

Online Livestock Evaluation

Tue, Jan 17, 2023 11:26AM 28:04

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

animal, livestock, breeder, auction, heifer, lamb, purchase, breeding, picture, question, buy, sheep, sale, online, jackpot, important, producer, amy, chris, evaluate

SPEAKERS

Amy Powell, Christa Hartsook, Chris Cassidy

C Christa Hartsook 00:15

Hello, and welcome to the small farms podcast, a production of the small farms program at Iowa State University Extension and Outreach. Our podcast covers the opportunities and challenges associated with rural life. In this episode, I interview Amy Powell, Iowa State University Extension and Outreach for each animal science program specialist in Chris Cassidy, Iowa State University livestock judging coach to talk about how to evaluate animals in an online format versus going to sales or auctions. I'm Christa Hartsook, small farms program coordinator. And we hope you enjoy the show. Amy, welcome. Thanks for being back.

A Amy Powell 00:53

Thank you for having me.

C Christa Hartsook 00:55

So, Amy, for those who have never participated in any kind of an online sale format, how does these really work?

A Amy Powell 01:02

Well, there are several online companies that you may choose from to look at cattle or sheep or any kind of livestock. And you just log on to their website. And they usually have an area where you register as a bidder, just like you would at an in person auction. And there's catalogs and there's pictures and things like that, that you can look at. And then you bid, depending on the type of auction you did, just like you would face to face.

C Christa Hartsook 01:29

So are there different types of auctions themselves, Amy, that we really should be familiar with

A

Amy Powell 01:35

the two main types, especially in the small ruminant and are the racehorse style, which is similar to a traditional auction where bidders log on, and they bid and they bid back and forth. And then there's a certain time, so the sale starts at say 8am. And it continues on until the last bid is placed. And if no one else bids within that five minute period, then the animal is sold to that individual. So the auction can actually take a very long time. In that respect. Another style, which is relatively new is the shotgun style. And this is where you know that the animal is going to be sold at 9am. And you must be logged on ready to go. And at 9am. Whoever hits buy on their computer at that time then purchases the animal for the price that it is listed at. Okay, so it's kind of like buying a car, it's whatever the price is listed. And whoever pushes the button first owns the animal.

C

Christa Hartsook 02:36

Okay, all right. Are there ways Amy that we can evaluate the companies themselves? You know, how do we know we're really dealing with a reputable company here?

A

Amy Powell 02:45

First of all, I would look at the number, the number of sales they are hosting. If they're only hosting one or two, then that might tell you they're new, and they don't have a lot of business yet. I would also talk to other people in the industry and see who they have purchased animals through really look at their website, see how they are marketing the animals. Is it just through that website? Or do they have other materials and promotions out there? Look at some of the big livestock catalogs, Showtimes, some of the purebred catalogs, see if they're advertising in there, that usually is a good indication that they are good at this and that they've been doing it a long time. And also see how long they've been in business. Just like with any business, you would think that those that have been there the longest are probably more reputable and have stood the test of time.

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Christa Hartsook 03:36

That makes sense. So then if we're looking at the individual animals that are for sale themselves to I'm assuming there are, you know, records or information available specific to each animal itself.

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Amy Powell 03:48

Yes, especially if you're looking at a breeding animal or a purebred animal, they're going to have a catalog listing that has a photograph or video of the animal and then below that are attached to that would be the pedigree information who the damn the sire was. In addition, especially in the sheep industry, we use a lot of letters to describe what genetics that animal

has. You'll see the codons there for scrapie like a QQ or QR, and our our spider gene is usually also denoted there. And in some breeds, we even have the hairy lamb disease, which is known as ectodermal dysplasia, you'll see those letters. So a lot of breeds and a lot of species do genetic testing. And so you can see those numbers or letters or whatever combination it is that denotes what genes that animal carries. And if you're confused or not sure what that means, then I would encourage you to look that up. I mean, if you go to a website that is reputable for gene testing, you should be able to find a definition for all of those terms that you see.

C

Christa Hartsook 04:54

That makes sense Amy. Each individual animal then is going to be a product from a breeder in and of itself, you know, so are we able to kind of talk to that breeder to find out anything about them ahead of time?

