

South Devon—Exceptional Beef, Making an Impression

By Jo Dexter

An unexpected market has evolved for cattlemen. Protein diets are all the rage, beef consumption is up and steakhouses have a nightly waiting list. Consumers are seeking unconventional beef. One of the hottest issues in the cattle industry is national animal identification and BSE. The flurry of press and discussion of “Mad Cow Disease” has created consumer concern for beef safety. As a result, new marketing opportunities are developing for producers selling high quality beef straight from the farm directly to consumers. It is comforting for buyers to know where their beef is raised. Not to mention, most retail stores carry select beef, and many consumers seek higher quality beef with better taste and tenderness. There is a profit-making opportunity with direct marketing cattle. You have fewer costs in getting the product market ready and can set a higher price for product that is higher in quality with value the consumer demands.

It Sells Itself

Within the South Devon breed alone, there are many success stories where operations are beginning new meat business enterprises and have trouble keeping up with consumer demand. Bud Burgess, South Devon breeder from Colorado has been selling beef to people in his community for 30 years. He never had much business until he started selling South Devon beef in 1990. “Before our product was inconsistent in quality, taste and tenderness—so we sold only a few head. Last year we sold 78 head for beef and never had to promote or call anyone,” explains Burgess. Burgess starts calves on a back grounding ration right after weaning and uses corn silage, alfalfa hay, oats and corn to feed them out. The beef is sold by the 1/4, , and whole based on the hot carcass weight and is aged 14 days prior to cutting and packaging. When asked what if any comments he has had from customers about his beef, Burgess replied, “I had a customer in Denver tell me that they would buy our beef no matter what it cost.” Burgess believes that South Devon cattle have a unique ability to marble well (high quality grades) and yield well (consistently over 65%). Most cattle breeds can only offer one or the other of these carcass characteristics. “We are pleased with our cattle from a maternal, performance and carcass standpoint. We will continue to feed more calves and try to meet the demand for our beef program,” says Burgess “I think two things are important when developing a beef program. First, genetics are critical, secondly, corn fed beef is what the consumer wants.”

A Superior Gift

At the Double RL Ranch Tom Harrington, manager spends most of his time managing the near 900 head of cattle owned by Ralph Lauren, designer of high quality clothing. During the holiday season, Harrington also oversees the delivery of 200 specially packaged boxes of South Devon steaks to Lauren’s select people. Harrington says, “If you are on Lauren’s beef gift list than you are important to him. He considers his gift of South Devon steaks a very special treat and so do the recipients.” Harrington often has requests to buy more of the beef but the only other outlet for Double RL Beef is at Lauren’s Chicago restaurant. Harrington often has people tell him that they do not want to eat steak at even the best restaurants because it does not compare to Double RL Beef. Last year they put 500 calves on feed and they were all used by either the restaurant or during the holidays for gift boxes. Most of the calves are Angus South Devon cross. Harrington says, “They perform unlike any other cattle that I have managed. The cows have maternal traits that are essential in our large herd and weaning and carcass performance that has increased our profitability.” While Lauren is not interested in building a beef business, South Devon beef from Double RL Ranch has an important role in his businesses.

Taste The Difference

The 3SDJ Cattle Company in Minnesota got started breeding South Devon Cattle because of their disposition. “We wanted a herd of purebred cows that the kids would be safe working around,” says Don Brammeier, owner. In 1995 they started selling South Devon Beef and now they sell 40 head a year. “Selling beef is easier than selling breeding stock—especially South Devon beef,” states Brammeier. We only sell purebred or full blood animals from our farm, and we have never had any complaints about our beef. “In fact, it amazes me but we have people drive 6 hours to come and pick up their beef each year,” says Brammeier. They feed their calves a ration of corn and byproduct from distiller grains. 3SDJ does not have an organic certification on their beef but

raise all their animals as organically as possible. All the beef is sold by word of mouth and priced by the hanging weight. Brammeier explains that his butcher noticed the quality of beef right away and convinced him to keep the same breeding in his herd. Advice for those starting out Brammeier says, "Just get started-- as soon as people taste it they will buy more and know of someone who will also want to buy your beef." In fact, Brammeier has a meat buyer that was working on a job with him and some other men. They decided to cook steaks for dinner. Everyone asked if Brammeier supplied the steaks and he said no. One of the men purchased beef from Brammeier before and he was convince that the steak were from 3SDJ Cattle. Finally the man who brought the steaks revealed that he had gotten the steaks from Brammeier. "No matter how much we tried to bluff this man, he could taste the difference and knew the steaks were from our farm, " states Brammeier.

Conception to Digestion

Windmill Meat Company, Gouverneur, New York is a fully integrated meat business where they manage breeding, feeding, processing, retailing and even cooking. They get calls daily requesting meat for everything from events and fundraisers to family freezers. "We are a mini IBP with a cooker added on, " says Mike Vandenberg, owner. He along with his wife Michelle makes a living from their meat business and livestock farm. Predominately an Angus breeder, he found in his meat shop, customers were not getting reasonable yield or muscling from straight Angus cattle. A bull sale flyer talked about South Devon Cattle providing both marbling and high yields. This along with disposition is what convinced Vandenberg to by his first South Devon Bull in 1998. The breeding must be working. Now Vandenberg sells 50 head of South Devon Cattle a year and is constantly in need of more supply. "I would be able to sell quite a bit more product if I had the animals," says Vandenberg. This year he is beginning a cooperator program with bull buyers. He plans to buy back first choice of calves from many surrounding small herds and increase his South Devon beef availability. Unlike the West, Windmill Meat Company has a concentrated population of people to market to. They occasionally use newspaper advertising, but word of mouth has been their best promotional vehicle. "Additionally, we have a diverse market here in New York," explains Vandenberg "We sell both grass-fed and corn fed animals." At Windmill Meat Company they have found that most customers want lean hamburger and well marbled steaks. South Devon breeding is working to meet the expectations of their customers "Our customers always comment on how delicious and tender our beef is. They even brag that our beef can be cut with a fork," says Vandenberg. Between their willingness to participate in all phases of production and the advantages of their location, Vandenberg's seem to be on their way to building a bigger business. They have plans to increase their cattle herd to 100 head, further develop their cooperator program and continue to grow the meat business.

These are but a few of the successful direct-beef marketing businesses in the South Devon Breed. Whether it is Colorado, Minnesota, or New York South Devon beef is in demand and making a lasting impression on those who eat it. Breeders have a unique opportunity to take advantage of exceptional South Devon genetics and profit from a growing number of consumers who are seeking a safe, local alternative to beef offered in large retail stores.

***Tips in Developing Direct Marketing
Beef Business***

1. Know your beef – what makes it better than beef available in other markets such as grocery stores.
2. Decide who your customer is
 - a. Within a certain geographical area
 - b. Are they health conscious or concerned about food safety?
3. Develop a name for your beef business and write a brief story telling why your customers should buy your beef.
4. Price your beef knowing that consumers will pay more for:
 - a. High quality
 - b. Natural or Organic
 - c. Assurance of beef source
5. Stand behind your product - one bad consumer experience can ruin your business.
6. Word of mouth will be your best marketing tool.
7. Start small and grow your business.
8. Visit www.ams.usda.gov/directmarketing for more resources in how to begin direct marketing your beef.