

Marketing

—Ulf Kintzel

When I went to college in Germany, studying agriculture, I took management and marketing as my specialties in the last two semesters. Most of the time spent in marketing focused on interaction with the customer and the personality suitable for marketing, especially direct-marketing. Given the fact that I am most times not the easiest going fellow in the room, I was told time and again that my personality does not suit direct-marketing and dealing with customers. Bummer.

I have been self-employed for almost 16 years now, running White Clover Sheep Farm since 1995. I raise sheep and sell them as breeding stock as well as market and freezer lambs. I train dogs and their owners to do sheep herding and for about 9 years I sheared sheep for small flock owners. The experience gained over the years in marketing my products and my services differs tremendously from what I learned in college. In this article I would like to share what kind of marketing has worked for me.

Let's start with the product offered. The best marketing will fail if your product is inferior. There is no substitution for producing quality! The best way of standing out and being better than your competitors is offering a superior product. Sounds simple enough? I would say so, but I don't hear that very often when marketing is being discussed. I am aware that the superior product you might have to offer does not sell the

first item that you produce. It didn't sell my first freezer lamb and it didn't sell my first breeding ewe either. You have to advertise your product first; you have to start somewhere. However, the quality is what sold many of my freezer lambs and breeding animals thereafter. Like an old-time farmer who came from the Old World once told me in his mumbling way with his hard Dutch accent: "Repeat business is where the money is." So true. People will start recommending you if your product is good. When they recommend you they may say: "He is a little blunt and short in his approach, but boy, his lambs taste so good," but they will never say, "He is really nice, but his lambs tastes so-so." Also, have your quality right before you advertise and start selling. There is very little room for error. If you lost a customer due to quality issues, it will be extremely difficult to win that customer back, and in fact, most leave for good. If you, however, get a customer hooked, you may have him or her for many years to come. Some of mine have been buying lamb from me for more than ten years.

Advertisement: It isn't all that easy measuring the success of your advertisement and knowing exactly what advertisement brought you which customer. I tend to ask my new customers where they heard about me. Many times the customer does not remember exactly where, and I am reluctant to dig deeper when the conversation should be about selling a freezer lamb or a group of breeding ewes. I certainly do not want to send

out questionnaires to my customer base, asking what means of my advertisement reached them, as is often recommended.

Word of mouth is the best advertisement there is. It is cheap too. Most of my customers, big and small, heard about me from someone else. I traced it back in some instances, months or years after I had started selling to that person, when I was comfortable enough to ask that question and it was all right to dig a little deeper. You would be amazed how twisted the recommendation process



works at times. Here is one example: I bought some grass-fed beef from a farmer when I was in New Jersey. Then she became a customer of mine who bought freezer lamb from me. At a conference for organic farmers she mentioned me to a representative of a national store chain, who in return contacted a regional producer who owned a regional label. He in return contacted me. While the negotiations between him, the national store chain, and me never bore any fruit, he was able to get me in touch with a different high-end distributor of local and naturally-raised meats who has been buying lambs from me ever since. Twisted enough? I'd say so. One should never underestimate how much people talk about what they bought from whom and how good or bad it was.

For two or three years I have been running ads in the two leading sheep publications and have a breeder's listing in the national breeders' directory. So far, I got exactly one buyer from all these ads. Yet, I am not prepared to cancel these ads or let them expire.

Publications in your region seem to do a better job for advertisement than national publications. In my experience, if you get a hit from a national publication and someone from 1,000 miles and three states away calls you, chances are they want to chat. If you get a call from someone just an hour away from you, the chance of being able to sell something is far greater.

A very good means of advertisement is writing articles. Articles like this one with all the contact information at the end of it usually help generate business. Most agricultural magazines look for writers; some are right-out desperate to get farmers with hands-on experience instead of university personnel and other bureaucrats to write about farming. It is just as good or better than advertising. Many magazines even pay for the articles, and the publisher is happy to have a farmer writing for his or her magazine. It's a win-win situation.

