

Invested in Customer Success

North Dakota ranch is striving for remarkable customer service.

by **Troy Smith**, field editor

Customer service has been the topic of innumerable magazine articles. Entire books have been written on the subject. Websites have been created to educate people in the art of customer service. Some companies hire professional trainers to help employees master the art. All of this stems from the fact that customer service is the lifeblood of business. Savvy business people, including those who merchandise seedstock, understand that customer service plays a huge role in bringing customers back.

When Chad and Julie Ellingson married and merged their respective herds 20 years ago, the Saint Anthony, N.D., Angus breeders understood customer service would be essential to long-term success. The registered seedstock business is competitive. The couple knew that as much as customers want breeding stock that meet certain expectations, they also want someone to care when, for whatever reason, that does not happen.

The Ellingsons also understood that customers appreciate an attitude of gratitude. Saying, "Thanks for your business," and providing customers with a little something extra goes a long way toward establishing good will.

Ellingson Angus has tried to go a bit beyond the typical role of seedstock supplier to help customers enhance their cattle management and marketing efforts.

"Our success is based on the success of our customers. That's why we keep trying to improve not only our genetics but other ways to help them succeed," says Chad Ellingson. "We're trying to establish and maintain relationships built on trust. We can't expect loyalty from customers unless we are committed to serving them. It's something we strive for year-round."

Service during and after the sale

Ellingson says some of the services that accompany purchases made through the annual Ellingson Angus production sale are offered by many other seedstock suppliers. Offering customers the options of viewing the offering and bidding via the Internet, or having Ellingson bid on an absentee buyer's behalf, are services that simply make good business sense.

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commitments that keep them from attending the sale. Most of them will come see the bulls ahead of the sale and then bid online. We've had customers that timed their vacations to escape North Dakota's winter, but they still watched and bid online," grins Ellingson. "We also handle sight-unseen purchases for a few buyers. If the customers don't like the bulls we buy for them, they don't own them. Satisfaction is guaranteed."

In Ellingson's opinion, it also makes good business sense to guarantee the fertility and reproductive soundness of the bulls in accordance with American Angus Association recommendations.

"I look at it this way," he adds, "If the

wheels fell off of your new car in the first year, you would change the brand of car you buy next time. We need to stand behind our bulls just like a car manufacturer would stand behind their cars. We don't want our bull customers changing the brand of bulls they are buying."

It's customary for bull suppliers to offer free delivery or discounts to buyers wanting to haul their purchases home after the sale. Ellingsons do that, but they also offer "free keep" to customers preferring to have bulls delivered at a later date. Not only do buyers save the cost of feeding purchased animals until spring, but they don't have to think about where to put newly purchased bulls during the remaining months of winter.

"We think that's important, because our sale is in early February," explains Ellingson.

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"If a buyer takes a new bull home and turns him in with other older bulls, there's a risk of injury to the new bull, and keeping him separate can be a bother. So we'll keep the bulls for two months and deliver them (following semen-evaluation) in April. Nearly all of our bull customers take advantage of that service."

Ellingson says providing delivery also provides him with the opportunity to visit customers' ranches and learn about their individual operations. It's an opportunity to talk about each customer's goals and objectives. When it's a new customer, that's often where the process of building an ongoing

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Educating the next generation

Saint Anthony, N.D., is one of those little-bitty towns that doesn't draw much outside trade, generally speaking. With a population of 70 or so residents and few services other than a post office, the unincorporated village doesn't attract many shoppers — except for beef cattle enthusiasts. People of the Angus persuasion, in particular, frequent the greater Saint Anthony area's seedstock operations to "shop" for breeding animals. Among the attractions is Ellingson Angus.

Located in the rolling and sometimes rough hills that lie west of the Missouri River, Ellingson Angus is owned by fourth-generation beef producers Chad and Julie Ellingson. Married in 1995, the couple launched their own seedstock business that same year, with fewer than 100 cows.

The Ellingsons established their headquarters on a place they purchased from Julie's parents, Martin and Angie Schaff. Cattle numbers have grown through the years, as has the Ellingson family, which includes five children: sons Stetson (16) and Jameson (15), and daughters Sierra (13), Medora (9) and Sheridan (6).

"Our oldest son, Stetson, is already pretty heavily involved in helping with the registered cattle. He probably knows the cows and their pedigrees as well or better than anyone in the family. He even writes all the footnotes for our sale catalog," says Chad Ellingson, noting how all of the children are enthusiastic about agriculture, especially cattle production.

"They're eager to be involved. Jameson takes charge of most of the haying and feeding. The girls are a little younger, but they're getting into it, moving cattle through pasture rotations and helping with other cattle work. They're very much the young cowgirls that love being on a saddle horse moving cows."

There is enough cattle work to go around. Ellingsons operate a fairly "ranchy" operation in a region where it takes about 12 acres to support a cow-calf pair. Managed under a rotational-grazing system, the cows are expected to graze throughout most of the year, with limited supplemental feed. The latter comes from farming enterprises that include production of hay and a relatively few acres of feedgrains.

