

OVERCOMING PROBLEMS IN MANAGING HUNTERS

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Let me explain that our ranch is located in Doss, Texas, which is in the northwestern part of Gillespie County near Fredericksburg. Our operation consists of about 3,500 acres and our deer population is one deer to 3.2 acres of land. Our livestock business is a cow-calf operation. Calves are born in the early spring and we sell in the early summer.

When Dr. Guynn asked me to give a talk on overcoming problems in managing hunters, I figured that would be easy. The more I thought about the subject, the more I realized I would be talking about people management or, if you are from the city, you call it psychology.

What I would like to talk about today are some of the things we have learned and a few of the experiences we have had. All of this has helped us improve our operation over the past 24 years. In our operation we put a lot of importance on service, which is really nothing more than taking care of the hunter's wants and needs from the time he arrives until he leaves. Service is one of the few things a rancher has which he can offer to the public. He can ask big city prices for the service he gives and receive dollars in return.

The type of marketing system we use on our ranch is a 2½ day hunt. The hunters arrive on Thursday morning and hunt that afternoon, hunt twice on Friday and twice on Saturday, then leave Sunday morning. There is no hunting Sunday morning. The main reason we do not hunt on Sunday morning is that we have found that it is too much hassle if a hunter comes back to camp with a warm deer that needs to be cleaned and cared for at 9:30 a.m. He still needs to pack all his gear, clean camp, take a shower and pay me. We have found the whole hunt can end on a bad note very easily if the hunters have too much action on the morning they leave. Besides I can get away and take my family to church with this arrangement.

The price for the 2½ day hunt is \$300 per person. In addition to the \$300 base hunt price, there is a kill fee of \$250 for a forked-horn buck which means a buck with three points or more. We limit him to one of those. \$125 is charged for each spike and \$100 for each doe. If a person kills three does, we subtract \$50 from his total bill.

As a rancher I have learned a lot on how to handle people, but I keep learning new things every year. One of the hardest things for me to learn was not to put my values on other people. I had to develop the attitude that the hunter is a customer, and the customer is always right.

As in any business you have to have goals to be successful. Our goals are to have lots of deer, healthy deer, reproductive deer, high deer harvest and an increase in revenue. If you will notice revenue does not become a bad word until you put "Internal" in front of it.

Hunters are a very important part of a hunting operation and we as ranchers have the opportunity to direct or manage our operation to make sure that the customer, or hunter, feels that the money he spent was well spent.

We as ranchers need to realize that when we sell our hunting, we are not selling a product, or an item, we are selling an experience. In fact in Gillespie County we talk a great deal about "total hunting experience." To me that means more than killing a deer. I find that hunters want to get away from the daily routine of life and be part of an outdoor environment. We want our hunters to have a successful, safe and enjoyable experience from the time they arrive until the time they leave.

For the next few minutes let's talk about an experience that I had that the hunters thought was fun and exciting. To me it was work and not much fun. They saw it in a completely different light. We had a group of ten men arrive on Thursday afternoon on this particular weekend. By Saturday evening most of the hunters had killed what they wanted and, since it was cold, only two men made the choice to harvest some more deer.

After the evening hunt that Saturday the first hunter I picked up had a deer on the ground. Since only one shot was fired by this hunter I did not have to check out all misses with our trained deer dogs. It is not uncommon for a hunter to tell me he missed a deer and then have my dogs find the deer maybe not more than 50 yards from where he shot at it.

As I drove up to the second hunter, a thought came to my mind. One hunter has been picked up and one deer has been killed, this looks like it is going to be an easy evening. When I asked the second hunter if he had any luck, he said he thought he missed a nice buck about 45 minutes before dark. At that bit of information I told my dogs, "Seek em."

My dogs are very good dogs but they only know four commands: 1) Jump on the jeep, 2) Sit in front, 3) Sit in back, and 4) Seek 'em. Seek 'em in dog talk means, "We have a hunter here that fired a shot at a deer. You dogs go see if you can find it. And if you do find it, dead or alive, bark at it until I get there." Anyway it wasn't 30 seconds after I gave the command that Jess the lead dog gave three short barks on the run. In dog talk that means, "We've got a hot trail, so get your flashlights and a pistol because we're fixin' to have some fun!" Excitement was building!

One of the hunters elected to stay at the jeep, but the other one wanted some fun and followed the dogs with me. As it turned out the buck headed straight to the creek which was a half-mile run. The dogs had the deer in a water hole which was about two feet deep. The deer was pretty much alive so I finished him off with a shot from my pistol. I've heard it said that the fun stops when the deer hits the ground. In this situation, the fun stopped when the deer hit the water.

After dragging the deer out of the water, we left it there and walked back to the jeep. We sure had some wet, cold feet. A jeep with a good heater in it does wonders for a cold, tired body.