Each year I hold a herding trial in October that is admission-free and open to the public. Local newsletters are happy to publish a press release, put it in their events calendar, or even have a little write-up—all free of charge. Such a trial is good for public awareness. Doing something for the community is always appreciated and is rewarding in itself. While it is not necessarily something that may directly generate any business, many of your local customers surely will like to come and observe. So, if you plan on an open house, a pasture walk, a plowing demonstration, or an event of some sort, think about publishing it that way. You can do it yourself or with the help of some grassroots group. It does not need to be an official event, put on by your extension agent. Conferences are also good to make contacts that can yield some business.

My website generates a reasonable amount of business. It does so in a speed that I can keep up with. When you grow too fast you will soon find your logistics not catching up. That is a sure way of losing customers. White Clover Sheep Farm is also on Facebook and I send out an e-mail newsletter. Both are less of a means to trigger new business. It helps to inform and



photos by Author

The other primary reason for my expanding market is breeding animals like these percentage White Dorper ewe lambs.

educate existing customers about the cycles of sheep farming. People appreciate being part of your farm and learning intimate details about it. And I don't just keep the news to the farm. An occasional picture from vacation, a Christmas card, or wishing Happy Thanksgiving with a picture of the family at dinner are appreciated as well. If you just treat a customer as a customer, by only e-mailing information about special sales and your current prices, you run the risk of insulting the very customer who sacrifices convenience for the sake of supporting the local farmer.

Distributors: I am selling market lambs to two different distributors and one farmer who raises organic beef and pork and purchases lambs from me for his customers. My obligations are a delivery schedule, delivery to the butchering facility, getting the weights from the slaughterhouse, and billing the customer. They all appreciate, if not expect, a smooth and reliable process. Organization matters. They don't want to be bothered with my problems; they have their own. How I engage with the customer on a personal level (meaning how nicely I can talk) matters very little. Aside from the quality of the product, a reliable and well-organized process seems to trump everything else.

Direct-marketing: The most time-consuming process is direct-marketing, especially when it comes to first-time customers. They have a lot of questions and need to be educated about how the lambs are raised and what cutting options are available. It is also a learning process for many that my product needs to be pre-ordered and that it takes a while before they get it. Here is a typical conversation that happened this way or in a similar way at times: Customer: "I am passing through this afternoon and I was wondering if I can pick up half a lamb." I: "Sorry, I do custom butchering. That means you have to put in an order. The next availability would be in about three months. Any lambs ready before that for harvest have already

Quality trumps everything in marketing. Only well finished carcasses will sell in the long run.

been committed.” Customer: “You mean I have to wait *three* months before I can buy a lamb?” I: “Yes.” Click, the customer hung up. Long-time customers confirm that it was quite a shock for them that they had to wait perhaps months before they could reorder. However, the committed people who choose quality, local, and healthy meat over convenience can easily be educated about why the food is seasonal and what is involved in the ordering process, and why I don’t keep an inventory.

The other side of my direct-marketing involves the sale of breeding stock, primarily female ewes and yearlings and ram lambs. I am selling sheep or a breed that is still rare in the country and for which the demand is very high. Hair sheep that shed and don’t need shearing as well as sheep that thrive on grass and produce high-yielding carcasses are in high demand. I have both. That in itself gives me a bit of an edge. Add to it that I do not cater to the people who wish to purchase sheep for the show ring and cater to the folks who wish to purchase reasonably priced sheep that produce for them. My motto is: “Don’t try to get rich; try to make a comfortable living.” Many people come back year after year buying breeding stock from me. That is my goal. Yet, the communication before you can make a sale is often extensive, at times difficult, and many times after many conversations no deal can be struck.

So, why bother with direct-marketing, whether it is freezer lamb or breeding stock? Because it yields the highest profit margin and it is the most resistant against economic turbulences. The more diverse your market is, the less you have to worry about a customer dropping out.