A

Amy Powell 05:06

I would strongly encourage people to call the breeder. Most all breeders want you to have a good experience, because if you purchase an animal from them, and that animal does well for you, that's just great publicity for them. So they don't want to hide things, they don't want to cause you to not have a good experience. So pick up the phone or email them or communicate with them in some way. And there's lots of things that you can ask a breeder, if you're looking at the purebred animal or an animal that you're wanting to put back into your herd or flock for breeding purposes in your questions are going to look a little different than if you are trying to purchase a market animal for a show. That when you call that breeder, the first thing you want to do, of course, is tell them who you are, make sure you tell them which lot number you're looking at purchasing. And then tell them where you're from. A lot of times, animals that are going from the north to the south, maybe don't perform as well, because of respiratory problems. It's very humid in the south, it's very dry and arid, in other places. And so that's another thing just to mention, when you're talking to these breeders, and then explain what you're wanting the animal for is do you have a specific breeding goal in mind, if you're trying to purchase a male, a sire for your flock or herd, then perhaps you're looking for heavy muscle. Maybe you have animals that are really tall and long, but you need to put muscle back into your breeding stock. So talk to the farmer or the producer and ask them, do you think this one will work for my situation? And nine times out of 10, they will say yes or no, but here, maybe this lot would work better? Or here's the name of another producer that I think would have what you're looking for another thing you might want to ask for some genetic information that wouldn't be up on the website, especially with a sheep. Did the ewe that produced this have trouble lambing? was the birth weight really high? Or was it pretty average? Was the mother a good mother? Did she have good milking ability, did she prolapse when she lambed. Was the lamb a twin, there's lots of things that you can ask that will sort of help guide your decision, especially if you're wanting to put this animal into your own breeding program, because we want to be successful and you don't want to buy something that's not going to work out for you. Now, if we're talking about market animals, obviously, those type questions don't matter, because you're going to sell this animal at the end of your program. But I would really ask a lot of questions about what they're being fed so that when you get them home, they can make a good transition, maybe explain to the breeder, hey, this is my first time and I'm not really sure what's going on. And that might change the direction of the type of sheep that you buy your type of calf, maybe you want one that's a little easier to feed, that's not as hard to manage.

The other thing is making sure that the producer knows when you need that animal to be ready. So if your state fair is in August, then tell them that and they might say, well, you know, this lamb is probably going to be way too big by the time that fair comes along. Let's try a different lamb for you. So there's lots of dialogue that you can have with that producer that can really help you and make you aware of all the things that you need to know to buy a good lamb.

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Christa Hartsook 08:22

That all make sense, Amy. Are there things in an online auction format that you would consider as red flag?

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Amy Powell 08:29

One thing is to look at the amount of pictures or video that is there. If the producer has just put up one picture of their animal, then you might think to yourself, so what are they trying to hide, maybe they only have a side view. And for some reason they've not put any other views. I recently spoke with someone who sells a lot of sheep online. And he said, if there's not at least four pictures, then that's a red flag. And you really want to be able to see every angle of that animal videos are really nice as well. And so if there's a video, that's even better, the other thing, especially with sheep is wool. Wool can hide a multitude of sins. And so if you see an animal on there, and it's beautifully fitted all, fluffed up looks perfect. You might want to think a little bit about that or talk to the producer before you purchase them. Also on market lambs, sometimes producers will sell them in their lambs wool. And there's multiple reasons for that. It could be that it's Iowa and it's freezing cold and they don't want to shear the lamb for the health of the animal. But at the same time, you still kind of need to consider that when you're looking at that animal. A slick shorn animal is what you see is what you get. It's really hard to hide things and that some other red flags would just be look at the time the photo was made. If it's right now let's say it's spring and you look at the picture and it looks like there's fall leaves hanging on the trees. Then that picture is not recent. So see if you can tell how recent the picture was made, that's another red flag, just looking at the backgrounds and those type things.

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Christa Hartsook 10:05

That makes sense, Amy, I'm assuming these type of auctions, if they're in an online format, they could happen anywhere in the country. So you're obviously going to then need to get that animal back to your own operation. How is transportation usually handled or coordinated in something like this.

A

Amy Powell 10:21

Well that is something you need to consider upfront before you purchase an animal. But there are livestock haulers across the country. And that's what they do. That's how they make their living. They're willing to transport your animal. Usually, if you talk to the show or sale management, they can make arrangements, most producers will make arrangements for you to

try to get it to another breeder that you know, or another place, but they want to make a sale. And that's important to them. So they will do everything they can to help you with that. But keep in mind, you know, a livestock hauler may say, well, it's going to cost \$250 to get that animal from, say, California to Iowa. So just something to add into the price of that animal.

