

Gill Red Angus builds its brand by catering to the buyer

Codi Vallery-Mills for *Progressive Cattleman*

If you ask Bryan Gill of Gill Red Angus, Timber Lake, South Dakota, how his family's seedstock operation has found success, he will likely tell you it's because of commercial cattlemen and customer service.

The two are tightly woven together, according to Gill, who ranches with his dad, Larry, and brother, Brent.

The family has been raising registered Red Angus cattle since 1979 when Bryan's dad, Larry, dove head-first into building the foundation cowherd the Gill Ranch hosts today. Larry began ranching when he took over his father's ranch after he got out of the service in 1968.

Eight years ago, the family began to seek out other ways of garnering more money for their seedstock. They looked at what other operations were

doing and found a few ideas they thought they should consider for their own outfit. After a little tweaking, the Gills can say they have improved upon their marketing efforts, to the benefit of the commercial cattleman.

"We have always based our operation around the commercial cattleman and wanted to not only bring more dollars to our operation, but more dollars to our clients' operations," says Bryan Gill.

Customer service x 6

Gill says it has been a combination of quality genetics and promotional ideas that has sustained their operation.

Today their "You Buy, We Bid" calf buyback program is the mainstay of the operation. It was the first of the marketing ideas to be instituted and the one that has paid off the most.

Through this customer service program, the Gills commit to their bull buyers that they will bid on their animals at sale time.

"When we started the program, Red Angus cattle coming through a sale barn were often getting much lower prices than the black-hided cattle. We wanted our customers to get paid what their cattle were worth," says Gill.

And so he and his family began to create partnerships with feedyards in Nebraska where they could send calves they purchased. Soon they were driving the highways into every town with an auction barn selling Gill Red Angus genetics cattle. With the Gills placing competitive bids on their customers' cattle, the result was higher sale prices.

"No one has ever said they buy bulls from us because of our buyback program, but we have tripled the number of bulls we sell since we started it," says Gill.

Last year Gills bid on roughly 11,000 head of cattle. He says not every seedstock operation can implement a calf buyback program because of the labor intensity. Gill says it has taken himself and several of his family members attending numerous sales – in person, via phone or online – to hit the amount of customer calf sales they do every year.

The Gills believe selling a bull is about more than sale day, and they strive to offer something of value to their customers throughout the year.

Twice a year they send out a ranch

TOP: Raised on the border of South Dakota and North Dakota, Gill Red Angus bulls are designed for commercial cattle operations.

TOP RIGHT: Bryan Gill with sons Holden and Hudson.



LEFT: Each year Gill Red Angus bids on thousands of their clients' calves in their unique "You Buy, We Bid" calf buyback program.



MIDDLE: Larry Gill has been raising Red Angus seedstock since 1979.

BOTTOM RIGHT: A few mother cows out of Gill Red Angus. All photos courtesy of Gill Red Angus.



Become your own marketer

Bryan Gill says commercial cattlemen can become their own best marketers (and put more money in their pockets) if they are willing to step outside their marketing comfort zone. While quality genetics are a step in the right direction, he also suggests marketing your cattle by:

- ◆ Vaccinating cattle the way buyers want them.
- ◆ Promoting your cattle correctly. If your cattle are natural, promote them as such.
- ◆ Taking advantage of the age-source verification tags.
- ◆ Contacting potential buyers and letting them know when and what you are selling. Every extra bidder helps.
- ◆ Creating pot loads. If you don't have enough head to create a pot load, join forces with someone who has similar type of cattle and management and you can co-mingle them to receive full premium.

Add up the extra money you will get from implementing the ideas above, and Gill says you could get an additional \$75 to \$100 a calf.

newsletter that talks about industry issues, gives ranch management advice and updates about the Gill Ranch happenings.

"We have a car dealership mentality," says Gill. "At a car dealership, you buy a car and have access to their service department. We are the same. We believe in service, only ours don't have the expenses to the customer like a dealership does."

As part of that service they also try to visit their customers during the summer months to see how the bulls have worked and what the current calf crop looks like. Gill estimates they visit 75 percent of their customers during the summer.

"Sale day is too busy to talk to everyone, so we like to get out and visit with those who buy from us, to see their operation and learn about them," says Gill.

Gill takes photos of the cattle and posts them to their ranch website. He does this for two reasons: First, it helps prospective Gill customers get a visual of genetic potential. Second, it advertises his customers' calf crop that will eventually be for sale and helps give him an idea for feedlot orders.

"It is very gratifying to see that our bulls are doing what they are meant to do. To see how our genetics fit into a commercial operation is always an awakening," says Gill.

Another service Gill Red Angus offers its customers is inviting them to consign their replacement females to the Gill Red Angus annual bull sale in February. This year, four customers consigned around 200 head of good heifers. These customers use the Gill Red Angus name and advertising to sell their heifers, and they usually get a nice premium because of it.

Gills also promote their clients' cattle through social media outlets. On any given day, you can go on their Facebook page to see a post with a customer's upcoming sale details, prices from a past sale given or what they are doing on the ranch that day.

A few more perks to being a Gill customer? You can get a discount on vet supplies. For six years now, they have partnered with DeTye Vet Supply out of Sturgis, South Dakota, to offer a discount on vet supplies to Gill customers.

The Gills also sell semen at cost on any of the bulls they own and have collected to their customers.

"They're all different ways for us to say thank you and help the commercial cattleman get ahead," says Gill of his family's customer service and marketing efforts.

Service gone awry

Through trial and error, the Gills have made the above examples work for them. Some things that haven't panned out, though, include a semen catalog which showcased Gill genetics. Plus, the 2010 fall-born calves will also be the last group of fall calves born at Gill Red Angus.

"The semen catalog didn't work because it is such a competitive industry. We still offer the semen for sale, but we don't publish a catalog anymore," says Gill.

Fall calves didn't fit the Gill operation as they had hoped. The cows didn't perform as well, as the cold weather was a constant hurdle, according to Gill.

"We haven't come up with any new, crazy ideas for marketing. But we are constantly watching other successful operations and then try to tweak some of their ideas to fit our operation. Sometimes we can and sometimes we can't," advises Gill. 