

## **Marketing Alfalfa Hay: What the Consumer Demands**

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Anytime we address selling a product to the consumer; our first objective should always be to sell a quality product. However before we get into quality, I think we need to back up and understand that quality can vary from customer to customer depending upon the type of livestock he is feeding. For instance, if you are selling hay to a dairy operation, how is the hay being utilized? Is it being fed free choice? Is it going into a milking TMR (total mixed ration)? Is it going to feed young stock, breeding heifers, or sick animals? Each group of animals listed above will probably require a different type of hay quality.

The consumer in the horse industry is even more diverse and complex than the dairy industry. Again, what type of animal are we feeding; pregnant mare, barren mare, nursing mare, yearlings, horses on the racetrack, breeding stallions? Each of these groups requires a different quality type of hay. Also, in the horse industry, the manager or owners play a great role in determining the type of hay being fed to the animals. The types of hay that are used by the horse industry vary dramatically more so than in the dairy industry. Dairy animals usually are fed pure alfalfa or some type of alfalfa grass mix. The horse industry, however, utilizes pure alfalfa, alfalfa grass mix, clover, clover grass mix, orchardgrass, timothy, bromegrass, prairie hay and I am sure that there are some that I am leaving out. Again, what quality are we looking for?

In the beef industry, are we going to feedlot or a farm? Are we looking for a source of energy and protein or are we looking for fiber and fill?

Other types of livestock that can utilize hay can include but are not limited to; emus, llamas, goats, sheep, camels, elephants, rabbits, gerbils and guinea pigs. These are specialty type markets with each one requiring its own quality needs.

So as you can see finding out the exact type and quality of hay that your customer needs is very important. After we find this information out, we can then proceed to discuss other criteria of the sale.

Is the type and quality of hay that we have for our customer competitive and economical? If it's a dairy operation, they want to see more milk in the tank for fewer dollars. We need to be very cost conscious. We need to do it as economically as we can. If we are pricing for the horse industry, then we need to realize they are a little more demanding and more critical of the hay that comes in. You may want to price your hay slightly higher for some of the aggravations in dealing with them. The exotics are somewhat the same. More often than not, these animals are used for show pets. You might have a little more leeway in a price markup. So pricing is very important as well.

Quantity: Again, this is very important. Is this customer going to buy one load, two loads, or more per year? If this customer is only going to buy one load per year, your mark-up may be more than if he is going to buy 20 to 30 loads per year. How much he/she purchases could help in dictating your pricing structure.

Timing of shipment is important also. If he wants a load of hay, does he want it the first of the month or the last of the month, early in the day or late in the day? If he going to buy just one load a year, can he put it in when the weather is good and access to the farm is easy. Those types of things are vital information and can make a difference.

Storage is another factor. If your customer is going to purchase a great quantity, does he have storage for it and can he give you leeway to get trucks in there throughout the year. Is there access to the farm to get trucks in and out of there without too much difficulty. It is very important to be able to get straight-trucks as well as tractor-trailer trucks into the farm without them getting stuck or running over bushes, flowers, etc.

Another important thing to consider is using correct weight. Always be honest with your customer about the weight of the hay. The hay marketer has received a bad reputation because some people use dishonest weights. This is not acceptable. Always encourage your customers to check the weights against the weigh ticket that you provide.

The size of the package can sometimes make or break the sale. A dairy operation maybe able to use 4 x 4 x 8 or 2 x 3 x 8 bales. Horse customers tend to want the smaller square bales. Exotic breeds want all different sizes. They may want big, they may want small, or they may want repackaged bales. This depends on their location and what market they are trying to target.

Are you able to provide an accurate test analysis on the hay you are selling? When you sell a load of hay to a dairy farm be prepared to have them test the hay. For example, if someone wants to buy a load of hay that has a RFV (relative feed

value) of 175, can you as a supplier guarantee that you can deliver that quality or better to his operation? Be very careful when selling hay on RFV analysis.

What do you do if your customer rejects the load you send to his farm? The remedies can be many and varied. However, the two most utilized ones are to discount the price or send the load somewhere else.

In closing, I would like to end where I began and that is to provide the consumer with quality hay. You can only do this if you are as informed as you can possibly be and you have honestly represented yourself and your hay.