

Key Neighbor

For The Love Of Horses

By Frank J. Buchman

Survival In Horse Business Requires Action Now

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However, the Moscow, Idaho-based horse owner and journalist insists, "To survive profitably, horse owners must adapt their programs to match changes in the market."

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Value-added is a common term in agriculture economy advice these days, and it's recommended to horsemen as well. "No matter what is being sold, it needs to offer more than the competition," Thorson stresses.

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market is worldwide today, and a person is blind if the internet isn't used as part of a marketing plan," the horse journalist states.

Sellers knowing the potential buyers, and possible customers knowing the marketers are more important than ever to selling a horse. "Horse breeders need to be active in horse activities over a large area," Thorson claims. "They should be involved in clubs and breed associations and help with shows, clinics and other horse-related events. This expands a person's network of contacts."

As the majority of horse owners is rapidly maturing toward retirement, bringing the younger generations

into horse involvement is essential. "Attention must be paid to youth and to those in the 20-to-30-year-old age group," Thorson indicates. "These people have an interest in horses, but they often don't know much about them or how to get involved."

"Special open houses and sponsorship of clinics for 4-H members and young adults are ways to help get those people informed and started in the business," Thorson notes.

Horse prices, like all of the economy, work in cycles, and this is the slump period. "I talk to a lot of people, and horse prices have always gone up and down," relates Cleone Uecker at South Dakota Horses Sales, Corsica, S.D.

"Old-timers, some of those horse people in their 80s, say prices go down and up every 10 to 15 years, and I've found that to be about right," tallies Uecker, who's operated her large monthly

horse sale for 22 years.

"Prices were down after the fuel shortage in the '80s and then went to record levels in the '90s," Uecker remembers. "That's when everybody got on the bandwagon, bought a stallion and broodmares and started raising horses, with no attention to quality, strictly emphasizing bloodlines and color."

"There was soon major overproduction," Uecker recognizes. "I could see it coming, but there was really nothing I could do, with horses selling so high and in such demand, it was a good business to be in."

Echoing Thorson, Uecker confirms, "If a person is going to raise horses, the foals must be out of a stallion and mare with a proven show or performance record and a production record."

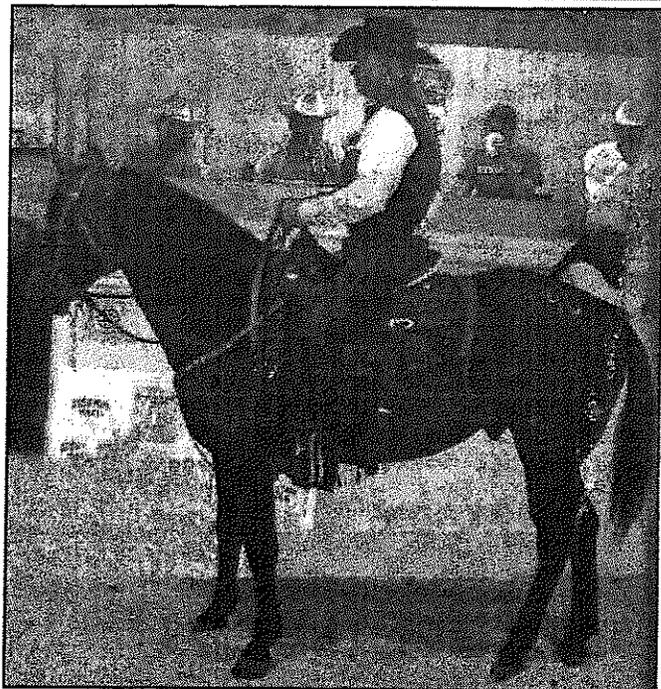
Owners need to represent their own production. "Many of those who raise horses today don't have the ability to train their own

horses, and it is often difficult and expensive to have somebody else do the training," Uecker opinions. "If you don't plan to do your own training, it's often better not to raise a colt."

Decreasing production and numbers will take time. "Eventually a lot less horses will be sold, but they will be sold at higher prices," Uecker forecasts. "Many people are going to have to take a loss now, before it will improve."

Few people talk about horse slaughter, but those legitimately in the horse business for a profit emphasize that horse processing is essential for production profitability. "I love horses. I have some good horses and use good horses, but there must be a way to get rid of old and nonusable horses," offers Randy Smith of Smith Horse Company at Hutchinson.

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slaughter every week," explains Smith, who's been buying slaughter horses for many years.

"There is always demand for a good horse, but horses going to slaughter are not good horses," Smith declares.

High inventories coupled with increased feed prices are bringing horses to the slaughter plants at over-capacity levels. "We had 439 head out of 640 horses at our November sale that sold as loose horses," Uecker details. "Not all of these are going for slaughter, but many of them are."

