

The Customer Is Always King

or a Guide to Be a Good Customer

—Ulf Kintzel

Photos by Author

“You can please some of the people all of the time, you can please all of the people some of the time, but you can’t please all of the people all of the time.”
- John Lydgate

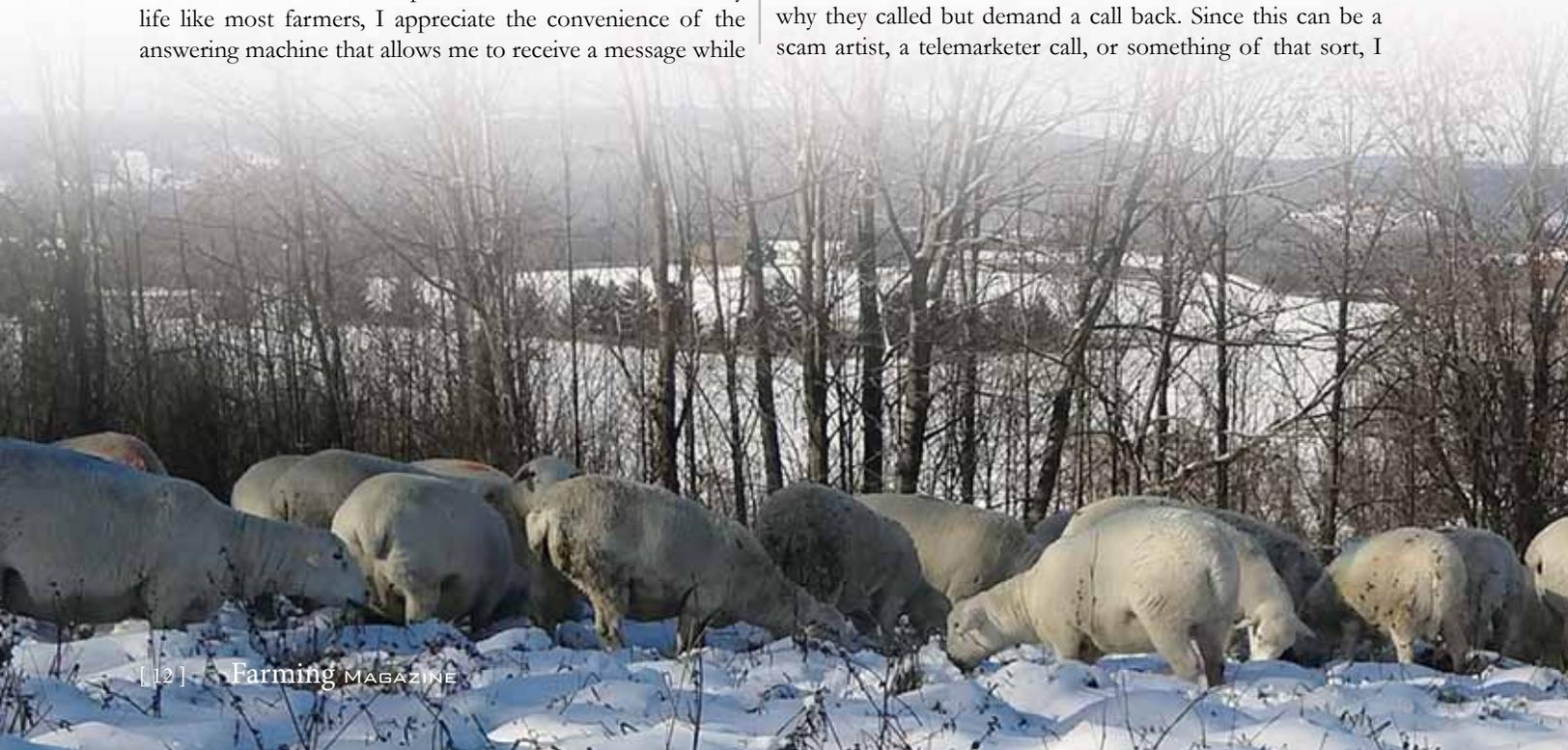
Do you have a roadside stand? A buying club or CSA? A farm store? Or do you sell direct by other means? Then you will probably agree with me that the phrase “The customer is always king” must have been phrased by someone who never had any customers. Or perhaps some customers got together and as part of their conspiracy they coined that phrase. How many times have you, the “producer,” said to yourself that the production side of your business is the easy one, but dealing with customers is what makes it hard? Well, if you are one of those, this article is for you. It is winter, the time of some musing and perhaps even some lighter topic. If, on the other hand, you are a customer, please keep in mind I am writing this article with tongue-in-cheek. So don’t get upset. Moving forward, you can use the article as a guide if you strive to be a good customer.

