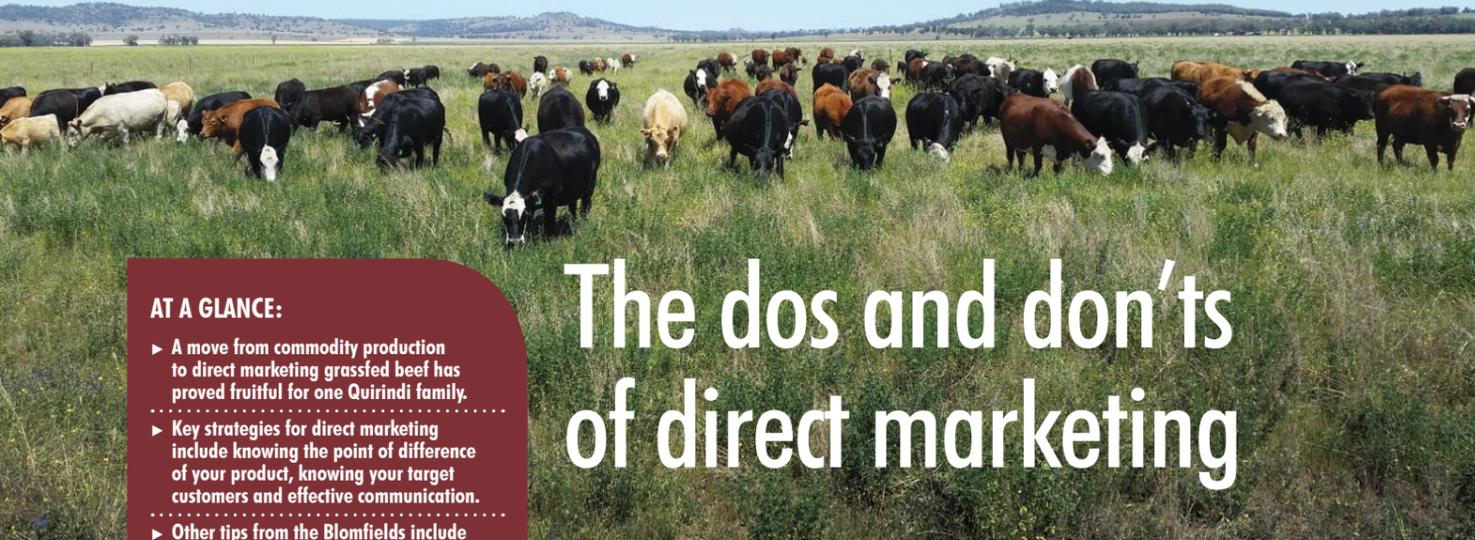


Going direct: The Blomfield family from Quirindi in northern NSW have recently begun direct marketing their grassfed beef, with very positive results. Photography Derek Blomfield



AT A GLANCE:

- ▶ A move from commodity production to direct marketing grassfed beef has proved fruitful for one Quirindi family.
- ▶ Key strategies for direct marketing include knowing the point of difference of your product, knowing your target customers and effective communication.
- ▶ Other tips from the Blomfields include being consistent with your message, seek feedback and advice and stay true to your goals.

The dos and don'ts of direct marketing

Switching from being commodity producers to direct marketers of a specific beef product requires guts, determination and the ability to think and adapt quickly, as Pamela Lawson discovers when talking to Derek and Kirrily Blomfield.

Over the past nine years, Quirindi farmers Derek and Kirrily Blomfield found themselves being forced to consider their farming future.

As third generation beef commodity producers on the black soil Liverpool Plains of northern NSW, the Blomfields were horrified when coal and coal-seam gas exploration licences were issued over their property and surrounding areas.

After being overwhelmed by this news and allowing it to affect them and their business negatively, they decided to create a more positive focus.

"We started selling our 100% grassfed beef directly to consumers – which has improved our profits per head and has given us something positive to strive for again," Derek said.

"We began by selling the offspring of some trade animals and are now in the process of rebuilding a breeding herd.

