

# A Relay for Quality



Some feeders may talk about crossbreds, but Bim Nelson (right) says, “the farmer-feeders who come here to buy know cattle don’t get much better than our straight Angus.” Nelson partners with Donnie Painter to operate Bassett Livestock Auction.

**A northern Nebraska market becomes known for high-quality Angus and for helping make them better.**

*Story & photo by*  
**STEVE SUTHER**

budget because they are the kind that will make money.”

“We can go for three hours straight selling nothing but the best straight-Angus cattle,” says Nebraska livestock market owner Bim Nelson. He and partner Donnie Painter operate Bassett Livestock Auction, one of a growing number of markets known primarily for selling high-quality, straight-bred commercial Angus cattle.

They are intensely involved in improving local beef quality, and that includes an open-book approach to buyers and sellers. “At least 90% of our customers produce cattle that may qualify for the *Certified Angus Beef*<sup>®</sup> (CAB<sup>®</sup>) brand,” Nelson says. “There are some cattle that will make less than 20% CAB, but others can make 60% to 65% CAB, or near the top. On some of these cattle, it doesn’t matter if you go way over your

## **Pride in selling**

Nelson says the Angus reputation is a reflection of the customer base. “We’re proud to sell customers’ cattle, and we do sell the good kind every week.” He’s seen the good get better, thanks partly to cooperation after the sale.

“A lot of the problem is getting information from packers, but that’s not such a problem if cattle end up in Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed feedlots,” Nelson says. And, when Bassett-sold cattle end up in their possession, CAB partner feedlots find it easy to trace them to the ranch of origin.

“We serve the producer first,” Nelson explains. “I certainly don’t back away from the opportunity to say we were proud to sell them. We don’t want to sell the most, but we do want to sell the kind that will

perform and hit the top of the grids.”

Many auction markets balk at revealing contact information after the sale, but Nelson sees it as a service he wants to extend to a loyal clientele.

“No matter what you do, there is 5% to 10% turnover, so you have a 90%-95% customer base, with 5% always looking for a better deal,” he says. “I think our base is more stable because we do these little things. With volume, the little things go by the wayside because you don’t have time for it, but we can handle 100,000 head a year and still provide the service.”

The typical Bassett customer has fewer than 200 cows. “Some have 1,500, and a lot have 20 cows, but we think of our average as 150 to 200 head that are maybe 5% Charolais-cross, 5% red and 90% black or black baldies,” Nelson says. “Within the blacks, we don’t have much influence of low-percentage Angus here.”

Customers gravitate toward straightbred Angus because they can produce cattle that perform and bring the top price, he adds. “A handful of big cattle feeders and others keep trying to reinvent the wheel with talk about new crossbreds, but the farmer-feeders who come here to buy know cattle don’t get much better than our straight Angus.”

“You don’t want to paint yourself into a corner with composite marketing programs that offer a premium over the board,” Painter says. “Why take a \$2 or \$3 premium when we can get you \$10 over the board here with the right Angus genetics?”

### **Staying on top**

When a customer asks for help in getting information after the sale, Nelson says, “There is never any problem with telling a seller who bought their calves. We give out buying numbers rather than names because that is how the cattle yard is laid out. It’s not that we don’t want you to know who bought them or that we are worried that you will try to sell direct.

“I don’t deal with customers that way; we’re not afraid of losing them,” he says. “We are more comfortable with people who sell here because they want to, not because they have to or because they don’t have enough information. If they don’t show any more loyalty than that, then I don’t care; I will take the next seller. After 10 years in the auction business, our customer base is the best.”

Staying on top means maintaining that kind of customer base and cattle. “There is nothing magical about what we do,” Nelson says. “Just sell quality to people who expect quality, bringing seller and buyer together.”

When a fancy set of cattle “blows the doors off after the sale,” gaining 5 pounds (lb.) a day and making a high percentage of CAB and Prime, “if I find out how they did, I feel a certain responsibility to pass it along,” he says. “I may be able to get some of that information where they can’t, and it’s my job to make sure they get a fair price.”

Some buyers let Nelson know they got such cattle last year and that they want to buy them again at any cost. “They can find out where the cattle are from; they can try to deal with them in the country, but most of our customers will stay with the auction to find the price,” he says.

Of course, many buyers don’t want people to know how good any cattle do, and won’t tell Nelson or his customers,

hoping to save money on bids the next year.

“They might save \$3 per cwt. (hundredweight), but more likely other buyers will figure they are bidding for a reason and join in the competition,” Nelson says. “That is the market, and it has to work on both ends.”

When customers ask Nelson how they can get involved in the CAB program, he

doesn’t worry that it will lead them away from his business. “I just tell them to keep aiming for the high-quality Angus target, work with us after the sale to help find out how you’re doing, and use the information to do better. Maybe you can’t do much better; probably you can.”

