



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.

## “Put Your Best Foot Forward” Marketing Yourself and Your Bulls the Best Way You Can

Let me be the first to tell you that I still have a lot to learn about marketing; however, I think it is safe to say that I am an enthusiastic student. One of the greatest perks in veterinary practice is all of the interesting people you get to interact with and I have been fortunate enough to have had some great teachers that were usually paying me for my time. One lesson I learned along the way was that veterinary practice really is a service industry. You see, back when I was a student the veterinary curriculum focused on the nuts and bolts of veterinary medicine; business was something you learned on your own. Fortunately, that has changed and new graduates learn all sorts of neat stuff especially, it seems, how much they should get paid.

Growing up on the farm we raised our calves, gathered them up in the fall and usually sold them to one buyer. The price per pound had been discussed and once they were weighed you got paid. Another option was to “market” the calves which to me meant taking them to a cattle auction where hopefully there would be more than one buyer. Sure, I know that prices in a free market are determined by supply and demand; my point here is that wouldn't it be nice to encourage so much demand for your calves that you could set the price? I can remember my dad telling me that when you are a farmer it seems like there are only two sentences you need to know when doing business: “How much?” and “How much you gonna give me?” Even nowadays, most producers of ag products are in this situation. Sure they can say no to an offer, but sooner or later they will have to give in. At the other end of the spectrum, there is the relentless onslaught of sales persons trying to sell them something that seems to be way over

priced. Whichever way you look at it somebody is trying to take your money. No wonder so many farmers develop what I call a “us and them attitude.” Most have never had any experience serving the public and really are not attuned to catering to what often seem to be eccentric whims; and, for the most part, why would they want to? Ah, the lure of the purebred cattle business and the opportunity to make a decent living out of cattle! Turn the table around now, and many farmers-come-salespersons appear rude or arrogant sometimes to the point of alienating potential customers. There are a lot of great cattle out there, but it is the marketing and salesmanship that really help to create demand for the product and bolster the prices.

When I started in vet practice I saw myself as a farmer who had been divinely chosen to lead my fellow cattlemen and show them that there was a better way. Well it wasn't quite that bad, but I definitely could be arrogant and rude at times. I turned off quite a few people; especially ladies with kitty cats and the odd cattleman too. It took a couple of old-timers to set me straight and get me thinking about offering service. You see, up to that point I use to say that: “I got into vet medicine because I liked working with animals, but unfortunately most animals had an owner.” Not a great philosophy if you want to grow your business and enjoy your career.

Some of my best teachers were and still are other small business owners... hairstylists, tradesmen and retailers. Most of these folks really have taught me how to offer service. In the purebred cattle business, everybody ought to know that you have to offer the best bulls and castrate the rest. The savvy buyer is looking for all sorts of performance

## A Breeder's... Veterinary Perspective

information and wants a smooth looking bull that is going to sire a uniform group of calves that stand out in the pen. Most are also gonna talk to you about birth weight and probably also about feet and the bull's mother. Pretty standard stuff. Now, think about businesses you like to patronize and what it is you like about them. Pricing will probably be on your list, but I'll bet there are a lot of other things too. For me, friendliness and a genuine desire to satisfy my needs top my list. Patience! That's an important one. I also like it when people remember my name. I like people who genuinely try to help me out and even if they can't they will suggest a useful solution. There's a fine line though; don't drool over your customers, give 'em some space. What about what you hate? If I have to wait for service while employees are carrying on personal conversations or gossiping about customers I am not likely to come back. Never, never make fun of the customer in any way. That includes his profession (if he is not a fulltime cattleman), his ethnicity, his income, his truck or his cattle. I used "his" in the previous sentence, but it could just as easily be "her" so don't assume that just because there is a man there he is the one making the decisions. I don't think anything ticks a capable woman off any more than being treated like her opinion doesn't matter. Be good to the kids too; they'll help with repeat sales down the road. Avoid making assumptions...just because they have an old livestock trailer doesn't necessarily mean they are going broke. My new aluminum trailer has been ordered; should be here in 2015! Most importantly, always conduct yourself with business in mind which means be careful what you say and do 'cause you never know who is watching or listening. This is the kind of stuff you need to deliver the sale and to keep them coming back. They are all potential customers, big or small; you gotta treat 'em like gold.