"For some years now we have concentrated on improving the quality of the land on our farm, reducing chemical input and have moved to solely producing beef cattle on perennial pastures."

Since starting direct selling beef over 16 months ago, the Blomfields have attracted consumers that value this production system, the health attributes of the product and the way that the animals are treated.

STARTING SMALL

As Kirrily freely admits, the couple started their direct marketing business with very little initial market research, preferring to start small and one step at a time.

"We really just began by selling via word-

of-mouth to our friends, offering household and individuals '1/8th hampers, to test the processes involved'," Kirrily explained.

"The hampers are boxes of mixed cuts individually labelled and crivacked, making up about 20kg of meat which we believed most households could handle in one go.

"We chose this approach as it was low risk, with very low start-up costs and knowing we always had the commodity market to return to.

"Direct selling also provides us with direct feedback, which we can learn from and change our business or product accordingly.

"We were also aware that as turnover increases, we don't want to create too much extra work for ourselves.

"For this reason, we have set systems in place from the start that will be workable with larger turnover.

"We only sell direct rather than through butchers, to ensure that we maintain our margin and can obtain direct customer feedback."

MEETING CHALLENGES

The Blomfields have learnt a lot about every aspect of their business, and admit much of this has been through trial and error.

"We were confident in our ability to produce a suitable, desirable grass-fed product, but had had no experience in the logistics of getting cattle slaughtered, butchered, packaged and delivered directly to consumers," Derek said.

"We have therefore had to develop very clear, step-by-step systems to ensure each step is carried out efficiently and to the

quality we require.

"We are still exploring things like different transport options for distribution, both in terms of costs and practicalities – it remains one of our greatest challenges.

"We also knew we would have trouble selling all the cuts on a beast if we allowed customers to dictate exactly what they wanted, so we created the boxes which contain some of every cut instead.

"We currently process four to six head at a time, depending on demand which we confirm prior to processing.

"Maintaining year-round supply is another challenge, and we have bought in weaners in the past to run under our system as needed and supplement the progeny of our own breeding herd.

"But we are also educating our customers to realise our production can be seasonally constrained.

"We strive to be regarded as our customers' 'base suppliers', providing their everyday beef needs which can then be supplemented with the odd purchase from a butcher as needed."

KNOWING OUR CUSTOMERS

According to Kirrily, one of the essential components of their business success has been getting to know their customers, educating them about their product and sharing the production ethos through their marketing.

"We began by choosing a name – The Conscious Farmer – that resonated with our customers and was not just about us," Kirrily said.

"We also wanted to sell the 'why' story, as in why we produce beef the way we do,

rather than just selling a product.

"We knew most of our customers were seeking grass-fed beef for the health benefits, with low chemical use or chemical-free as our system is.

"But the next most important considerations for our customers are animal welfare and the way we look after our land through regenerative practices.

"Our customers therefore value the fact our production system is the whole package – we are conscious farmers and we care.

"We know that people do business with people that they like, and we are finding many of our customers have values similar to our own.

"In fact, customers have actually thanked us for producing the way we do, which is very satisfying."

MARKETING KNOW-HOW

The Blomfield's current marketing of their grassfed beef is through customer references, word of mouth, and social media. Further exposure is gained via annual food events, return customers, a basic holding-page website and partnerships with co-operators with complementary businesses.

"Our next step will be setting up online ordering and an interactive website telling our story and with the ability to capture data," Kirrily said.

"We already take every opportunity to conduct personal surveys of our customers to see what they like best about our product and what could be improved – we find real value in asking what it would take to receive a '10/10 rating' rather than just how we could be better.

"We are also striving for a consistent message in our branding.

"We know the 'feeling' we want to portray in our product and the words such as regenerative, nourishing, genuine, authentic, trusting, personal and caring that we want to reflect our ethos.

"As we build The Conscious Farmer team, we will make sure they are also aware of this and 'own' the brand.

"We also carefully choose opportunities to promote our business or product, looking for maximum quality and cost-effective exposure through business synergies and even free media exposure by supporting things like charity events."