For many of us the phone is the main tool to be reached when a customer wants to place an order. Since I live a busy life like most farmers, I appreciate the convenience of the answering machine that allows me to receive a message while

I am not there and the liberty to return the phone call later. That seems like a pretty straightforward idea. Just today I received a message from John* who wants a ram. I wasn’t home, so I returned his call when I got in a few hours later and we hashed out the details of the deal. Simple enough? Oh, if only. Here are some scenarios that happen more often than the one I just described.

Most people are familiar with their own phone number and their own name and perhaps tend to forget that others aren’t. So at times I find a message that might state the nature of the business but at the end of the message either name or phone number are left with a rushed voice and hardly or not at all audible. Easy fix, you might say, just look at the caller ID. Well, often the number is not available or not listed or restricted. If you happen to catch the number but not the name or only somewhat and you call back and you start the conversation with “I am returning Kyle’s or Kim’s phone call, I didn’t quite catch the name”..... boy, you might think the Spanish Inquisition is answering the other side of the phone: “Who are you?” Why are you calling?” “No, we didn’t call you!” Okay, sorry, have a good day.

It can be worse. Some don’t leave a name or the reason why they called but demand a call back. Since this can be a scam artist, a telemarketer call, or something of that sort, I



never call back unless I know what it is about. Those people can then start leaving some demanding messages, seemingly upset that I didn't call back yet. So was it scam or a customer? I never find out because I never call back. I figure whoever wants something from me won't have a problem telling me what it is about.

My greeting message also states when the best time is to reach me. (In the summer that would be 6 AM; at other times it would be when the school bus arrives mid-afternoon.) Some don't like to leave a message, so I give them the option to call me when it is more likely that I am home. I make a point to make myself available at that time. Yet, the same person may call back time and again, just not at that hour.

When I have to call someone I first look at the clock before I call. Before 7 AM? Not a time to call a stranger. (My neighbor is another story. If my phone call wakes him up at 6:30 AM I just tell him it was a good Christian time to get up anyway. After 9 PM? That's too late, especially in the winter. Too bad some customers don't feel that way. Half asleep by ten o'clock the phone rings. At times I shake my head, pick up the phone, and utter the sentence: "This better be good".

A special case is a phone call from a cell phone. Driving down the road with spotty cell phone reception can lead to some very incoherent messages with many important details left out. I no longer fill in the blanks. If it was important, the person will call again.

That's just the phone. Let's move on to e-mail, the way I conduct most of my business. For my breeding stock a great majority of the inquiries come via e-mail simply because people have looked at my website on the Internet and it only takes a click with the mouse to open up an e-mail. Here is what I learned over the years that a serious inquiry looks like: the person who e-mails addresses me in some way, states his or her name or signs the e-mail with the name and tells me what they are looking for. In fact, if they know my name, the breed of my sheep, or the details of my custom-harvested freezer lamb, I know immediately that they have done their homework and that they want *my* sheep or lamb and not just a sheep or lamb. These are the telltales of a serious customer.

Then I jump right on it and reply, telling people what I have available, what the price is, etc., and ask if they wish to proceed. That too sounds easy enough, doesn't it? Well, just wait. Many times an e-mail does not address me in any way, it starts literally in the middle of a sentence, and oftentimes for good measure ignores all the rules of capitalizing words or beginning of sentences or punctuation. I used to glean at times the name off the e-mail address. I found out the hard way that this is no sure thing. I once addressed a person as Marsha when I replied to MarshaShivo@bluemail.com, only to find out that Steve was now upset because I just called him Marsha. Well, how was I supposed to know?

