

Focus On Fleece: Tips for Marketing Your Fiber

Judith Korff

The most successful alpaca breeders are those who have developed a formal marketing program for their livestock. This may involve developing logos and tag lines, designing and printing business cards, developing and maintaining an informative website, participating regularly in alpaca shows, printed or CD-format sales list handouts, informational farm packets, collecting and mailing fleece samples to interested buyers, and volunteer service with national and regional trade organizations.

When it comes to the fiber produced by their livestock each year, however, few breeders have any type of marketing program. Some send part or their entire annual clip to AFCNA to support the national cooperative, which is, of course, a very important use. However, there are many ways for a farm to profit directly from its fleece production that most breeders seem to ignore or overlook. However, income from fiber sales could contribute significantly to a farm's profitability. You work hard to improve the fiber produced by your alpacas; it's time to take advantage of what that offers to your farm in terms of income and sustainability.

Well in advance of the eventual transition of this industry from a primarily livestock production industry to a commodities industry, wise breeders will have positioned their farms to be competitive in the marketplace by developing and implementing an active and profitable fleece marketing program. This article will offer some guidelines and suggestions for beginning or improving your annual fiber sales to give you the chance to be among the leaders in the emerging commodity market.

Evaluation:

The first step in developing a marketing program is to know everything there is to know about the product you are offering for sale. The more information you have about your product, the easier it is to target your market and to decide where to spend your marketing dollars.

Have your fleece tested. For fiber marketing purposes, it doesn't matter whether you obtain a regular histogram or the more detailed OFDA report. You need to know the representative micron value of each fleece, the degree to which it is uniform throughout, and its relative comfort value. This will tell you the most suitable end use for your fleece. If you have obtained an OFDA report, you can use the annual growth chart to check for stress points – areas along a fiber's length where stress may have caused a weak point that could result in breakage during processing. This may help you determine appropriate use and assign reduced pricing for fleeces that may have been affected by stress.

A very fine (low micron) fleece with good uniformity and a high comfort value can be used for products designed to be worn close to the skin, such as sweaters or lingerie. A moderately fine fleece may be best suited for products such as hats, gloves, or mittens, which will be worn on the head

or hands where the skin is less sensitive. It may also be blended with coarser fleece to add a degree of luxury to sock yarn without sacrificing the durability of the coarser fleece. High micron (strong or adult) fleeces in the low- to mid-30's micron ranges are suitable for socks or other garments that will receive heavy wear and thus require greater tensile strength for durability. Very high micron (coarse) fleeces can be used for blankets or felting and needlecraft projects, such as rug yarns. Regardless of micron, all clean alpaca fiber is usable, so take the time to gather and market those seconds and thirds. As long as fiber is clean and unstained, and of spinnable or feltable length, it is a valuable commodity that can add to the bottom line of your farm enterprise.

Preparation:

Pasture Management: The first step to producing marketable fleeces is to maintain your pasture and barn facilities so that the alpacas are not exposed to excessive vegetable matter. Setting up feeding stations to prevent waste hay from falling onto the backs or embedding itself in the neck fiber of your animals will help significantly. Alpacas love to burrow deep inside their hay to find the choicest morsels. If you can keep their heads above the hay mass, it will force them to eat what's available at the top, thus saving hay and keeping their neck fiber free of waste. Keep your pastures and yard areas mowed so that grasses and weeds do not have a chance to set seed. Not only will this keep your forage source growing over a longer period of time, but it will prevent alpacas from being exposed to seed heads and weeds while grazing. Be particularly careful to eliminate burdocks and other weeds that produce clinging seeds which become entangled in your alpacas' fiber and are very difficult to remove.

Shearing to simplify skirting: Whether you do your own shearing or use a professional shearer, it helps to perform the shearing task so that fleeces are shorn in stages, with the blanket shorn and collected first, separately from the belly, brisket, legs, and neck fiber. Place each shorn section in a separate bag. This will facilitate the skirting process, since you will have already segregated based on areas of micron divergence. If you hand-shear, you will be able to assess each handful or "clip strip" before placing it in its appropriate container. It's also very easy to shake out debris and dirt as you work, thereby simplifying the skirting process.

Clean your fleeces well: A clean, well-skirted fleece will bring significantly more than a stained or dirty "raw" fleece. Educate your tactile senses and employ them in conjunction with your visual sense to distinguish between prime fibers and the secondary fibers found around the edges of the blanket fleece. Remove the coarser fibers and set them aside for sale as seconds. Unless you are skirting for a specific handspinning client who prefers random color shifts, you should remove any color contamination (spots or areas where color changes occur in patterned alpacas) and set those fibers aside with others of like color and quality. Be sure to remove all dung tags. Dirty or stained fibers can be set aside for washing and use as stuffing. Pick or shake out and discard sand, mud clumps, seed heads, burrs and

other vegetable material. If there are areas that are clumped with burrs, try Cowboy Magic or a similar equine mane and tail product to help you remove them.

