



Dr. Colin Palmer

Biography:

Dr. Colin Palmer is an Associate Professor of Theriogenology (Animal Reproduction) at the Western College of Veterinary Medicine. Originally from Nova Scotia, Dr. Palmer worked in mixed practices in Ontario and British Columbia and has owned/operated a practice in Saskatchewan. Dr. Palmer along with his wife Kim and children Lauren, Emily and Carter run a herd of purebred Red Angus cattle under the KC Cattle Co. name.

As a large animal vet you have the opportunity to meet a lot of producers, see their stock and learn how they do business. We all know that every business since the beginning of time, even the frequently cited “oldest profession,” relies on repeat customers and good-will advertising. At least I assume that this is the case, from what I have been told. What still makes me laugh, though, is how often this is forgotten. Now I know that there are those people out there that can never be pleased and there are others, perhaps some of the same, who are dumber than dirt. They’ll buy the worst bull in the pen, despite what you tell them. What I am talking about is doing the best you can to meet your customers’ needs and, more importantly, not misrepresenting the sale.

The most common deception involves calf birth weights. I know of several purebred producers that don’t even have a scale to weigh their calves, or they only weigh one or two calves per season and guess at the rest. Have you ever seen one of those bull sale catalogues where every single bull weighed 75 to 80 pounds. I once heard of a catalogue where there was two full pages of bulls all weighing 75 pounds. I suppose you could argue that most commercial producers have no idea what their calves weigh... they think they need 70 pound calves when in fact, most of their calves weigh 90 to 100 pounds, but come on, all of the bulls weighing the same? How dumb do you think we are? Not reporting creep feeding and use of nurse cows are a couple of more common misrepresentations. How are we supposed to believe those weaning weights and EPDs? Another trick - using drugs to sedate cattle for shows or sales seems to have largely fallen by the wayside, probably because it was hard to get that just right

“Where’s the Integrity?”

It’s Buyer Beware in the Purebred Cattle Industry!

dose and the animals could look too dopey. Thank goodness! How about selling black cattle known to carry red genes to unsuspecting customers?

On a grander scale, my latest pet peeve has been American Genetics; specifically, Red Angus genetics. The last few years, I have been so disappointed with this junk I will not even consider buying any more semen from American-bred bulls. Unless, of course, the bull has mostly Canadian breeding! Let me share some reasons why: frame sizes that are all over the place; poor feet; poor mothering; weak conformation and no testicles. Those scrotal measurements have got to be inflated by at least five to ten centimetres! Not to mention the really big ones like buying semen from bulls that throw white and from bulls that has now been found to carry the gene causing osteopetrosis; a.k.a. marble bone disease. Now it is reasonable for me to believe that the bull studs may be innocent of these flaws, but I refuse to believe that the breeders are not aware of these problems. So you must be asking yourself, why did I go state side for my genetics in the first place? BIG NUMBERS! Back in the ‘90’s it seemed liked the best balance of birth weight and growth performance EPDs was with American bulls. These numbers are a selection tool, but really only one of many. When picking bulls out of a semen distributor’s catalogue, you have to do your homework. Choosing a bull based on EPDs alone is almost as bad as single-trait selection. After awhile, you can have really good numbers, but non-functional cattle. A lot of the very important phenotypic traits have no EPD. That one I had to learn the hard way; I got caught up in the American obsession with numbers.

A growing trend has more to do with negligence than outright deception. That is failure to identify

and address the customers' needs. Just like giant chain stores, as farms and ranches get bigger, there is less time to visit leaving the customers to shop on their own.

Unfortunately, the results are not always good. Many commercial producers buy bulls based on birth weight and price, with really no business plan for their herd. They can probably handle a performance or a trait-balanced bull that will do wonders for their bottom line for many years to come, but they don't know any better. Others will attend a sale drawn by the excitement of a large number of bulls produced by an outfit with an excellent, often well-deserved reputation. Most of these guys don't know what "ranch-raised" or "range cattle" are, or they associate these terms with "healthy" and "trouble-free." You know, "the kind of cattle that work for you!" instead of the other way 'round.

Remember, there are a lot of people buying bulls for 50 to 150 cow herds or less, and most of these folks handle their cattle on foot or with quads. A lot of these bulls are getting canned for just being too wild or hard to handle and a lot of repeat business plus the potential for new sales is being lost.

Remember: follow-up calls or visits; determining what the customer's needs are; educating the customer about what your program or breed has to offer; and not being afraid to recommend another breeder's cattle or even another breed will long be remembered after your cattle have been forgotten. Most importantly: Be Honest!