Over the years I learned to distinguish between a serious inquiry and one that isn't. Just every once in a while I follow a lead that I considered an inquiry that wasn't serious just to prove myself wrong. But in the end it is indeed a dead end. The fact that texting has become commonplace has not helped courteous conduct. I am still of that generation that learned to say please and thank you, and learned the proper form of a letter, such as addressing a person and signing your name. That puts me increasingly at odds with today's generation. So if you shoot off a text that says, "i look for shanks do you have them" and nothing else, well, don't expect a reply.

As you know, I am a regular contributor to this magazine. I also write for another quarterly publication. The paragraph at the bottom of every article basically invites people to ask me questions. So I get many e-mails that ask me what grass to use for pasture renovation (late-heading orchard grass), my preferred legume (New Zealand Grazing White Clover, variety not so important), if my Dorper sheep are suitable for a sheep dairy (no), or if my Dorper sheep are meatier than Katahdin sheep (absolutely by a wide margin!). I usually answer, provided the person who has a question included his or her name. Those who know me also know how willingly I share my knowledge I collected over the last 30 years of raising sheep. So a thank-you note back is always appreciated. Well, it rarely comes. Eight or nine times out of ten people have no problem asking me all kinds of questions, even push for an answer if I haven't



answered right away. But a single simple thank-you in return is the exception, not the rule. Some have perhaps wondered why I didn't answer additional or follow-up questions. I always tell myself if it isn't worth your time for you to say thank you, it isn't worth my time. Phone calls can end the same way. So when Marco has all his questions answered about the fact that his sheep keep dying,



At my freezer lamb delivery place in New Jersey.

he has no problem just hanging up the phone. Where did common courtesy go? On occasion I get a very lengthy e-mail from someone with a dozen or more questions basically asking me to write a business plan. When I point to my articles all neatly published on my website and often addressing the topic they inquired about, many will refuse to read them first.

Then there is the on-farm business. The general public seems to have the perception that a farmer is always home and always available. It is not uncommon that I receive a phone call or e-mail in the morning that a customer wants to “stop by” in the afternoon or the next day. What are they thinking? That I wait all day by the barn, willing to interrupt my job at a moment's notice to serve a customer? So I stress the importance of an appointment. I sometimes point out that I am in a field far away from the house or the barn. Whether it is picking up a freezer lamb or a group of breeding animals, I do all by appointment. In fact, it serves the customer much better. When I get interrupted in the middle of some work I wish to get done, or if I have to come back from the farthest edge of a field to meet an unannounced customer who “stopped by,” I am not exactly in the right mindset to be of service. Other things are on my mind. On the other hand, if I meet a customer who made an appointment (and the customer shows up on time, wink, wink), I have the time set aside to serve him or her and they can ask all the questions they want, whether it is about the grass-fed freezer lamb they purchased, or they might want to know if I don't ever feed any grain (no, not mornings, not afternoons, and not on Sundays either). If a person who picks up breeding stock wants to know about the vaccination schedule or my deworming strategy—I have the time and willingness to answer. I know there is a whole group of readers who emphatically nod their heads reading these lines because I took more time out of my schedule than they expected.

A big part of my business is the freezer lamb business.

When someone orders, I describe in a prepared letter what I offer, what the price is, what the cutting options are, etc. Among the things mentioned is the weight of the lamb. So when the customer picks up his or her lamb, it is all neatly stacked in a box. First-time customers look at that box—and those who sell butchered goods or do butchering

themselves probably know by now where this is going—and ask, “That's all?” Well, yes, that's all. It is the 30-plus pounds I said it would be. I didn't take out a leg-o-lamb or chops and eat them myself. Some indeed have the feeling they are being cheated.

I take orders from about 70 different lamb customers, each of them wanting to have their lamb or half a lamb cut their way. They get that one lamb once a year and for many it is special. I get that. Here is the other side of the equation: The butcher stands in front of 10 or 15 lambs at a time, reading various different cutting instructions. Before he will cut my lambs, he just cut up someone else's lambs. Afterwards, some pigs need to be cut to special instructions and after that perhaps a steer.

