

***A CASE STUDY:
The Development and Efficacy of
Pasture-Raised Lamb Marketing
Messages***

Planned Lamb Farm

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Practical Farmers of Iowa

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Introduction: Pasture-Raised Meats Marketing Messages

As consumers become increasingly attuned to health and environmental effects of food production, meat producers are racing to make claims about their production methods. Even mainstream grocery stores now stock many products carrying labels such as “organic,” “free range,” “grass-fed,” or “pasture-raised.” Does this barrage of sustainability claims confuse the consumer? Which of the many marketing messages employed is the most effective? How can producers make convincing claims about their sustainable meat production methods?

With these questions in mind, Food Alliance Midwest through a collaboration with the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture at Iowa State University, Practical Farmers of Iowa, Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture at the University of Minnesota, the Center for Integrated Agriculture Systems at the University of Wisconsin, Iowa State University Extension, and Food Routes designed a project to study the development and efficacy of pasture-raised meat marketing messages. The project was funded by the Leopold Center.

The group chose three Iowa farmers who practice pasture-raised production systems and who market their products directly to consumers. We conducted case studies to examine which messages and

communication strategies are effective in communicating the benefits of pasture-raised systems to consumers.

The first step in the process was to conduct consumer surveys and focus groups to determine which messages about pasture-raised meats were most convincing and compelling to the average consumer. The focus groups overwhelmingly indicated that the most compelling messages about pasture-raised meats focused on taste, health and nutrition, support for local farmers and, to a lesser extent, environmental sustainability and humane treatment of animals.

A consultant then conducted farm visits and interviews with the participating meat producers. The consultant developed marketing materials for each producer, catering to each producer’s desired consumer market and focusing on those messages about pasture-raised meat that the consumer focus groups determined to be most effective and compelling.

Finally, we conducted follow-up interviews with the producers to see how they had utilized the marketing material, how effective they deemed it, and what affect it had on new or existing customers.

The following case study tells the story of one of the three Iowa meat producers, Scott Weinberg.

Pasture-Raised Lamb Marketing

Planned Lamb Farm— Clarksville, IA



One of the three Iowa producers selected to participate in this project was Scott Weinberg, owner of Planned Lamb Farm in Clarksville, Iowa.

Background

Scott Weinberg has been raising lambs on pasture for the past eight years. All his lambs are born, weaned, and raised on a rotational grazing schedule which combines a planted mixture of perennial rye and white clover with naturally-occurring grasses and legumes. Scott raises only Dorper sheep, a South African breed known for its lean, tender meat. Scott is on a winter-harvest schedule, which he says allows him to produce the highest-quality lamb; in his winter-harvest system, ewes get an optimum diet of high-quality spring pasture growth—providing them with much-needed nutrition and energy—before their spring lambing. This means that lambs are born healthier and stronger.

Additionally, during the lambs' first months of life, they also have access to the spring pasture grasses, the best of the year (Scott says he has "some of the best green grass salad bowl pastures around").

Market

Before the start of the project, Scott primarily marketed his lamb to the Bosnian immigrant population of Waterloo, Iowa. He relied primarily on word-of-mouth advertising, although he occasionally advertised at several venues in heavily Bosnian neighborhoods. Customers usually purchased live lamb on the farm, for \$1.00 per pound live weight. Scott was hoping to find a market for his lamb that was more receptive to the pasture-raised message, and that would provide him a premium of \$3.50 to \$4.00 per pound. At the time of the project, he was exploring the option of selling lambs to a Wisconsin farmer/marketer who finished the lambs on his land in Wisconsin and then sold the meat to area grocery stores and restaurants. Scott felt that he would make a greater profit selling through this channel than he could selling to the Waterloo Bosnian immigrant population. However, he still had concerns that this marketing outlet would not promote the Planned Lamb brand, nor would it promote the pasture-raised aspect of his product.

