

Jackson's Golden Rule

2005 CAB QA Officer of the Year bears positive attitude on cattle care.



Jerry Jackson (left), CAB QA officer of the year, and Mark Sebranek share a vision that allows them to implement change and enhance marketing at their Garden City, Kan., feedyard. (PHOTO BY STEVE SUTHER)

Story by
SUSIE KNETTER

Spend a little time with Jerry Jackson, and you'll discover two things. He loves his job, and the job loves him back.

At the Irsik & Doll Feedyard (IDFY), a 32,000-head Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed feedlot near Garden City, Kan., Jackson is known for his easygoing ways and wisecracks. He's quick to offer anyone a crooked smile, the kind that makes you feel like you're in on his joke. But when it comes to cattle care, he leads a serious quest for excellence. That's why Jackson was named the 2005 CAB Quality Assurance (QA) Officer of the Year.

Riding around the feedlot, he can tell you almost anything you'd want

to know about any pen of cattle — who owns them, the genetics, the health program, where they're from and how many times they've been sorted. He keeps a sharp eye on each animal and sorts a pen as many as 10 times to make sure each one shines.

Jackson has been watching cattle for years. He met IDFY manager Mark Sebranek in 1993 during an earlier stint at the feedlot as a pen rider, and they joke about not getting along in the old days.

"He was on the feed crew," says Jackson with a laugh, "so that meant he didn't know anything."

Eight years later, after Jackson had found work elsewhere, Sebranek was general manager of IDFY and looking for a new cattle manager. He knew the market was changing, and IDFY needed to change with it.

Redefining Quality Service

Manager Ken Schilz is quick to brag about the rare find he brought into his Brule, Neb., feedlot. While usually he is searching for high-quality cattle of known background, this time he found an employee with the background to redefine customer service at his Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed feedlot.

An informal job offer in a downtown parking lot brought Kelly Crymble to McGinley-Schilz Feedyard Ltd. Two years later, she has earned her keep managing the customer service efforts at the feedlot and winning the 2005 CAB Runner-Up Quality Assurance (QA) Officer of the Year Award.

Natural ability

Schilz says the accomplishments have come naturally to Crymble because of her credentials and ability to handle any feedlot task. She has acquired experiences that make her "the perfect fit for the job," he adds.

Growing up in Wyoming, Crymble was always close to livestock and 4-H, which led to collegiate livestock judging and a role coaching the team. She also worked as a bank loan officer and earned a paralegal certificate while working for an attorney.

"You will not find anybody in the feeding industry who knows as much about their job as Kelly," Schilz says. "She can handle customer service, selling cattle, financing, contracts and everything else. She knows her stuff."

The 18,000-head-capacity business is a "small feedyard that tries to do big yard things," Schilz says, and Crymble's total package of skills helps fulfill the mission. They work as a team to build stronger relationships among the feedlot's growing customer base.

Schilz says he knew the yard was moving in the right direction when it received the 2003 CAB Progressive Partner Award. Shortly after that, he hired Crymble to help follow through on the goals he set for data capture and reporting.

"We have been told that we have the best information-gathering system out there, and we take pride in that," Schilz says. "Kelly is a large part of it."

Increasing enrollments

Crymble has nearly doubled McGinley-Schilz enrollments in the CAB Feedlot-Licensing Program (FLP) and has continually improved *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®)-acceptance rates along the way. Involvement in the CAB Natural program helped boost acceptance beyond most yards that did not produce for the natural market.

Enrollments for 2003 were at 2,769 head, with 25.4% hitting the CAB target, growing to 4,854 enrollments with a 26.4% CAB-acceptance rate in 2005.

"When cattle come into the feedyard, Kelly takes it upon herself to make sure we enroll every qualified animal in the CAB program," Schilz says. "Since she has come on board, it has become a priority to get it done the way it needs to be."

Crymble says enrolling cattle has become engrained in the data capture and reporting system.

The feedlot supplies customers with carcass and closeout information, regardless of their investment in the cattle. The goal is to win them over by proving the ability to feed cattle to a prof-

itable end point, while providing the information to increase profits in the cow-calf phase.

To achieve this goal, Crymble is incorporating multiple-year reporting along with yearly information.

"Producers will not only get this year's information, but last year's and an average across the years," Crymble says. "We want to draw on what producers have done and give them a larger picture with the data we have."