C Christa Hartsook 11:04

Absolutely. Is there anything else that we really need to pay attention to or think about ahead of time, when evaluating these animals in an online format,

A Amy Powell 11:14

I would look at the breeder themselves. And I realize, you know, every breeder has to start somewhere. And this might be their first time to ever sell anything online. So you might not have a long tradition or website or those kinds of things. But when you're buying online, I would suggest starting with someone that you've heard of, or starting with a breeder that maybe is featured in a magazine that you have. Talk to some other folks that have purchased animals from them. I think those are some things that we need to keep in mind. Is the breeder themselves. And how reputable are they? Are their bloodlines really good. Have you noticed that some of their animals have been winning a show or have come up to the top in their EPDs, for their respective breeds or those type things?

C Christa Hartsook 11:58

That will make sense. Anything else?

A Amy Powell 12:01

I think we've covered everything.


C Christa Hartsook 12:04

All right, I'm going to switch gears a little bit here and talk to Chris Cassidy, Iowa State University livestock judging Coach, and we're going to talk about animal evaluation specifically. So Chris, what should we really be looking for if we're looking at evaluating these animals online?

C Chris Cassidy 12:21

Well, the one thing that's interesting about purchasing livestock or really selecting livestock in general, it's not really a one size fits all kind of endeavor. I think first and foremost, probably need to identify whether you as an individual that is interested in exhibiting livestock, what direction you want to go. And the first question you probably answer is, if you want to go to the market side, which would be your Barrows, your wethers or steers? Or do you want to go on on


the breeding side, whether you want to show gilts or does or heifers or ewes or whatever you'd like to do. And so I think that that can kind of change a little bit as far as just what you specifically select for. But I think the big picture selection criteria doesn't really change. And so I'd say before you even go in with any type of mindset of what you're thinking, you probably have to have a purpose or a goal, whether you're wanting to buy one for a state fair, or whether you're wanting to buy a breeding heifer that you can show but yet continue to build your herd. If you want to buy a steer to, you know, try to compete at your county fair, or later on in the fall, like get a Kansas City or Aksarben, there's a lot of things that kind of come into play. So basically, you know, there's, it's not a one size fits all kind of endeavor. And it takes a little bit of planning, and it takes a little bit of skill to come up with the right answer for which project you select on an online sale.

 Christa Hartsook 13:54

That makes a lot of sense, Chris, if we were to talk about some of the specifics for each type of animal, and let's just say, you know, a breeding animal versus a market animal, what should we really be looking at in terms of evaluating that breeding animal? Knowing we can't really put our hands on her and see her in this kind of a timeframe here?

 14:14

Yeah, that's a great question. And I'm kind of glad that we're taking this route and splitting it up a little bit. Because I think from a breeding standpoint, a lot of people or a lot of young exhibitors or young families that are just getting started out, probably don't have enough foresight to really understand this concept. But when you're purchasing a breeding animal, you think about just the lifespan of that particular animal. So for instance, you're going to probably show it or exhibited at your county fair, your state fair, maybe a major if you decide to go that route, but they're gonna represent a very small portion of that animal's like productive life. And so what I mean by that is, let's take a cow for instance, you buy a show heifer, you show and it's your county and state fair. It's going to hopefully spend the next 10 to 12 years out on pasture. So I think from a breeding sense, really covering the basics is the most important. And so I think putting a strong emphasis on maternal qualities, whether that be structural soundness flushing ability, and something that's even, I think, sometimes pretty grossly underrated are reproductive traits. So if you're looking at gilts underlying quality, if you're looking at heifers trying to look for udder and teat quality, toe quality, quality and foot shape across all species is very, very important because it does equate to longevity. So, I think starting with the basics first, and so how you evaluate that, honestly, it takes a really good video to see a lot of these things. And some of these people are doing a great job with their media and the promotional materials of putting out really high quality videos. So I think you can study structural angularity, just the way that those animals kind of compose themselves and how they hold themselves when they're in their natural positions, as well as in motion. Everything fits together. But to kind of get the fine details that might require a little more investigation. So to study foot shape, or to study underlying quality, that might require a trip to the farm or a consultant that can go investigate for you, maybe another video or another picture that gives a different angle that you can request from the breeder. There's a lot of different avenues that you can get if you're trying to get those specifics.



