

LIVESTOCK

Livestock breeders have had to be creative to market their animals this year as the Covid-19 lockdown led to the cancellation of many sales and the entire summer showing season. Jonathan Wheeler reports.

Netting livestock sales in lockdown

For many livestock breeders, the internet has become an even more vital tool to market stock this year. Charlie Sutcliffe, a Longhorn breeder from Lincolnshire, says it is perfectly possible to generate what is effectively 'face to face' contact with customers over the internet.

But he stresses that anyone venturing into social media should follow a few key rules to avoid some of the well publicised pitfalls of the medium.

Being active and being relevant are the keys to success, he says, while highlighting the benefits of getting it right.

He aims to post about his Tetford Longhorns herd every day on Twitter (over 5,300 followers) and Facebook (over 1,600 followers) and says that has helped him sell many animals.

He says: "I do not think there is a single pedigree sale I have made in the past decade for which the initial contact has not been generated via the internet."

Mr Sutcliffe and his wife Debbie run the 30-cow herd on 24 hectares (60 acres) at Little London, Tetford, near Horncastle, Lincolnshire.

Animals finished for meat are sold through The Mansion Farm, an internet-based company run by their son Jim which sells a wide range of distinctive, mainly locally sourced, British artisan food products.

In previous years three elements combined to promote the Tetford brand – word of mouth from satisfied customers, showing and the internet.

Positive

Now the internet plays a much more crucial role and can be expected to continue to do so, no matter what shape a post-Covid-19 show season might take.

Mr Sutcliffe says: "If you are going to make the best of social media you need to be on it every day. You need to stay in the public eye and stay positive."

He avoids posting about politics and controversial subjects. He adds: "You can very quickly land yourself in a lot of trouble if you engage in them."

Instead, he aims to post content online morning and afternoon, with both news and photographs that he hopes followers will find interesting.

One recent post was a group photo of two cows and a calf to which he had just provided some buffer feed.

He says: "Photos attract a lot of interest. I posted that quite late in the evening recently and it had 70 likes and several retweets by the next morning."

CHARLIE SUTCLIFFE

I do not think there is a single pedigree sale I have made in the past decade for which the initial contact has not been generated via the internet



Charlie Sutcliffe is positive about the possibilities of selling livestock over the internet.

While Twitter helps him keep everyone abreast of what is happening with the herd, he tends to use Facebook to promote and advertise animals.

He says: "I have two accounts – one for personal, social things on which I post things I find amusing and the like."

"But the Tetford Longhorns account is purely a business tool, on which I post news about the herd and individual animals, especially those that are available for sale."

"Facebook is very good for that because you have no character limit and can give full descriptions of animals and their pedigrees."

But he warns against adding a price tag to animals presented for sale. He says: "Every deal is different depending on the circumstances at the time."

Character

He urges new users to ensure they 'inject some character' into whatever they post, something the extra capacity of Facebook makes feasible.

"You have to interact with people and you have to be active. That means posting regularly and telling them about yourself and the business."

"That is the best way to make people more comfortable about contacting you and you can always invite them to phone you if they want to discuss things."

As an example of how this can

benefit, he points to bulls sold to dairy farmers producing animals for the Buitelaar Longhorn scheme.

He says: "We have sold 10 pedigree bulls to dairy farmers in that scheme and in all cases the first contact was made via Facebook."

He fully intends to return to the showing whenever possible, although to the slimmed down programme he adopted a few years ago.

They used to compete at 10 shows a year, winning Longhorn male champion at the Royal Show twice – first with Tetford Clansman in 1999 and then with Tetford Kingpin in 2005.

Those showing successes help advertise the quality of their stock he says.

"We used to do between 10 to a dozen shows a season, but have cut that back to three now."

Those are Lincolnshire Show, as their 'home county' event, the Great Yorkshire Show, which he says allows them to reach more people than anywhere else, and Heckington Show, the largest village-based show in the country.