Scott's decision to participate in this project was motivated by his desire to find a market for his lamb product that would pay a premium for his pasture-

raised production methods. After working with the consultant, Scott decided that the most promising market was in food service, specifically restaurants and grocery stores. Therefore, the consultant designed marketing materials to cater to these specific markets, focusing most heavily on meat quality, flavor, and nutritional value (those messages that the consumer focus groups deemed to be most effective)

Development of Marketing Materials for Planned Lamb Farm

John Seymour Anderson, the consultant contracted to design the marketing materials for each Iowa producer, visited Planned Lamb Farm in summer of 2004. He compiled detailed field notes of the visit, and ultimately designed a tri-fold brochure that Scott Weinberg would use to market his pasture-raised lamb. The consultant used the results of the consumer focus groups to determine which aspects of the pasture-raised message to highlight in the marketing material. The final brochure focused on the following aspects of the pasture-raised lamb:

- ❖ **Flavorful.** The Dorper breed—known for its lean, tender meat—is ideally-suited to pasture life and a winter harvest cycle. The result is a high-quality, flavorful product, which the brochure calls the “Champagne of Lamb.” The brochure also lists books and

websites containing gourmet lamb recipes.

- ❖ **Local.** The brochure highlights the fact that the lamb is produced and processed in Iowa: “The delicate, worldly flavor of lamb perfected on Iowa pasture.”
- ❖ **Nutritious.** The pasture-based system provides for optimum animal health. Because a grass-based diet is natural to sheep, the pasture system results in a “lean, healthy, nutrient dense and protein rich meat.”
- ❖ **Seasonal.** The winter-harvest system results in the highest-quality lamb; the brochure markets the product as a “seasonal delicacy.”
- ❖ **Environmentally-Responsible.** The pasture-based system is environmentally-sustainable because pasture cover enriches the soil and prevents erosion. Animals raised on pasture do not need antibiotics or growth hormones, because they have access to a diet to which they are naturally-suited.
- ❖ **Humane.** Both production and processing of the lamb is humane. The animals live a healthy life of open grazing. They are processed by a family-owned processor

which, “without the hurry typical of large industrial plants, is better for the livestock.”

The final brochure developed by the consultant for Planned Lamb Farm is pictured on page 5.

Efficacy of Marketing Materials for Planned Lamb Farm

Approximately six months after the consultant developed a marketing brochure for Planned Lamb Farm, we conducted a post-project interview with Scott Weinberg. We asked him about his usage of the brochure, the efficacy of the marketing messages developed, customer responses to the marketing messages in the brochure, and his overall responses to the project process and results.

Usage

Scott has widely distributed the brochure developed as part of the pasture-raised project. He sends a few brochures by mail to existing customers, but primarily he distributes them to potential customers when they request further information about his product.

He also distributes brochures when he goes to art shows to exhibit his iron sign creations. Scott finds the art shows to be a good venue for his pasture-raised message. The typical art show visitors are exactly the sort of group that Scott wants to target with the Planned Lamb brochure: an

upscale clientele, familiar with lamb and other gourmet products, and attuned to the flavor and nutritional benefits of pasture-raised meat.

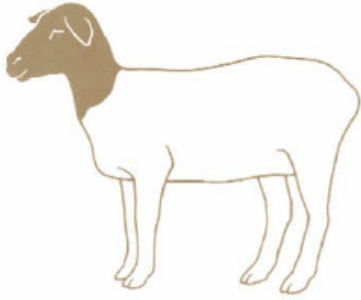
Scott finds the brochure to be much more useful with new or potential customers than it is with retaining existing customers. He believes that people will continue to buy his product because of its superior quality and flavor, so he doesn't require additional marketing messages to retain customers.

Changes in Market

At the outset of the project, the consultant helped Scott identify his target audience for the brochure that was to be developed. Scott identified his target market as an upscale clientele who would pay a premium for pasture-raised lamb. He especially felt that restaurant owners and chefs would be the most promising market in the future.