SOCIAL MEDIA

The Blomfields have made a concerted effort to engage with their customers and be approachable.

"As far as marketing our produce goes, we have embraced social media and have an active presence on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, to show customers we really 'walk the walk' and we are making a difference,"

Kirrily said.

"They are helpful tools for building trust and 'the story' around our brand.

"We receive orders and referrals from Facebook, and have discovered that people may not actively engage with social media but still notice our posts.

"We also try to take every opportunity to contact our customers and potential customers directly via email and the telephone, and issue the invitation for interested parties to visit the farm anytime."

Kirrily has also begun researching and

along every step of the production system cannot be underestimated," Derek said.

"We rely on external services from the minute our animals leave the farm, and often do not see the final product before it is delivered to many of our customers.

"It is therefore vital we set up very clear systems to ensure everything happens as we want it to, and not assume anything.

"Accountability in the business is also very important and we strive to be proactive about any mistakes – we like to think we under-promise and over-deliver.

"Direct selling also provides us with direct feedback, which we can learn from and change our business or product accordingly."

– Kirrily Blomfield

writing a weekly blog, The Conscious Farmer, about regenerative agricultural practices.

"The aim of the blog is to inform and inspire people, especially other farmers, about regenerating soils, landscapes and food producing land with a practical broadacre approach," Kirrily explained.

"The blog is interactive, with the opportunity each week for readers to comment about their own opinions and experiences on the topic, and learn from the comments of others."

LESSONS LEARNT

The switch from commodity production to direct marketing beef has proven a steep learning curve for the Blomfields.

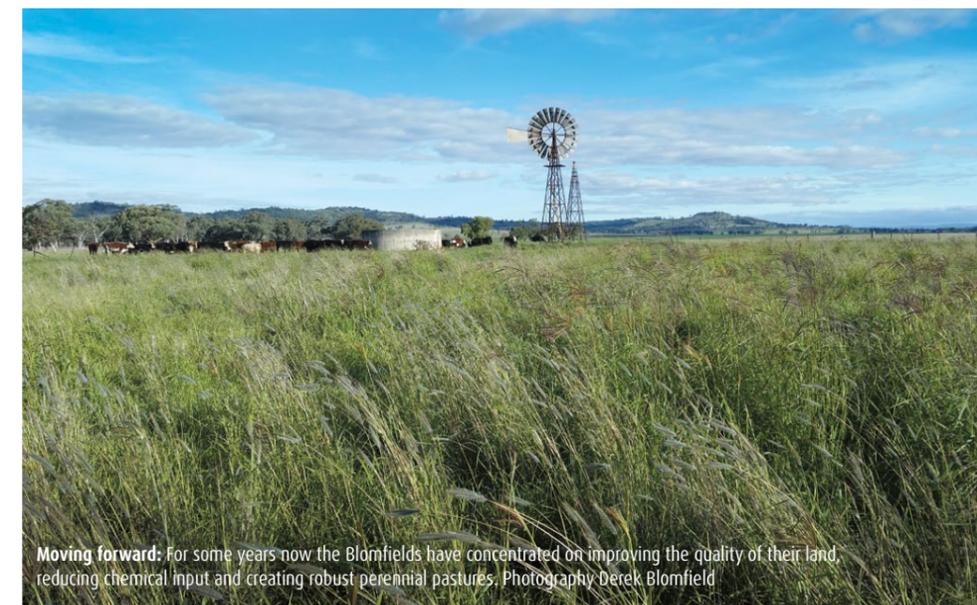
"The importance of good communication

"Product distribution is still our biggest challenge and we have to be strategic about delivering to areas where delivery costs are high.

"We have even had issue in the past with our boxes going unnoticed in delivery trucks, but as we have developed new coloured packaging and better labelling, we have found that they are now not missed when being delivered."

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Moving forward: For some years now the Blomfields have concentrated on improving the quality of their land, reducing chemical input and creating robust perennial pastures. Photography Derek Blomfield