That volume is pressuring horse slaughter. "I just got a call from Beltex that they would only be able to take 60 head this week due to the large number being killed," Smith comments.

Slaughter buyers and plants have always been tight-lipped about prices, with quotations varying depending on who is talking. Smith says presently horses are "\$300 delivered," which leaves a lot of possibilities on size and condition. Cautiously, Uecker indicates more strength, stating certain "No. 1 horses, and there aren't too many, might bring as much as 40 cents," which one could interpret as a big fat horse at anywhere from \$450 to \$600.

Smith asserts there are "too many horses, too many people raising horses." Yet, he predicts, "I see horses going up again in March and April, possibly twice what they are now."

However, Smith warns, "If the horse slaughter plants would close, that would abruptly end the horse market. People would be turning horses loose just like dogs and cats." He has already seen this being done in Colorado.

Thorson relates that a person left two horses at her place for two nights' boarding, paid cash, gave a false name and failed to return. "She got rid of the burden of her horses, and it didn't cost much. The horses became my responsibility," Thorson admits.

Mike Samples, manager of Farmers & Ranchers Livestock at Salina, which sells several thousand horses annually, does his part to keep slaughter plants open. "I've made regular contact with the legislators in Washington, D.C., whenever the issue is brought up," Samples remarks. "I talked to Pat Roberts and Sam Brownback last week urging them to oppose any bills that would jeopardize slaughter of horses in the United States."

All people involved with horses are urged to do the same. "We have to do our part to counteract movie stars and large money groups who want to stop horse slaughter," Samples urges. Contact can be made to congressmen by telephone, mail or internet.

While officials of horse registries won't freely admit that number expansion is a problem and are cautious not to talk about slaughter, they have initiated programs to expand horse demand.

Tom Persechino, American Quarter Horse Association (AQHA) senior director of marketing, Amarillo, Texas, quotes that American Quarter Horse transfers of ownership have continued to grow, and some American Quarter Horse sales are still setting highs. "Our foal registrations are relatively even with last year, while transfers have tracked upward. The All-American sale in Ruidoso set many records this fall," he elaborates.

Keeping those facts in tact are the association's objective. "We are continually expanding our membership programs and benefits," Persechino reveals. "We

also have several new programs to help get more people interested in horses.

"One of these is the American Quarter Horse test rides," he verifies. "These free, brief riding lessons are given by competent professionals. It's a great way to introduce new horse enthusiasts to the American Quarter Horse, promote the western lifestyle and showcase our trainers and instructors to prospective clients."

Quality is essential to survival, Persechino agrees. "American Quarter Horse owners must have responsible breeding practices. We've always recommended breeding for improved quality and not numbers," he points out.

The American Paint Horse Association (APHA), Fort Worth, Texas, saw high prices at the world show sale, "up substantially from a year ago," according to Jerry Circelli of the association's marketing department.

"People appreciate Paints for ranch use and for show competition, and there is also a growing number of recreational riders," Circelli defines. "I'm optimistic about the future for the horse industry. We just have to take some creative steps to connect people with horses."

"At APHA, we have educational outreach programs in place to introduce people to Paint Horses," Circelli acknowledges. "There are huge segments of our society who would get involved with horses, if someone could just show them how."

Fact sheets comparing horse ownership to other activities participated in by youth are being distributed by the Paint Horse registry.

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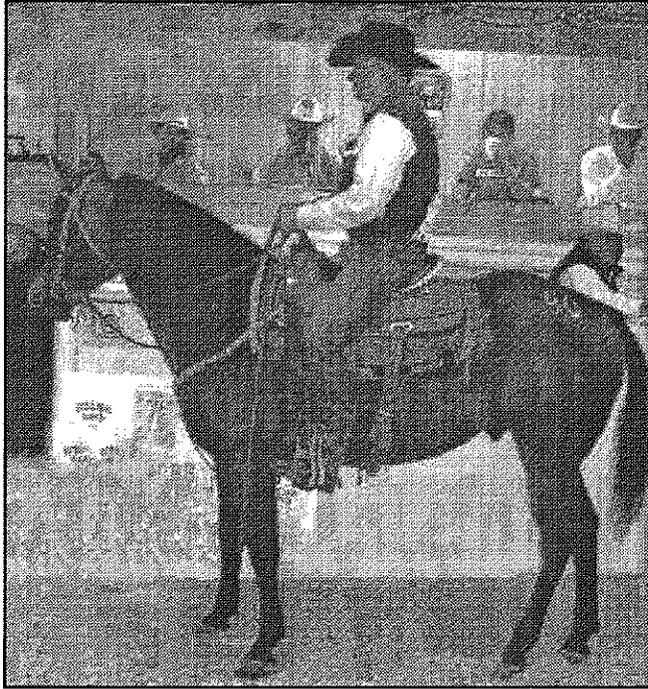
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