sorted, they cross the scale at the ranch for an average weight.

Willis says uniform load lots are important to buyers, and it is important to be transparent about weighing conditions.

“That’s a lot of cattle to sort before they run across the scale,” says Willis. “We make sure that in our description the buyers know how we’re handling the cattle that day.”

Similar to wearing the free Chevrolet baseball cap that came



with your new pickup, it’s a good idea to promote the registered Angus genetics you use, says Burtenshaw.

“A good uniform set of black calves has the eye appeal.” — Van Burtenshaw

“Buy the best bulls you can afford, and then flaunt that pedigree,” he emphasizes.

“When buyers recognize the genetic background you’re trying to insert in your herd, they recognize the quality. They know those kinds of cattle will grade. They’ll pay a premium for them.”

With 40 years of selecting top Angus genetics from seedstock sources like Basin Angus of Joliet, Mont., Willis says he’s confident that his bulls’ pedigrees help to pique his buyers’ interests.

Sometimes a seedstock ranch’s name is enough to get the job done, says Burtenshaw, but if you really want to impress your buyers, list your bulls’ expected progeny differences (EPDs). This gives

buyers an idea of what the cattle are, even if they don’t recognize the seedstock supplier.

Ranchers who buy good bulls and work hard to identify and keep the top end of their heifers tend to have great herds of cattle, he observes.

That type of quality is noticed by buyers.

Willis uses GeneMax[®] Advantage[™] DNA testing on his heifers to identify his top end and to inform his buyers

of the heifers’ rank within the Angus breed.

Warranty

A condition of selling calves on a video auction is that a buyer can be located anywhere throughout the country and not necessarily near the seller. This is where health and husbandry matter. Burtenshaw recommends participating in one or more of the value-added programs.

Vac 45 is a vaccine protocol that requires the calves be vaccinated and weaned for 45 days before shipping. The Vac 35 program requires calves be vaccinated 35 days before shipping, but not necessarily weaned.

Another program Burtenshaw sees some use is Global Animal Partnership (GAP), which includes independent, third-party certification of compliance to various animal welfare protocols.

The type of value-added program

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the calves are enrolled in will determine which buyers are interested, says Burtenshaw.

When it comes to value-added, Willis pulls out all the stops. In conjunction with his VAC 35+ protocol certification, he uses AngusLinkSM process-verified program (PVP) claims to distinguish his high-quality calves.

He and Ginette Gottswiller, director of verification services for the American Angus Association, talk all the time, he laughs. Willis uses all the AngusLink claims he can: Age and Source, Non-Hormone Treated Cattle (NHTC), NeverEver 3 (NE3), Angus Verified and AL-Calf Management. On sale day, Willis's buyers receive his herd's Genetic Merit Scorecard[®] (GMS), which updates them on the calves' beef score, feedlot score and grid score. Willis and his crew are also Beef Quality Assurance (BQA)-certified.

Additionally, the calves are GAP-certified.

"A lot of times, what we've found, is those programs give benefit. You get more out of those cattle because you're willing to step through those hoops or willing to vaccinate or willing to wean and give those calves shots," says Burtenshaw.

He recommends vaccinating for at least infectious bovine rhinotracheitis (IBR), bovine viral diarrhea (BVD) and parainfluenza 3 (PI₃), and with an eight-way clostridial. He encourages ivermectin products for parasites.

"If I'm buying calves [from Idaho] and I'm bringing them 700 miles to Nebraska, I'm willing to pay a little

For 40 years Willis Ranch has used registered Angus genetics to build a uniform black herd built on a solid foundation that can stand behind its reputation.



more if I can get the vaccines in them before they were weaned or in the feedlot when they were weaned. I know I'll have healthier cattle, less death loss, when I get them back to Nebraska," he adds.

Beyond these and other value-added programs, Burtenshaw says buyers are interested in health and nutrition programs. Cows and calves on a good mineral program, feed program, yearly vaccination and parasite prevention program produce quality cattle and earn themselves a name in the feeding industry.

Satisfaction

Initially, Willis sold all his cattle by private treaty.

"It got to the point where we were selling so many calves and so much money was out there, we felt we needed a reliable source. For one, [the video auction company] would be more willing to stand behind the contract and then also on ship day that the backing would be there, that you'd get paid for the calves," he explains.

Willis recalls one of the last private-treaty deals he made required a lot of work to get the buyer's bank to approve the sale and

issue the money. He likes the security of getting a check from the auction on the day the calves leave the ranch.

After taking a look at his cow herd and all the work he had put in, Willis wanted more for his efforts, as well.

"We thought that people should have to compete to buy our calves on that given day, that hopefully they bring you more of

what those calves are worth," he states.

The ranch stepped up its game and worked hard to promote what they had.

Willis offers this advice: "Promote what you got. It takes a few years to get a reputation if you have good cattle that good buyers want. It doesn't happen overnight. You just have to try to make your calves look more appealing than the next lot of calves that sell."

Burtenshaw says video auctions are a one-stop shop for buyers. Superior, for instance, has 7,000 buyers across the country.

"You don't have that in your local sale barn," he laughs. "Competitive bidding is good for the seller."

As with any kind of livestock auction, there are fees and commissions associated.

However, Burtenshaw notes, "It costs a little in commission, but if you get one extra bid, it pays for that commission pretty quickly."

Remember, discount brands and companies exist for a reason. Don't let your calves sell on the clearance rack. ■

Editor's note: Paige Nelson is a cattlemaster and freelance writer from Rigby, Idaho.