Now the two hunters, the dogs and myself all loaded up in the jeep and started down the creek to get the deer. We have roads all over our ranch except this particular place on the creek did not have a hint of a road. Things were going real good until I drove off into a hole $2\frac{1}{2}$ feet deep and about 5 feet wide. Needless to say, dogs and hunters went flying everywhere. When the commotion stopped nobody was hurt and the jeep did not turn over, BUT the nose of the jeep was pointed to the North Star. After winching ourselves out to level ground we loaded up the buck and headed for camp. By this time I wasn't cold any more, just hungry and tired. When we arrived back at camp most of the steaks had already been eaten. Most of all I was just happy to be home again.

This happened three years ago and this group of hunters still talk about this experience as being the highlight of all their hunting trips. It tells me as a rancher that hunters want to be entertained. They want to be a part of the action and have an experience that can be talked about years after the hunt is over.

We talk a lot about a total hunting experience. One of the best and most important things a rancher can do to insure a good hunting experience for his hunters is to have a positive attitude toward them. Attitude is an unwritten language. What kind of experience will the hunter have if the rancher has this attitude---give me your money, don't stay very long, don't shoot many deer and don't bug me?

If the Olympics had an event which consisted of bulls unhinging gates and tearing up fences, we had a bull two years ago that would have qualified for the finals. After tolerating this bull for two breeding season, four gates broken and five fences torn up, we finally decided his usefulness in this world would be better fulfilled by supplying the meat that goes between two hamburger buns.

Last year some of our younger customers went rabbit hunting and, not watching what they were doing, drove their jeep completely through a five-wire fence. The hunters apologized, offered to pay for the damages and promised to be more careful in the future. It upset us enough that we seriously considered not letting them return the next year. After studying the situation, I figured if our tolerance level was very high on the ornery bull, why should our tolerance level be

different for people. Besides they payed for the fence damage; the bull did not. It seems we have a high tolerance for animals and low tolerance for hunters.

When it comes to hunting recreation, farmers and ranchers in the Hill Country are famous for three things: 1) They try to market something they don't have (big bucks); 2) They try to produce something that is not practical (big bucks); 3) They don't market what they do have (lots of deer).

A form of recreation for our hunters is to kill deer. This brings us to a problem that I feel has cost me more time in thought and planning than any other one problem. We have basically overcome this problem. How do I get my hunters to shoot does? I think attitude is very important here. In my opinion every deer is a trophy to somebody. Ask yourself what is a trophy? A trophy is in the eyes of the beholder. A phrase I have been using for several years to describe a good doe is "trophy doe." I figured if there were trophy bucks there would be trophy does. After all, the Virginia Slims ad says, "You've come a long way baby."

In 1979, we went to a one-pronged buck limit per hunter, that is, a buck with three points or more. Our reasoning behind this rule was to put more hunting pressure on the does and have a higher buck population toward the end of the season. The way we convinced our hunters that this rule was good was to have our county agent Duery Menzies and Dr. Milo Shult write me a letter telling me to do this. I put the letter in a frame and hung it in one of the cabins. The reluctant hunters would read it and then agree. My feelings are that a hunter that is not satisfied with one six point buck probably would not be satisfied with two.

Rules are another way to get hunters to shoot does, but as far as I am concerned they are the worst way. For example, if you force your hunters to kill a doe before they kill a buck, you are putting your values on other people.

Using pricing structure is putting a lower kill fee on a certain segment of your deer herd. It makes that lower priced animal more attractive to your hunters and encourages them to kill what you want them too.

A technique which has worked best for us as far as getting our hunters to shoot does is education and promotion. We always talk with our hunters and tell them it is very important that they shoot a doe or two to help us with our deer management plan. Besides doe meat is by far the best meat. To prove this I fry up some deer meat in camp. Now, it might be seven hours and three beers since they had a bite to eat, so when they start eating that deer meat, you would think they were eating rib eyes. Most will say, "Why, this is the best deer meat I've ever had." I'll say, "If you want some more just like it, go out tomorrow and shoot yourself a trophy doe or two." Then I'll say,

"Now, if you have an image problem and can't shoot a doe, then shoot an old stinky buck." Most of the old hunters don't say much, but the young ones say, "I don't have an image problem." Then I say, "Okay, then shoot a doe."

Women are a big help, too. Most of the time they are the ones who prepare the meat at home, so if the husband comes home with good doe meat, she will also encourage him. In fact, some hunters tell me that the last instructions their wives gave them when they left to go hunting is, "Don't you bring back any of those bucks. Just bring some of those trophy does home."

The date is not important but 25 or 30 years ago the brewers came out with a new beer and they called it 3-2 beer. Sounds pretty good, doesn't it? To say the least, it didn't sell. Now, most people drink 3-2 beer, but we don't call it 3-2 beer, we call it light. The brewers get us to drink light beer by doing what? Giving it a big man image. You see a big football player on TV drinking a cool one down and then crushing the can with his bare hand. Or, "I've been digging post holes all day long and all you have is Coors Light?" We don't make a hunter feel big if he shoots a doe or two, but we do make him feel wise and intelligent, and everybody wants to be wise and intelligent.