Six months later, Scott has not begun to target the restaurant market. Instead, he still focuses on direct marketing to consumers, since he has found the brochure to be very successful in appealing to an upscale clientele. Judging by the great customer response to the pasture-raised message presented in the brochure, Scott believes there is “tremendous opportunity out there” for marketing his products.

Brochure Developed for Planned Lamb Farm



DORPER: THE CHAMPAGNE OF LAMB

Developed in South Africa during the 1930's as a cross of the Black Headed Persian and Dorset Horn, the Dorper was bred for its lean, tender meat, its broad frame and ideal muscling. In addition to its rich flavor and tenderness, research tests show that, when cooked, Dorper meat actually shrinks less than meat from other standard favorite North American breeds.

Dorpers are hardy and mild mannered, and do exceptionally well in varied and extreme environments. So, lucky for us, neither Iowa's winters nor hot dry summers are able to dim their innate ability to thrive and produce wonderful meat.

"OH THE RECIPES YOU'LL TRY"

During recent years, lamb has been experiencing a revival in the U.S. The blossoming of ethnic restaurants is providing a delightful array of new menu ideas for at home cooks. And, the interest in American family roots has brought back dishes and foods from the first half of the 20th century and before for rediscovery and redefinition.

At the same time, traditional American lamb dishes and cultural hybrids like our favorite, barbeque lamb, are showing up at fairs, family gatherings and local restaurants. There are many recent cookbooks that provide delectable recipes using lamb—for the beginner and the adventurous alike. And, there are many web sites with recipes and cooking tips. Among our favorites are:



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PLANNED LAMB SHEEP FARM
Bred and Raised To Produce Outstanding Quality Meat



— WINTER HARVEST —

Pasture Raised Lamb

"Tender, Lean And Succulent"



"The Champagne of Lamb"

THE DELICATE, WORLDLY FLAVOR OF LAMB PERFECTED ON IOWA PASTURE

Lamb is a meat that's long been appreciated around the world for its sweet, mild and complex flavor — from Europe to Africa, India, Mexico and North America. Now, our gently rolling Iowa meadows are proving to be a perfect home for raising the perfect lamb.

We've selected and raise only the Dorper breed, developed solely for the quality of its meat.

With naturally suited outdoor pasture life and diet, and our winter harvest cycle, we're able to bring out the best in the outstanding qualities the Dorper has to offer.



BORN AND RAISED ON GRASS — NOURISHING EVERYONE

All of our animals are born, weaned and raised on our pastures, so we can guarantee that they're healthy and always have been. They spend 95% of their time on pasture, getting plenty of fresh air and clean water as they roam year 'round on a circuit of large open plots.

They derive the bulk of their nourishment from pasture plants, including tender grasses, clovers and other legumes. This is the diet natural to sheep, and therefore provides them optimum nutrition and health. In turn, they produce a lean, healthy, nutrient dense and protein rich meat.



WINTER LAMB: A SEASONAL DELICACY

Between November and February is harvest time for our Dorpers, for one reason and one reason only—that's how we can produce our finest, most succulent lamb.

Our winter harvest is dictated by an annual cycle for spring lambing. With this calendar, we give the ewes a diet of the best spring pasture growth to provide them optimum nourishment and energy as lambing approaches. As a result, the lambs are given the best possible start nutritionally. The first several months of their lives they're feeding and growing on the pastures when the plants are most lush. By working with the seasons, we reduce livestock stress, enhancing their ability to succeed and produce exceptional quality meat.

An added benefit of this calendar is that it makes our lamb available when domestic supplies normally diminish—during the winter.

HEALTHY LAMB AND HEALTHY LAND

We're committed to produce the most healthful and flavorful lamb possible. So, we don't administer growth hormones or antibiotics. With the livestock's healthy outdoor life they're not needed. Nor do we feed our sheep any animal byproducts. They're not needed, either.