This year, Ellingson Angus will calve 550 registered females and about 100 commercial cows. A majority of the cows deliver in the spring, from late February through the end of April. A small group of cows are bred to calve during late-August and September. The fall herd was established as a way to expand production, without increasing the spring work load. Ellingsons also wanted to produce some longer-aged bulls to sell, along with spring-born yearling bulls,



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at the firm's annual production sale. The 2015 offering included 175 bulls and 40 registered females, plus some 400 commercial females consigned by ranches that use Ellingson bulls.

Along with producing balanced-trait genetics for their customers, and striving to provide remarkable customer service, Ellingsons believe they bear responsibility for service to the beef industry.

Industry advocacy was a career choice for Julie Ellingson. She has worked for the North Dakota Stockmen's Association for two decades and currently serves as the organization's executive vice president. As a producer entity, Ellingson Angus has tried to serve the industry through encouragement and education of young people who, like the Ellingson children, may aspire to become beef producers.

"For 12 years we've helped mentor students at Bismarck State College. Livestock production classes have been held at our place. We also host students, three at a time, who spend some time with us, learning about genetics, grazing practices and ranch management in general. We also host livestock judging workouts for county youth and college teams," explains Chad.

"I think we have a responsibility to be involved and work for the benefit of the industry as a whole. One way we can do that is to share our knowledge and experience with future beef producers."

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Youth Development

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relationship starts, but it doesn't end there.

"I'd hate to call a customer just prior to our next sale, and invite him or her to come, if we hadn't spoken since the year before. So I make an effort to talk to customers multiple times during the year," says Ellingson. "I want to check in more than once, to find out how things are going and make sure the customer is satisfied. I also want every customer to know that I am available to them. They can call me anytime. I think it's important to be accessible to customers."

Advice for the asking

Adding to Ellingson's experience as a seedstock breeder are the nearly 19 years he worked for Genex Cooperative Inc., including several years as the firm's beef sire-procurement manager. He welcomes the frequent queries from customers wanting to pick his brain for information about genetic selection.

Most want advice on bull selection, but increasing numbers of customers also seek counsel for honing selection of replacement females from within their commercial herds. In response to growing interest in DNA technology, Ellingson is helping several customers refine their female selection processes through implementation of GeneMax testing of replacement heifer candidates.

"There is a lot of interest in genomic testing, and I think seedstock suppliers need to know and understand the technologies available to commercial producers," states Ellingson. "I also advise some customers

that use AI (artificial insemination) and help them choose and apply (estrus) synchronization protocols."

An advocate of lifelong learning, Ellingson tries to build on his storehouse of knowledge related to cattle nutrition and health management. He has worked at building a network composed of people possessing expertise in those areas. At the very least, he wants to be able to refer ranchers to reliable sources of information — proper experts in their fields that can provide answers to customers' questions.

That network includes numerous Northern Plains cattle feeders, and Ellingson organizes tours whereby these feeder-calf buyers can visit calf sellers' ranches and become acquainted with these calf sellers.

"Our sale day is important to us, and our customers' sale days should be important to us, too," he says. "I think one of the most important services we can provide [is] to help customers market their cattle."

With that in mind, Ellingson advises customers interested in implementing cattle management practices that represent added value in the eyes of potential buyers. He also takes an active role in marketing thousands of customers' steer and heifer calves sold at auction and at private treaty.

Marketing customer cattle

"I act as a go-between, helping place customers' cattle in feedlots. I work closely with an order buyer that procures cattle for both large and small cattle feeders. I also work directly with certain feedlots, as an



► Chad Ellingson welcomes customers' commercial females into the Ellingson Angus Sale.

agent, to bid on cattle sold through sale barns, video auctions or directly off the ranch," explains Ellingson. "I also take delivery, sort [and] weigh out some of the cattle."

Additionally, Ellingson also sources replacement-quality commercial heifers for commercial ranchers and, during the last year, began buying heifer calves for Ellingson Angus' own commercial heifer-development enterprise. A nearby place was leased recently, mainly for the purpose of developing commercial heifers purchased from customers, as well as some home-raised heifers, to market as bred heifers.

In recent years, the Ellingson Angus production sale offering has included a "commercial female division" featuring groups of customer cattle — commercial heifer calves and bred heifers consigned by ranches whose bull batteries represent exclusively Ellingson genetics.

"We invited these customers to share our sale day because they have outstanding ranching programs and they have been committed to us. Their cattle were a great addition to the sale," says Ellingson, noting that working with customers, all the way from when they make a purchase to when they market their cattle, is mutually beneficial.

"Working closely with them allows me to learn more about their operations and what they need to succeed. It gives me more insight into where we need to go with our genetics than anything else we do," he adds. "Customer success is where the rubber meets the road."



► Julie Ellingson (right) visits with customer Gene Harris of Killdeer, N.D., after a sale.