Last year we experimented with two groups of hunters by offering a prize to the person in each group that killed the heaviest doe. It worked well enough that we will try it on most of our groups this coming season. The prizes range from a hunting knife to an ice chest.

You might wonder how successful the education and promotion techniques have been on our ranch. We have been shooting more does than bucks for the past six years.

I want to discuss some of the policies that we have established on our ranch which in my opinion are very necessary. We generally have groups of six to 12 hunters. We have found that it is best to deal with a single spokesman for each group. The group spokesman is responsible for making the lease and getting the deposits together. Final payments are made after the hunt depending on what animals were killed. Most of my hunting deals are made by telephone. When someone is really eager to hunt, he doesn't always pay attention to what the deal is. The last thing I tell him is to write me a letter telling me what the deal is.

This is a sample of a letter I received in May of 1985, which most simply covers the things which may become an issue.

"Dear Henry: We are enclosing our check in the amount of \$1,000.00 as a deposit for six hunters for December 5, 6, and 7, 1985. We would plan to arrive at noon the 5th and depart Sunday morning, the 8th. No hunt on the 8th.

We understand the rates to be as follows:

\$300.00 per hunter (we expect six)

\$250.00 for each prong-buck (limit one)

\$125.00 for each spike

\$100.00 for each doe (3 for \$250.00)

No charge for turkey

We will contact you at a later date for final confirmation.

Yours truly,....."

Another policy we have is we offer transportation to and from the stands in the morning and evening. I cannot imagine all the problems we would have if we didn't do this. To me it is only good business and probably is a big factor in the success we enjoy. Can you imagine a hunter having a good hunting experience if he is lost half of the time?

Another service we offer our hunters is to field dress their deer if they want us to. Can you imagine the way a man feels if he gut shoots a deer and he has never cleaned a deer in his life. What we usually say is, "Would it be okay with you if we cleaned your deer?" Most of the time you can see relief come across his face when he hears that offer. With well cared for meat, his odds for getting home with quality meat are greatly increased.

A policy which I feel is really for the good of everybody is we don't shoot from a jeep or pickup. The main reason is for safety. The other reason is, if you start shooting from vehicles, it doesn't take deer long to get wild. Our deer associate the sound of a vehicle with food and not danger. As a result the hunters will see more game.

The next several things I want to talk about are probably more related to service than overcoming problems with hunters. If you can give service that helps your hunter to cope with impatience, frustration, aggravation and embarrassment, then you solve problems before they happen.

For our operation the one thing I would not want to be without is a good VHF radio in all our ranch vehicles. They are handy 12 months out of the year, but we get a tremendous amount of use out of them during the deer season. Radios are a key factor in solving problems when taking hunters to stands and especially picking them up again. Nobody has to wait very long for help, service or advice.

Twelve years ago we numbered all our stands. Hunters can remember numbers a lot easier than names. It was frustrating to me and the hunters when I didn't know what stand he was wanting to go to by describing how it looked and which pasture it was in. Now with the number system he just says number 16 or 57 and I know which one he wants.

The way we tag the deer that are killed is with a plastic holder which contains a tie wire, my name, address and telephone number (like a business card). We tag all the deer to insure that our hunters don't have an unpleasant experience with a Wildlife Conservation Officer.

These deer tag holders can be purchased at Dietel and Son Printing, 105 North Milam, Fredericksburg, Texas 78624, Phone number (512) 997-8130.

Cattle guards are something like a good pocket knife, they are handy every time you use one. When it is cold and raining and your wife is not with you that's REALLY when cattle guards are handy.

Telephones have become part of everybody's life and some, not all, of our hunters have to use a telephone on a regular daily basis. Hunters would come to our home to use our phone. Nap time, meal time ---it didn't make any difference. To solve this problem, we just put an extension in each cabin. Then we had another problem, the phone was always in use. To solve this problem we had another phone line installed in our home. In my opinion having two different phones on the ranch is just like having a good bull, it doesn't cost, it pays.

At the end of each deer season we make a list of things that we want to change or improve for the coming season. We find that this list is a reminder through the year to think about problems, study them and then hopefully find a solution. Like the telephone problem, sometimes you can do more than one thing before the problem is solved.

We can list many reasons why people go hunting and the reasons range from shooting a trophy doe or buck, to getting away from the daily routine of life, from being an annual habit to being a part of an outdoor experience. In plain English, the reason is usually to have a good time. We as ranchers need to start putting more thought and energy into providing a total hunting experience for our hunters.

In closing I want to say that managing hunters is people management. I am not magic. It is a skill that can be learned by anyone with average intelligence.