

# What Is A Brand Anyway?

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**W**hat should a brand imply to a customer? Webster's Dictionary defines a brand as "a trademark, a class of goods identified by name as the product of a single firm or manufacturer, or a distinctive kind." "Brand name," the adjective,

means having a reputation and a loyal following. Brands can imply good or bad things depending on the situation. The phrase "Southeastern cattle," when used in cattle-feeding country, implies calves gathered over a period of days from weekly auctions; of unknown genetics, health and management protocol; and expected to have higher sickness and death loss. Those factors plus the freight are the reasons our auction prices are lower than those closer to the feedlots most times of the year.

To me, a brand implies credibility, integrity or an expectation that if the product is purchased it is something special, i.e., not generic, and will give me the same performance or satisfaction if purchased again. If all a buyer knows about your cattle is the color, weight, sex and grade, then you should not expect nor do you deserve more than the average market price.

We have had several efforts over the years to establish a brand or label for preconditioned feeder cattle. My first recollection was the TNT program, or Tennessee and Treated. Unfortunately, the label TNT had other implications with which people were more familiar. Later, several Southeastern states had a variety of state programs, carrying their own brand or label. The NCBA region made a major effort to come up with a program for different levels of preconditioning. The Blue Tag cattle were fully preconditioned, with double vaccination for respiratory and blackleg, weaned at least 30 days, castrated, dehorned and taught to eat from a trough and drink from a tank. The Red Tag program required all of the above except weaning, and the White Tag program only required one round of vaccinations and did not require weaning. The program had only modest success. South Carolina still uses the designations in a few sales. Georgia does not use it at all. In Tennessee, only Sweetwater uses the brand or label, and that sale has additional requirements. It requires the Blue Tag level, is animal health product-brand specific, requires 45 days of weaning, and a few other items requested by buyers. It moved to this Southeast Pride Plus level because the regular Southeast Pride Blue Tag program did not work for buyers.

Other groups in the state currently have programs that attempt to establish their brands, in the hope that buyers will try the cattle, be fully satisfied and become repeat buyers. The Tennessee Beef Alliance has a program that includes some genetic specifications. Some of the cattle in the Sweetwater Southeast Pride Plus sale have genetic requirements. The Hawkins

County Cattleman's Association sale is brand specific for its vaccination program and requires 45-day weaning. The Hereford Alliance sale in the fall is breed specific, but also has specific preconditioning requirements. Athens and McMinnville also have one or more preconditioned sales each year. In addition, there are animal health companies that have their own preconditioning programs, such as Sure Health and Select Vac. If I have left any sale out it is not by intent.

Another program is the Process Verified Program (PVP). Its purpose is to verify the age and source of feeder cattle so that the beef from those cattle will qualify for export to Japan. Following the BSE (mad cow) case in 2003 – and after much negotiation – Japan only accepts beef from cattle 21 months and younger. The Tennessee Department of Agriculture has made available funds to producers and markets who hold preconditioned sales for PVP cattle. It is my understanding that some of those cattle might have been preconditioned and PVP for age and source, but were nothing special otherwise. In my opinion, buyers expect something special from cattle that are age and source verified. However, it is only human nature for folks to run to the money when such programs are made available no matter how good the intent of the program.

The situation begs the question, "Why can't Tennessee have a program like Kentucky's Certified Preconditioned for Health (CPH) sales, or a VAC 45 program?" I think there would be some benefit in having a recognizable brand. One brand would not have to take away from the uniqueness of alliance-specific or breed-specific programs. There are differences among Kentucky's CPH sales, but the CPH sales do have a set of standards which apply to all. It comes down to a need to work together, decide what is important, and come up with a recognizable brand with basic standards. Then individual groups, alliances, associations, etc., can add special requirements. It will take more than meetings and catchy names to accomplish the task. It will require commitment.

The market is crying out for feeder cattle of known reputation which will stand up under customary stocker and feedlot programs and perform with a great degree of repeatability. We want those buyers to be the last bidder or next to the last bidder on our Tennessee cattle. As many groups have learned, load lot numbers are critical to capturing full value for any cattle. Anything less than 48,000 pounds will not get the job done. Producers will need to work together to convince the doubters that any such program and sale is the thing to do. Help is available from UT Extension, TDA and others if we are to create a brand to market quality feeder cattle that meet buyer expectations. Beef producers can have some control of the value received for their cattle if they become committed to do so. Δ

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