The strategy has helped McGinley-Schilz retain more customers from year to year. Crymble notes, "Producers may not always like what they get back," but they appreciate having more information to make decisions on herd production.

In turn, customers find it more appealing to retain ownership in cattle as the feedlot works with them to improve calves from generation to generation, she adds.

"It takes a number of years to get a fair assessment of cattle performance," Crymble says. "There are too many variables to deal with on a one-year basis."

The feedlot also uses carcass and performance data to assess potential placements in the yard, Schilz says. "Data integrity becomes more important to everyone throughout the supply chain when profit and loss decisions come into play. CAB filled an essential role in helping us provide customers with information they can trust.

"We needed someone like Kelly on board to get things taken care of," Schilz says. "She has helped us turn it around and get it into producers' hands."

The relationship with CAB has been beneficial for Crymble, too.

"Everybody I have come in contact with at CAB has been so easy to work with that it makes my job easier," Crymble says. "If I have a question, I can call up and get an answer. That kind of service makes it easy to do my job for CAB as well."

CAB Feedlot Specialist Paul Dykstra says the relationship has been "mutually beneficial from the start" — synergy that comes from a healthy partnership.

"Kelly has proven to be a conscientious quality assurance officer since she attended her first QA seminar in North Platte, Neb., last year," Dykstra says. "She makes it a point to have frequent contact with our supply development office and get information back to producers."

Crymble says that's the main goal. "The award is a unique record of accomplishment. It means that I am heading in the right direction — providing producers with information to make herd management decisions. It says that we are providing customers with some of the best service in the business."

—by Lance Zimmerman



Kelly Crymble has nearly doubled McGinley-Schilz enrollments in the FLP and continually improves CAB-acceptance rates. (PHOTO BY LANCE ZIMMERMAN)

He wanted to move toward grid marketing and sorting more cattle. When Jackson came in to interview, Sebranek knew it was a perfect match.

“On my list of what I wanted, of what I was looking for in an individual, you’d think he had a cheat sheet. Everything that I wanted to do is what he wanted to get accomplished, though it was new to the industry and definitely new to this yard,” Sebranek says. “He was the only [candidate] who saw it that way.”

IDFY had a tradition of excellence as a CAB partner under its previous management, and a former QA officer had won the annual CAB award a few years ago.

“Expectations were high when Jerry took over his position as assistant manager,” says Gary Fike, CAB feedlot specialist. “He has done an excellent job and is absolutely a great guy to work with. I simply can’t say enough good things about him.”

Give and take

As soon as he was hired, Sebranek and Jackson began to implement the changes their common vision demanded. They divided up responsibilities, with Sebranek watching the markets and numbers, while Jackson focused on each animal in every pen of cattle.

Although marketing is ultimately Sebranek’s call, in practice “it’s give and take,” he admits. “We’ll argue about cattle going out; I’ll think they’re ready and he won’t. But then he’ll say we need to take a lot out, and I’ll pull him back because of, say, Choice-Select spread.”

It’s not bickering, but, rather, a useful way to consider all factors in effective marketing. “We try to go two different ways,” Sebranek explains. “He watches cattle appearance and I watch marketing structure. It’s really a pretty good deal.”

Working together helped the two form a bond that is visible to anyone, and stronger than even they expected. “It’s worked out 100% better than I thought it would,” Sebranek says.

Jackson agrees. “We’re on the same wavelength, trying to accomplish the same goals, which, in the end, serves the customer,” he says. “We want to do anything possible to make them money.”

That includes helping each calf realize its genetic potential, and that’s why Jackson enrolls as many as possible in the CAB database. At 22.3% on 4,773 enrolled cattle, IDFY has the highest *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®)-brand acceptance rate of any licensed feedlot with greater than 15,000-head capacity. Nationwide, only 8% of all beef meets the CAB brand requirements.

“Jerry Jackson is one of the most thorough QA officers that I work worth,” Fike says. “He is very conscientious about making sure that we have the correct head count when cattle go to harvest, and his follow-up on every detail regarding enrollments and requests for carcass data is nearly faultless.”

That same precision permeates nearly everything Jackson does, and then he does more, such as monitoring specific Angus genetics.