Buying club: A buying club is a form of direct-marketing, but since it is a very special form of it, I want to give it some special attention. I am doing this for three years now. Currently, I sell about 16 or 17 percent of all lambs via the buying club I have in New Jersey. The importance of it is that it is a very fast-growing segment of my sales that was established in a very short time. It all started with one customer from New Jersey, belonging to a Weston A. Price Chapter, who wanted me to bring her order to New Jersey. I told her I would come down



there if she finds me ten more customers. She did. Three years later the customer base is about 50 people strong. The logistics of these deliveries about 280 miles from home are the most complicated and the riskiest. That is why I have strict rules. All business is done via e-mail and I save all correspondence until the delivery is done. I set strict deadlines for ordering and payment. I have all customers confirm any orders and correspondence. All orders are paid well before the delivery and enough time is built into the system to cash checks that bounce before the delivery takes place. I meet at a central location for one hour, with the understanding that someone has to pick up the order at that time. Leaving

the order at the host’s location or coming later is not an option and is specifically mentioned in the e-mails beforehand. That strictness does lead to losing a few customers. Then why be so strict? Just to keep yourself from going insane. If you are lenient in any way, you will come to regret it. Would you rather lose a customer or two or do you want to go home with a few lamb orders on a hot day, letting it defrost while you may have to reimburse the customer? I choose the former.

Rules: Aside from the already described approaches, I have a few additional personal rules in dealing with customers. Since the customer is always king, you have to take yourself back at times. While interaction with customers can be very rewarding, it also can be frustrating sometimes. Here are a few rules that I established for myself which I want to share with you:

- If you make a mistake, admit it. Don’t try to beat around the bush, find excuses, or even argue.
- Don’t try to argue with the customer even if it is clear that you are in the right. Arguing doesn’t convince a customer and it leaves a bad impression, even if you “win.” If you need to vent, do so at home. Your spouse will be happy to listen to you and after venting you will feel better.
- Be reliable, be on time, and follow up with an order; make the customer feel she or he can depend on you.
- Don’t try to hold every customer. It is impossible to make everyone happy. In fact, if one customer makes you miserable, chances are you start taking it out on your good customers. Dropping a difficult customer once in a while enables you to

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refocus on your good ones with renewed energy.

● Make appointments or, if you have a store, have store hours. Don't allow customers to just drop by. You will have no privacy left; your time will not be viewed as valuable. As a farmer you are already viewed as someone who is always at home and available to anyone who wishes it. If a customer is coming at a time agreed upon you can be ready for him or her and you are more likely to take the time to answer questions about you, your product, and your farm. If the customer just shows up when you are in the middle of something or when you want to sit down for dinner, you might act annoyed or at least won't take time for the person.

While the Internet is a great tool for marketing, it also allows the rude people to act out their rudeness. I often get e-mails like this: "do you sell freezer lambs" without addressing me or even saying who they are and without regard of grammar and spelling. Or you get a phone call of the same kind from a person who doesn't even remember who you are when you call back. My rule of thumb is: delete these messages. Chances that they will generate business are very slim. Chances that a person continues being rude and ignorant are high. Is that worth your time? If it is, go for it. It isn't mine. The more serious buyers have done their research. They address you, state their name, and tend to ask relevant questions. I put my time and energy into that kind of customer.

So, were the professors in college right about me or did I change? I happen to believe personality does not truly change. You can (and should) learn to control or temper your weaknesses. The need of making a living will certainly force you to do exactly that. However, if you are a former drill sergeant, you are not likely to change into Martha Stewart. While I have mellowed over the years, I am still the same person. Instead of trying to change, I searched for and found what my natural strengths are. I recognized there is a limit in how warm and chatty I can be. However, there is no limit in my commitment to quality, reliability, and organization.

Thus far, my approach to marketing works well for me.

My market is growing. I sell out every year, while many of the same people keep buying my product. Every year I make some people mad by having to tell them that I am sold out for the season. It didn't even change during the economic slowdown we experienced in the past two years. This year's orders are filling rapidly. That is not a bad position to be in. I readily admit that my experiences are personal and anecdotal and not at all scientific and empirical. However, this is the intent of this article. 🐏

Ulf Kintzel is a native of Germany and lives in the US since 1995. In 2006 he moved from New Jersey to Rushville in the Finger Lakes area in upstate New York. Ulf owns and operates White Clover Sheep Farm. He breeds and raises grass-fed White Dorper sheep without any grain feeding. His website address is www.whitecloversheepfarm.com. He can be reached by e-mail at ulf@whitecloversheepfarm.com or by phone at 585-554-3313.



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