Once you have skirted your fleece, place it in a clear plastic bag or storage box so you can locate it quickly. It is very helpful to slip inside the container a tag clearly identifying the name of the animal that produced the fleece and the date of shearing and, if you have it at the time of skirting, a copy of the histogram. If you wish, you can combine fleeces of a single color in the same container, as long as all the fleeces included in that container fall within a comparable 2-3 average micron range.

Sort: Gather the seconds and odd-color bits and combine them in like groups for marketing to those seeking those specific qualities. In small quantities, you can use Zip-Lok® freezer bags to keep those items collected and clean.

Add Value: If you want to go beyond the basics, you can add value to your fiber production by having some of it processed. Some breeders have learned to card and spin, and make their own handspun yarns for sale. There are also many small mills available where you can have fleeces washed, carded, or combed and turned into roving, batt, top, or felted sheets for sale to hand-spinners, crafters and weavers. Many mills can spin, ply and, if you like, dye your fiber so that it is retail-ready yarn or felt. Obviously the expense of processing will increase the price you must ask to recoup your investment and make a profit, but having value-added product can broaden your market base.

Finding Value in the Stained Stuff: Even the short, dirty, stained fiber can be useful. If you take the time to wash it, it can be used as stuffing in pet toys or beds.

Maintain Records:

It is very helpful to keep accurate records of the fleeces you have available for sale. When a potential buyer contacts you with an order or inquiry, you will know quickly whether or not you have in stock what that client seeks, and can offer a substitute fleece if you have one. I maintain a fiber log that details each fleece by color, quality/micron, weight (by ounces), date of shearing, and special information that might be helpful to a buyer, such as particular crimp qualities of huacayas and lock structure in suris. Be certain to update your log as fleeces or partial fleeces are sold.

Developing a Target Market:

Now that you have analyzed the qualities your fleeces possess, and know exactly what you have available for sale, you can consider who will be your best prospects as buyers. You will likely have at least two different types of fleeces to sell: prime and seconds. Prime fleeces usually sell for somewhat more and are often purchased – at least in the small quantities most farms can provide – by hand spinners, weavers or felt-crafters. Seconds are typically discounted by 10-15% over prime fleece, and are purchased by hand spinners, crafters and, in the case of suri fleeces, doll-makers.

Some farms have had great success in retailing their fully processed yarns to knitters and crocheters who are avid consumers of high quality yarn products. Sales /can be made off-the-farm, by consignment arrangement with a local retail environment, or through the internet.

If your farm is large enough to produce significant quantities of fiber each year, you will likely want to market your fleeces to commercial producers. A commercial producer will expect to buy very large quantities of comparable fleeces, usually for a specific purpose (e.g., sock yarn, fingering weight yarn, rug yarn, etc.), and will expect significant uniformity of color, micron, length, and handle among all the fleeces purchased. If your farm does not produce sufficient fleeces (or if you send a large percentage of your fleeces to AFCNA or another cooperative), you might consider working with another farm to develop a large enough lot to sell commercially. If, while developing your breeding program, you place a firm emphasis on across-the-herd uniformity, you will find yourself well positioned to satisfy this market.

Marketing Materials:

The materials you use to market your fleece should be separate and apart from the materials you use to market your livestock. It isn't enough to add the word "fleece" or "fiber" on your farm business card or stationery. You need specific materials that can be sent to prospective fleece buyers without distracting information about your sale animals.

I have a separate business card that features my fleeces, and I use a tri-fold brochure that contains a brief introduction to my farm, a description of my services and warranties, fleece photos, and a brief description of the fleeces produced at my farm each year, including colors available and pricing. One section is a mail-back or fax order form that a buyer can complete and return to order product. The brochure also contains complete contact information, including telephone, e-mail and website address, for those who prefer to contact me directly for more complete information or to place an order.

I also occasionally prepare separate sales lists featuring specials or sales. These lists are sent to spinning and weaving guilds, established clients and others who inquire about my products. To avoid confusion between sales events and the relatively permanent pricing in my brochure, each specials list shows an end date to the sales event.

You may have your marketing materials professionally printed or produce them yourself on a high-quality color printer. Since my sales information changes frequently (for example, as lots are sold out or I sell an animal that produces a particular color or type of fleece), I prefer not to invest in large quantities of materials that could be out-of-date before they are fully distributed. By producing my own brochures and sales lists or fliers, I can edit them as desired and print just the amount I need at any given time, whether to respond to a single inquiry, to do a bulk mailing or to have available to take to a show or other event. Whichever resource you use, your materials should be as high-quality

as your marketing budget can support. You are a professional commodity producer, marketing a high-quality commodity, and your materials should reflect your pride in your farm and your product.