C Christa Hartsook 16:29

That makes a lot of sense, Chris, let's flip the coin a little bit. And, you know, say we were talking about a market animal that we were really wanting to purchase with that intent to show or utilize in our herd. What kind of things do we need to be looking at there?

i 16:44

So yeah, the market side is a little bit different. And so I think even more importantly, understanding that each one of these market animals has a, we'll call it a terminal endpoint. And whether you're gearing to about last animal shows at the county fair, or it's at the State Fair at some certain other show that you're targeting. Unlike these breeding heifers or these ewes or these guilts. These barrows or wethers or steers are actually going to enter the food chain after a short period of time. And so, not to say some of those other basics aren't important. I still think structural quality is important. But I think that when it comes to market type of traits, whether that be maturity, muscularity, the ability to perform and gain weight and still stay lean enough to those heavier weights, to maintain freshness down the road, I think is really, really important. And so when you kind of tie that together with some of those structural things, I think it's not necessarily that you shift gears, but you probably emphasize some of those market aspects a little bit stronger right off the bat.

C Christa Hartsook 17:55

Chris, I know when I am looking at animals in an online auction format, I always want to see a video of them on the move. Can you talk a little bit about why that is important?

i 18:06

Yeah, absolutely. I think that's the most underrated view of livestock. In my opinion, just and I explained this to some of my students when I'm teaching them, let's take a heifer for instance, or a steer, you can take a pretty good showman. And you can actually when they're standing still, and just through different presentation techniques of clipping and fitting and feeding and presentation, you can actually make one look like it's pretty correct. And the only thing that doesn't ever lie to you from a livestock evaluation standpoint, is watching cattle on the move, you can put a good showman on an effort to maybe disguise some flaws, but as soon as they're moving, that is when all the flaws or positives come to light, if that makes sense. And so you can study muscle shape on the move, you know, especially when those animals are in motion, you can see the muscles working out of them. You can study joint work and flexibility that is the absolute most important view in my opinion, because you can show a lot out of them even in a wether or ewe you know when you're bracing them or you're setting them up to make them kind of fit together proportion, right. But as soon as they move, a lot of those structural flaws or compositional flaws can be seen even from a distance as well.

C Christa Hartsook 19:16

Sure, Chris, are there specific traits or things we can evaluate in an online format? That would give us kind of indicators of how that animal is going to develop later on?



19:30

This is a tough question as well. And sometimes I would just warn you, anybody that's interested in online and not just the online platform, just livestock in general, be prepared for some things to not turn out like you would expect that I know that I've been selling cattle on my own program for years and ones that you would swear with turnout or you're just confident in their ability to do what you want them to just be ready for the unexpected because their livestock and so you know, health management and different things can come into play way that can alter those things, but the specific things that I think you can look for, to separate yourself out to give yourself the best chance of voiding those particular downfalls, I think you have to have a really good understanding of maturity. And so what I mean by that is understanding where you like to take these animals where you would like to specifically exhibit them at because I think where that animal is at in terms of his maturity curve will tell you a lot about the potential of when they will look their best. And so ways that you can evaluate that our length of cannon, frame size, I think a really important one is how ready do they look at such a young age. And so I also this is kind of a goofy example. But you think of like a high school athlete versus a professional athlete, or just a young person coming up in the ranks, there's always been that kid that was the one that, you know, went through puberty early and was the tallest and the best basketball player, but by the time everybody else caught up to him, they're on in high school, maybe they weren't the best athlete anymore. So that is still a biological function of maturity. So I think understanding that and understanding body condition, relative to their age, and their stage of growth and development is a really good way to help you put yourself in a position to avoid some of those ones that don't turn out per say.



Christa Hartsook 21:19


Sure, sure. Are there ways then that we can work ourselves backward if we are evaluating an animal for a show? And, you know, trying to evaluate whether an early maturing animal is better for our own situation than a later maturing animal? How do we really know that?



21:38

Well, it just depends, it goes back to everything that I said at the beginning, you kind of have to have a plan, you kind of have to have a goal set for yourself and what you want to try to accomplish and understanding that in purchasing an earlier maturing animal. You might have a lot of success at some of these early jackpots like your Illinois beef Expo, Iowa Beef Expo, the numerous jackpots that you see throughout the country, but it will be that much more challenging to maintain that animal, the level of freshness that it requires to compete at a high level later on, because they've already plateaued in their growth. And they've already started to put fat on instead of grow and continue to develop with muscularity. So I really think that it just depends. And there's nothing wrong with that. I know a lot of cattle, they get jackpotted early. And same thing with sheep and goats that get jackpotted early and get along really well. And then maybe ones that were a little greener, early on that did okay, and they were somewhat competitive, but really came together and matured in the right direction as they get out to state fair. So it totally depends on what you want to do. If you want to jackpot and try to have your fun that way. That's the way to do it. You want to try to set yourself up for later

show, then maybe that picking a late maturing one a better option. But understand too, that the really good ones can do it all. What I mean by that are the ones that are elite early on, that can stay elite later on are the ones that we all try to strive to buy.

