

Common Ground

Lessons learned while building a brand.



Mark McCully, CEO
MMcCully@angus.org

I love telling the story of the Certified Angus Beef® (CAB®) brand. I've shared it hundreds of times and truly believe it's one of the greatest success stories in all of agriculture. The history and the accomplishment of CAB has a David vs. Goliath feel. A producer-owned, not-for-profit, little branded-beef program that changed an industry. While a feel-good story to tell, the brand's

history identifies several leadership lessons.

Many people know that the brand's origin starts with a letter written by Angus breeder Harold Etling of Ohio in 1975. Etling had a bad steak labeled Angus that frustrated him, and he began thinking about how to keep it from happening in the future. He came up with some great ideas and a well-thought-out strategy. The key is — he didn't just keep his ideas and thoughts to himself. He wrote a letter and shared it with folks who could do something with it — in this case, the American Angus Association Board of Directors. Sometimes it is just that simple.

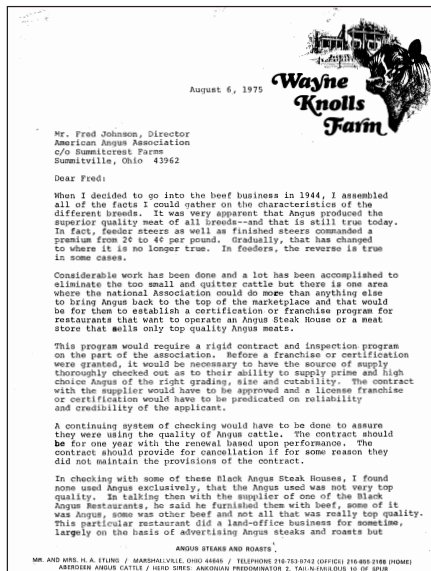
Lesson 1: Leaders are bold and take action.

The letter outlined a certification program that was built on quality and consumer satisfaction. This was at a time when the common industry thinking was about making our product leaner. **Lesson 2: Leaders think differently and buck the trend when necessary.**

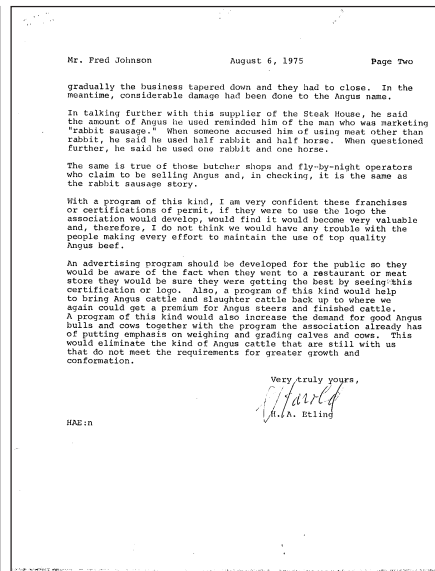
The early years of CAB were very difficult. The Association finances were tight, and program cuts were being made to balance budgets. From 1978 through 1983, specifically, there were spirited debates in the boardroom about continuing the investment into the branded beef project. The program was not generating enough revenue to cover expenses, and some believed those resources should be directed elsewhere. But several individuals had a clear and compelling vision about what could be, and they fought to keep the program going. **Lesson 3: Leadership requires tenacity.**

In today's microwaved, instant-gratification world, patience is rare. People don't want to wait for anything, and success is expected immediately. It took five years before the CAB program broke even (a total Association investment up to that point of \$281,000), nine years before the first grid premiums were paid for a CAB-qualifying carcass, and arguably 20 years before the brand was having a significant and measurable effect on its mission of increasing demand for registered Angus bulls. **Lesson 4: Leadership requires patience and the fortitude to stay the course.**

Over the brand's history, there were multiple occasions where



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demand was far greater than supply. More than one conversation took place in the boardroom about the option of lowering the marbling specification to something easier to reach. This would allow more cattle to qualify, and extra supply would allow the brand to grow in sales. Fortunately, decision-makers involved with the brand never gave in to temptation. They stayed true to the science that defined where the brand specifications should be in order to delight consumers. **Lesson 5: Leaders stay true to their convictions and resist lowering their standards for short-term gain.**

We are blessed as an industry to have so many leaders over the years who believed in the original vision that Etling laid out, stayed committed to building a promise with consumers based on quality and eating satisfaction, and persevered through years of skepticism and doubt to make the brand what it is today. Their lessons in leadership are invaluable, and we could all benefit from incorporating many, if not all, into our businesses today. **ABB**

Digital EXTRAS



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Learn more about how you can engage with the brand.