If you guessed that at times the lamb isn't cut or packaged exactly to the customer's specifications, then you guessed right. In fact, I have a disclaimer about this when people order, that this can indeed happen. Yet, the customer still gets his lamb. So you got shoulder chops instead of shoulder roast? See it as an opportunity to try something new. You might like it. It isn't worth sending me that e-mail, telling me how upset you are. It is still the same delicious grass-fed lamb that you ordered.

I also sell my freezer lambs through a buying club and make five-hour trips to the drop-off locations. I take these orders well in advance and take pre-payment. This kills two birds with one stone: First, it allows me to allocate the lambs needed and sell the others elsewhere. Secondly, pre-payment assures that people show up. I would never recommend taking frozen meats to a faraway location without having gotten pre-paid. You might drive back home with meat that is now defrosted and that you no longer can sell. The pre-payment part, although understandable for the majority of people, is a sticking point to some. I receive some e-mails from customers who are really upset about the pre-paying part, not understanding that it is absolutely necessary to make

such a buying club work.

A big chunk of my business is the sale of breeding stock. I sell ewe and ram lambs, grazing genetics, and shedding guaranteed all the way from Maine to Ohio to North Carolina and Tennessee. The number of people wanting to get away either from feeding grain or shearing or both seems to be limitless. Being able to sell an unrelated ram lamb with the ewes and additional goats makes me the only place they have to go to and business has been great over the last years. Here is what I hear over and over again: "The lambs seem small." In many cases this is due to the fact that people are used to wool sheep (which always look bigger when in full wool) while mine are hair sheep (which always look like a shorn sheep no matter the time of year). So most people guess the size and weight wrong, underestimating the weight by 10, 20, or even 50 lbs. I often sell ram lambs that weigh 80 or 90 lbs. and the buyer guesses 50 or 60 pounds. Ewe lambs, often sold at a lighter weight of 50 to 60 pounds, are often underestimated by 10 or 20 pounds. So what do I do about that, not wanting to sound like I'm doing a sales talk? I have my hanging scale ready and I just hang the lamb in question onto that scale. But before I do, I ask the buyer what he or she guesses the weight of a specific animal is. When buyers then see the higher than expected weight, I don't need to do any more talking.

So after all the bad talk behind the backs of my customers, what is the point to all this? Dealing with customers is hard. It is definitely the hardest part of my business. It is hard for the best people persons and I am not one of them. It can be frustrating, disappointing, aggravating, and annoying. However, here is the other side to this: It also can be the most rewarding and pleasing part of the business. At times when big agri-

business is on one side and city dwellers are on the other, both are completely disconnected from the world of farming, so one should be grateful for all those folks who want to buy direct in order to know the farmer and where their food comes from. I am grateful that more and more people are seeking to do that. In the case of other farmers who want to start a business, somebody experienced is often the only source of information. Why wouldn't I share my knowledge if I am asked? I hope my articles and the many questions I have answered in the past are testament that I do. However, I found out over the years that it is impossible to please all customers, as John Lydgate said in his famous quote, which was later adapted by President Lincoln. Just find out the people that you can and want to please.

So yes, the customer is indeed always king. But unlike a king, you have some choice who you want your customers to be. And once you have good customers you do want to make sure you treat them like kings and queens and perhaps even better. Bend over backwards to meet their wishes. I surely do. They are the ones who enable you to do what you are doing and allow you to call it making a living. Don't ever forget that. In that sense I will extend my gratitude to my good and faithful customers. I am sure you know who you are. I couldn't do this without you. ✍️

**All names are made up. Similarities to existing people who called or e-mailed me or purchased sheep from me are coincidental.*

Ulf owns and operates White Clover Sheep Farm and breeds and raises grass-fed White Dorper sheep and Kiko goats without any grain feeding and offers breeding stock suitable for grazing. He is a native of Germany and lives in the US since 1995. He farms in the Finger Lakes area in upstate New York. His website address is www.whitecloversheepfarm.com. He can be reached by e-mail at ulf@whitecloversheepfarm.com or by phone at 585-554-3313.

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