 Christa Hartsook 23:01

You bet, Chris, I asked Amy this question too, are there things that you would consider red flags when you were looking at an online auction format?

 23:11


I think, you know, having multiple photos is definitely a plus there's a lot of times where you see, it might be a spring sale, like say now in April or May or whatever. And the photo is of livestock, and there's snow or there's no grass, per say, if that makes sense. So you know that that photos aged a bit. And you know, that could be a two month difference, which I think can make a huge impact. As far as that goes. I've run into this a few times you really like a picture. And then you watch the video of the animal. And maybe you don't like the video quite as much as you maybe like the picture. And so it goes back to what I just talked about, always trust what livestock tell you when they're in motion. And so if you are and vice versa, too. There's some times where I was like, I didn't think this picture was that great. But man that went took a really good video, I probably lean more toward trust in the video. But I still think that it requires trust is that big word of working with your breeders and working with somebody that's reputable that has had success. And that's willing to work with you, especially if you're just getting started, I think the more that you can ask and the more that you use them as a reference point will definitely help set you up for success.

 Christa Hartsook 24:23

Sure and I think we can't probably stress that video high enough. You know what I've had some where I've looked at pictures and thought, boy, she looks really nice. And then you get her in motion and I think at her feet and legs are going to be shot, you know, within a few years and that's not really what you want for a breeding animal you want that soundness.

 24:42

Yeah, exactly. And then also think of it like I said, think of it the opposite direction to theirs. I've been fortunate enough to have some livestock that I've sold through some online platforms in the past and picturing and videoing the livestock is not easy its not an easy task. And we have this expectation we're at this level of expectation a more than when we see something online, we expect it to be perfect. And so sometimes there's really, really good ones that maybe just didn't cooperate that day, or the weather was bad, and they just didn't get the best photo of them. But it was the best that they could. But that video will tell you a lot about them. Because you know, even those ones that maybe have a little extra spirit to them. That's something you can even see, you know, you can even see if that heifer looks like she never settles down or that you never settles down or whatever, that'd be a great question to ask them. Yes, this one have an attitude problem, that would be an issue for a young kid.

 Christa Hartsook 25:33

Sure. Absolutely. Chris, are there other things that we should talk about today?

 25:39

I guess, I think especially with the fluid situation of what we're dealing with right now, I think more and more outlets per say, for livestock is going to move in this online direction. And so my family and I, we cooperate with another breeder to have a live auction every year. And I love the tradition of the live auction. But it's too easy to buy livestock online anymore. And so this is to me going to be kind of the new avenue, not new, but it's going to be the avenue of livestock marketing that I think really takes over. And I think you're going to start to see a lot of people shift and with the use of this technology. So it takes a little bit of time. And you know what, I'll be honest with you, there's been times that I've bought stuff online that, you know, maybe wasn't was perfectly what I expected it to be, but there's also been others. And so I guess my main piece of advice would be to purchase from somebody that you trust, don't be afraid to ask lots of questions, trust your instincts, ask for multiple videos, they'd be more than happy to provide that for you. But I think it just kind of boils down to trust. I mean, if you can't find the time to go out and visually look at those animals and yourself, then you need to find a consultant, or you need to visit with a breeder that you trust and that, you know, will point you in the direction that your goals are.

 Christa Hartsook 26:55

That sounds great, really good advice, Chris, for anybody just kind of getting started in this avenue. And I tend to agree with you. I think this is going to kind of become more and more of the norm as we think long term about how this really impacts all of our lives moving forward after this. Thanks so much for being on. I really appreciate it.

 Chris Cassidy 27:14

No, thank you for having me. I really appreciate it. And if there's any questions that any young person or young family might have, you know, feel free to reach out to myself as well. And I'll try to punch you in the right direction. Luckily, I'm out and about a lot. And a lot of the sales seasons especially in the fall travel and we actually visit a lot of these places that are having these sales so there might be a chance that I've even seen a few of them that you know if you needed an appraisal or needed some advice myself for my graduate student could be able to possibly help you.

 Christa Hartsook 27:44

Alright, thanks so much, Chris.





Chris Cassady 27:46

All right. Thank you very much. Have a great day.



27:47

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