

PRODUCER PERSPECTIVE:

Direct Marketing Lessons from Glenn Elzinga

BY KATE RASMUSSEN

In 1993, Glenn and Caryl Elzinga began their direct-to-consumer business by selling conventionally raised beef in retail stores, restaurants, and farmers' markets. Glenn admits these outlets were not financially profitable but were invaluable learning opportunities that would pay off later when the couple began selling beef products online. "Selling in farmers markets helped me understand not only my customers but also what their interests are and helped me conceptualize how they wanted the product presented," Glenn said. The Elzingas learned there was a demand for organic, grass-fed beef raised on sustainably managed land and that selling locally wasn't going to pencil out.

Alderspring.com, named after the Elzingas' ranch outside of May, Idaho, gained momentum in the early 2000s, but the couple needed to differentiate their products from the rest of the online beef sellers. At the same time, Glenn began digging into books written by leaders in

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ABOUT GLENN AND CAROL

Glenn and Carol Elzinga run the Alderspring Ranch in May, Idaho along with their seven daughters and son-in-law. The Elzingas have over 25 years of experience marketing their beef direct to consumers.

forward thinking land management, like Aldo Leopold and Wendell Berry, and began moving away from conventionally raising beef. Glenn and Caryl certified organic in 2003 and the online business started turning a profit soon after. The Elzingas' land stewardship practices became Alderspring's online brand identity and differentiated its products in a crowded market.

Alderspring cattle are either raised on the place or sourced from other certified organic operations. The Elzingas, with the help of their seven daughters, son in-law, and hired range riders, move yearlings through Alderspring's summer range using a management style they refer to as "in-herding". The range riders keep the Alderspring yearlings on fresh, high-quality forage, and manage wolf predation as well as prevent over grazing and damage to riparian areas.

Customers are willing to pay a premium for Alderspring organic beef finished on diverse, high-country grasses.

The Elzingas now sell the majority of their beef online and ship products across the country from their warehouse in Salmon, Idaho. Most Alderspring customers are health conscious, and many suffer from chronic illness and prefer beef raised and finished in a natural, chemical free environment. The main page of the website reads “Wild wellness. Delivered.”

The Elzingas’ land ethic differentiates Alderspring beef but consistent work on the website’s Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is their main strategy for successful online marketing. SEO increases traffic to a website through search engine results. Search engines like Google and Bing use many factors to rank websites on their search result page and keywords are a big one. Publishing content with relevant keywords keeps Alderspring.com ranked on the first page of an “order organic beef” and related Google searches. Since most users don’t look past the first page of search results, investing time into SEO is critical to building an online beef business.

In addition to keeping their website updated, the Elzingas consistently post to their social media accounts, update their blog, and send out newsletters. Alderspring’s social media presence and blog posts allow the Elzinga family to engage with customers, and newsletters give them an avenue to run regular promotions. Glenn recommends putting most online marketing efforts into a newsletter. Instagram and Facebook are important but investing too much time into them can be risky, as users’ social media feeds become crowded and algorithms change. Since producers control the newsletter, it’s a safer long-term bet. Glenn sends out two newsletters a week and includes weekly promotions to move cuts of meat that aren’t selling well.

GLENN’S RECOMMENDED WEB MARKETING AND SEO RESOURCES:

The Social Media Examiner Podcast

www.socialmediaexaminer.com

Platform: Get Noticed in a Noisy World

by Michael Hyatt

Purple Cow: Transform Your Business by Being Remarkable, by Seth Goden

COVID-19 RESOURCES:

The Elzingas created a free guide to help producers start selling their own frozen beef products online in response to the COVID-19 crisis: www.alderspring.com/grassrootstartup/shipping-in-five-days/

The Alderspring ranch has been featured in Forbes Life more than once and has also made it into the food section of the New York Times. Although the Elzingas have received a fair amount of publicity and ship orders from their warehouse at a steady pace year round, Glenn wants to be clear this model is not a fast track to huge returns relative to the investment. For Glenn and Caryl, the investment is worth it because of their passion for creating a food product that revolves around health from the soil up. To producers starting out in direct marketing, Glenn’s main recommendations are “understand who you are selling to, test your product on the market, build relationships with customers, and have a great photographer on hand.”

Photos by Melanie Elzinga