Marketing Language:

I've often found it astonishing that so many breeders produce such insipid marketing texts in their efforts to sell alpacas. A single-paragraph description of an alpaca offering little more than name, age, color, and sometimes production record, lacks appeal. Descriptions that are misspelled, improperly punctuated, or that fail to meet basic standards for sentence structure or syntax, immediately signal that the writer is careless about details and about the impression he/she makes on the public. Your marketing materials, whether for your livestock or your fleece, should be written with an eye to detail. If you know that writing is not your forte, you should have your written materials proofread or edited by someone who can bring out the best in them. If you are going to spend a significant portion of your marketing budget on printed material, you should be especially sure that the material represents the professionalism of your business.

As Madison Avenue well knows, creativity is the hallmark of a good marketing campaign. You don't need glitzy banners, a variety of type-styles and 5 colors to make your material stand out. If you have an effective tagline, use it. If not, you might find one by re-reading your previously-written material looking for phrases you tend to repeat, or facts about your operation that you like to emphasize. Chances are, your subconscious knows what you think is important. Listen to yourself and identify what you tend to focus on as you talk to buyers, and then develop a brief (five words or less) way of capturing and articulating that idea.

Another trick of the marketing trade is to use language that is consistent with the product you are selling. If you sold costume jewelry, you'd describe your merchandise in terms such as "delicate," "feminine," "glamorous," "stunning," and "lovely." Those terms would repel buyers if you were describing John Deere tractors. The same holds true in the alpaca industry. Learn and use colorful and appropriate descriptors to entice consumers to buy from you.

When describing fleeces, color is a powerful motivator. Buyers neither know nor care what alpaca colors are called on the AOBA fiber charts. They are attracted by uniqueness, romance and imagination when it comes to buying fiber. Colored fleeces need not be just fawn, brown or black. They can be Cinnamon, Sand, Copper, Deep Maple, Maroon, or Midnight. They can be golden, cream, russet, twilight. They can be whatever provides an image that is consistent with the fleece being offered.

Fleece textures can be glorious, glossy, lustrous, satiny, silky, slick, warm, snuggly. They can be whatever your imagination can convey to the buyer's imagination. If you can help a buyer develop a vision, you'll add that buyer to your repeat client list.

Resources:

The following are some of the resources I've found helpful in locating buyers and end-users of my fleeces:

- Personal website: You probably have a website to market your alpacas. It's a logical place to incorporate marketing for your fleeces or value-added products.
- AFCNA: I send approximately half of my annual clip to AFCNA, our national fiber cooperative, to support the development of the alpaca fiber industry. In addition to the benefits of participating in AFCNA's wholesale product program, AFCNA has now reached the point where dividend payout will be made to members. Information about membership in AFCNA is available at: www.afcna.com.
- Yahoo marketing groups: I have found many buyers through postings on Yahoo listserves dedicated to fleeces and fiber crafts. The groups are free to join and welcome marketing (with specific parameters in some cases). Some of the best are: AlpacaFiberAlliance, AlpacaFarmingClassified, Farm_Trader, FiberCombing, FiberCritters, FiberFling, FiberSource, FleeceForSale, LivestockClassifieds, SmallFarmBiz, SpinPlus, UltimateFleaMarket, and Woolcraft. Some lists have specific marketing days, so be sure to check their description before posting. You can search for these and other farm- or sales-related groups by going to the Yahoo Groups main page at <http://groups.yahoo.com>.
- Yahoo, AOL and MSN also have numerous listserves for spinners and fiber crafters that welcome the *occasional* ad, although their primary focus is on craft techniques and technologies. Be sure not to overwhelm these lists with marketing material. If you join one of these groups, take the time to participate in the on-going discussion and familiarize yourself with the other posters' needs and preferences in fleece qualities. Not only will you learn what buyers want and why, but you will develop relationships with end users who can become customers. Since these are not primarily marketing lists, you should use your best judgment in what degree of marketing is acceptable to the list's owners and participants.
- Spinning and Weaving Guilds: I have sold fleeces to members of regional spinners and weavers guilds by sending the contact person for each guild an introductory letter with 15-20 brochures and business cards to hand out to members. You can find out what guilds are in your area by checking one of the several online guild directories. The one I use is found at www.fiberart.com/guilds_weavers.html. Better yet, join a local guild and have fun!
- Trade and Craft Magazine advertising: I have not tried this method of sales, although I have seen advertising by larger breeders or those who also run small mills. *Spin-Off* has a classified section and also accepts block advertising. *Alpacas Magazine* and agricultural publications are other venues that might prove helpful.