“Jerry is taking it one step further,” Sebranek says. “He’s staying up with the Angus bulls and watching the progeny as they come through here. Customers call

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Jackson keeps a sharp eye on each animal at Irsik & Doll Feedyard, sorting a pen as many as 10 times to ensure optimum profitability. [PHOTOS BY SUSIE KNETTER]

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us up to ask what's working. I say, 'Just a second, I'll get you Jerry.'

Healthy partnerships

Genetics are part of an animal's background, and Jackson gets as much background as possible on each new pen of cattle. He has established a health

program that highlights vaccination history coordination with producers, veterinarians and the feedlot. The yard sets up a "portfolio" on each known-source pen of cattle, and then vaccinates to fill in the gaps.

"We work very, very hard to find out what the producers give them and what

their programs are, and we'll adjust ours accordingly," Jackson says. "We sit down with our vets, and then we'll call them to have our vets set up their program, and what we think they need to be doing when they're on the cows, and preweaning, weaning and the whole nine yards. That helps tremendously — it really has."



Jackson's combination of precision and a great eye for judging cattle has helped lead IDFY.

Jackson finds that producer cooperation comes easily. They know he is working for them, and they willingly provide any information he needs to help them adjust their programs.

"We explain what we'd like for them to do — and they don't have to do it — but in the last couple of years since we've really started doing this, we've probably changed 10 producers' health programs," Jackson says.

It can take in-depth research and lots of communication to recognize problems and create change. "Ranchers may tell you they've never had any problem with their calves. Then you get to talking to them and it turns out they did, but to them it wasn't a problem," he explains. "They had a couple of calves get sick, so they doctored them, and they lost one out of 100. Well, that's no problem. That's a pretty good year.

"But it's the calves they missed that may have lung damage and develop problems when they grow up," Jackson says. "You get them in here and weighing 1,200 pounds, and you get 100° days; they start falling apart. So we're working with producers to head off those problems."

Good eye, good attitude

Jackson's combination of precision and a great eye for judging cattle has helped lead IDFY. The latest example comes from this year's Beef Empire Days, which takes place annually in Garden City. Jackson entered an Angus steer of unknown genetics simply by visual appraisal.

"Probably 80%, maybe 90% of those animals were ultrasounded," he says. "We picked ours out Wednesday afternoon, hauled him into the show Thursday morning, and he won third in the carcass contest. The two steers that

beat him were show steers. We've got 32,000 head to go through to find one animal, and they've got 40 that they're feeding for those contests."

His ability to select and sort cattle is only half of what makes Jackson stand out among QA officers at the 82 CAB-licensed feedlots nationwide. You could guess it from his ready smile — Jackson exudes a philosophy that's all about attitude. He makes sure everyone has the right kind. From the pen riders to the feed crew, everyone who works with Jackson knows to keep a positive attitude around the cattle.

"We've changed our cattle-handling practices a lot," he says. "You won't believe how much your attitude affects cattle. ... They know if somebody's having a bad day, and they kind of show it. When you first realize that, it's amazing."

Jackson is convinced handling directly affects an animal's ability to gain. Through his time at IDFY, he has watched the staff's positive "attitude adjustment" increase average daily gain (ADG) and feed intake. His philosophy is the Golden Rule: Treat them as you want to be treated.

"We take pens of new cattle, and we walk with them," he says, in an effort to make them feel more at home. "They come in here feeling sorry for themselves. They lie around and worry about what's going to happen. Walk them, exercise them, ride through them and push them to the bunk, show them where the feed and the water are. It's unbelievable. They love it," Jackson says.

This empathy with cattle, as much as increased sorting, has helped fulfill the vision he and Sebranek had four years ago. IDFY has remained one of the top CAB partners since the brand's Feedlot-Licensing Program (FLP) began in 1998, and Jackson helps build on that strong foundation.

"Jerry seeks to promote CAB through signage and use of the CAB logo every chance he gets," Fike says. "He is an ardent supporter of the program."

Sebranek says the combination of CAB networking and Jackson's changes to management catch the eye of potential customers.

"A lot of people call and say they read about us in the CAB news," Sebranek says. "Probably the biggest reason is Jerry. He has made it work, not me. When we talk about our changeover to precision sorting for quality, he was the changeover."

Jackson says it's all just part of his job, and it works because he and Sebranek have a common vision and continue to learn together.

For anyone dealing with cattle, Jackson offers this advice: "Handle cattle in the pen just like if they were in a hospital. You have to know how to handle them with cotton gloves. Take care of them. They love it."

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