What's healthy for lamb is healthy for our land. Pasture cover naturally enriches the soil and prevents erosion and runoff while providing habitat for wildlife. And pasture farming dramatically reduces the need for heavy machinery and high energy inputs required to plant, harvest, process and distribute feed. As grazing sheep feed themselves, they not only get exercise, but help preserve the environment.



LOCAL PROCESSING: STATE OF THE ART / FAMILY OWNED / HUMANE CRAFT METHODS

Wonderful meat can only be as good as the last stop before going to market — the meat locker. So, we've partnered with an outstanding regional processor, Edgewood Meats.

Edgewood has been a local family operation for decades. They combine state of the art USDA inspected facilities and food safety management with a tradition of expert cutting by hand. Their methodical craft approach and humane handling, without the hurry typical of large industrial plants, is better for the livestock and, in turn, ensures both food safety and premium meat quality.

Efficacy of Marketing Messages

The Planned Lamb brochure communicated a variety of messages about the pasture-raised products, including superior taste, health and nutritional benefits, environmental responsibility, and local production and processing (see complete list of messages, page 3). When asked which messages presented in the brochure most appealed to customers, Scott responded, "I would like it to be the taste aspect, but I don't think [customers] really believe me until they actually try it. Probably the health and nutrition aspect is the most important to them. Then, if I can get them to try the lamb, the taste aspect comes on pretty strong!"

When asked which messages were *least* interesting or appealing to customers, Scott said that most customers were, in fact, "interested in pretty much the whole package. I haven't seen any 'I don't care' attitudes at all."

Overall Efficacy of Brochure

Scott expressed positive feelings about the final brochure format and content. "We rewrote that material a lot," he said, "and each time it got a little bit better. Today, I don't know if I would change anything on it."

When questioned about the "shelf-life" of the brochure, or if it would lose its relevance in the near future, Scott stated that he believed the brochure would be beneficial to his business for a long time to come. "It'll

hang right in there," he said. Since Scott's brother owns the shop that printed the original brochures, he can easily reprint them, and likely will.

Project Process

Scott found the process of this project to be effective and satisfying. On a scale of 1 to 5, he rated the design/communication consultant as a 5. "John was very helpful," he said. "From our initial visit, I really didn't have any idea where it was going. On our second visit, he had a very good framework built up for the project. And each time it got better."

Scott feels that his own success with the project was somewhat due to the fact that, when he began his meetings with the consultant, he already had a good sense of the marketing messages he wanted to get across to consumers. He believes that a consultant would be wasting his or her time by attempting to pursue a similar project with farmers who "didn't have any idea how they wanted to sell their product," or were not able to tell their own "story."

Having said that, however, Scott reiterated that the consultant did help him strengthen his own concept of marketing, and assisted him in telling his story. "He brought out a lot of points that I hadn't thought of," said Scott. The consultant also helped Scott to express his ideas in a way that appealed to customers. "I was really pushing for the grass-fed aspect of the product, but I just wasn't wording it correctly," said Scott. "John was able

to word it much better than I could. It certainly worked out well.”

When asked if he would benefit from ongoing marketing consultation of the sort provided during the project, Scott commented that if he “had a website that went along with the brochure, that would be tremendously beneficial.” Scott feels he would benefit from assistance in creating a website.

Conclusions

Scott Weinberg has effectively utilized the marketing materials developed as part of this project to build a larger customer base, and one which is willing to pay a premium price for his sustainable production methods. Although he has not yet used the brochure for the upscale restaurants, which was the market he originally planned to target, yet he has found the brochure to be tremendously successful for direct marketing to an upscale clientele. Scott felt that his participation in the project helped him to focus his marketing plans, as well as to more effectively tell his own story.

The case of Planned Lamb Farm demonstrates the potential for farmers to greatly benefit from marketing consultation and assistance.