

Social Media's Impact on Selling Performance Horses



I LOVE THE INTERNET when I have a few extra dollars burning a hole in my pocket. I can spend hours or days comparing details, watching YouTube and asking my online friends in forums or on social media sites free advice about my pending purchase.

Next stop is a store to touch and play. No salesmen needed. I am an "educated buyer." The hands-on test passes and I pull out my smart phone, scan the bar code and eureka! 50 online retailers want my business. "Hey, retail guy! Price match on aisle 2!" I Tweet my followers and make a quick post to Facebook about my buying prowess.

Later... still struggling with getting my new toy to perform to my "maybe unrealistic" expectations, I admit that it is not going to meet my needs after all. Back to the store I go. "10% RESTOCKING FEE!?" I would have never bought here if your salesman had told me the truth!" Tweeting, out the door I go.

Online I complain about how salespeople are liars by omission, do a review on that store and head off to the forums to tell my story. I feel better with every notification of someone agreeing with my posts and delete the ones that suggest I take responsibility. Eventually, I'll start looking again.

The Equine Connection

What could this fictional story have to do with selling and buying performance horses in America? Substitute "horse," "barn," "trainer" and "seller" as appropriate above, and the analogy becomes real.

Did you know there are one billion users on the internet today? That's 1,000,000,000 for those that like zeros. How many links to horses for sale are there today? Google hits for "Horses for Sale" today total 21.1 million. 55,700 new links were added in the last 24 hours and 2,750 in the last hour. Bing lists 388 million links (roughly 1 horse for sale link for every 2.6 people

on the web). No wonder the phone doesn't ring off the hook when we pay up to \$200 for that online ad or post a sales horse on our websites. You do have a website that is always up to date, don't you?

Bottom line: There is an overwhelming amount of online information available and we can research anything. Buying horses like commodities challenges both buyers and sellers. When I first became involved in selling dressage horses many years ago, nearly every sale was a local sale—meaning within a half day's drive. Almost every sale involved another professional calling us or we would make calls to our professional friends that we knew would like the type of horse we were selling. We would occasionally advertise in the classified section of a weekly horse magazine and buyers would respond by phone. We would talk with the trainer and make a mutual decision if a horse was worth the trip. Vet checks were not the norm. Most professionals protected their clients by knowing whom to deal with and whom to avoid. We wrote a bill of sale, shook hands and the horse was loaded on the trailer.

A New Way to Shop

What changed? Technology. A major innovation to complicate the lives of buyers and sellers alike was the VHS video recorder and camera. Sellers could send a tape to prospective customers so they could see the horse and make the decision to try it. What an awesome idea!

Buyers could receive videos in the mail, (the more the better), invite horsey friends over for dinner and drinks, and the entertainment was video night. The greatest thing of all was slow motion where a newly formed jury could pronounce judgment on horses and riders from the comfort of the couch. "Jane, back up that tape! I swear he took an off step after that third flying change! There, did you see it too? Next." For buyers, the shopping time to purchase the next dream horse increased because there were so many more choices to consider. The horses did not change but "newly discovered concerns" led to



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the dismissal of many horses without learning more or seeing them in person.

Efficiency at the expense of effectiveness became many buyers' focus and the performance horse was on the path to becoming a commodity. The professional's opinion now came later in the process, often after the buyer decided which

horses they wanted to see. For sellers, even the incoming phone calls had changed. They were talking with buyers, not the professionals they knew well, and the conversation usually didn't get past "How much is Pokey and send me a video tape.... No, I will be able to see everything I need to see on a video. If we are interested, we will get back to you."

Sellers discovered a need for creative editing if they wanted customers to try the horse. A new group of do-it-yourself sellers also emerged as technology enabled anyone access to the market. The trainer who had the client's best interests at heart became more like "the retail guy" called upon when the decision to go was made.

Knowledgeable professionals were working with people whom they knew nothing about and many found that trying these "video vetted" horses was a waste of time and money. Horse shopping was more frustrating for buyers, sellers and professionals alike. Many professionals decided to quit selling horses altogether.



and like an online video. Yet, I hear daily from buyers and trainers, "That last horse I went to see was nothing like what it looked like on the video, and I wasted time and money going to look." Hmm, all this video technology and we haven't been able to solve a problem created 30 years ago.

Why might this be? Consider my theory on the information age:

"Information in absence of context is dangerous, yet people routinely make decisions without context and are surprised by the results."

Buyers: Here are some things to think about if you made a decision based on video and didn't like the result. Who was riding the horse? What is their level of experience? What is your level of experience? Did you have a phone conversation and ask enough questions to translate "subjective" criteria about the horse in order to assess his appropriateness to your own level of skill and goals? If you have a trainer or professional you regularly work with, did you fully utilize their experience, respect their advice and follow their recommendations? Did they call and talk to the seller? If not, did you offer to send the seller a video of you riding?

Sellers: Your pictures and video must be the best they can be and represent the horse accurately. Hire a professional. First impressions are judgments. If you choose to post poor quality sales video and pictures, do so at your own risk. Use the web, but don't rule out magazine advertising to build brand awareness and name recognition as you build your networks online and off. Don't expect much from premium pricing on websites. The web is creating a "commodity mentality" for horses. Commodity buyers want it all for the least amount. Yet high quality, well-trained performance horses are in demand.

Some buyers, faced with information overload, are back to seeing the value of professional help. Do you want fair price and short marketing time for a high-quality horse? Is your horse in training and for sale in a facility that specializes in sales for your discipline? If not, strongly consider it. The web doesn't sell horses as well as professional sellers do.

Shopping by Video 2012

Today, technology enables us to watch ... one moment please... Googling... Youtube ... 58,100 videos of horses for sale and we can post or e-mail the link for all our friends' comments. Dinner is no longer required.

Buyers and the trainers who will participate in a horse search require a video first. Many will not send an e-mail or rarer yet pick up a telephone to talk with a seller unless they have seen

Breaking News! Online Show Results!


For sellers, to show or not to show might be the question for 2012. Every seller should make a conscious decision about how to handle horse shows. New data-aggregating websites are providing access to scores of horses and of riders going back not just years but decades. Now is not the time to push the envelope at horse shows with your sales horses or those that may be for sale in the future. (Will this ultimately hurt the horse show industry? That's a subject for another column.) Value perception is related to high scores and blue ribbons. Even scores from schooling shows are on the net these days and can work against a horse or rider. Mediocre and poor scores may cause buyers to pass over your horse as they research every single detail about him.

Buyers: Don't rule out a horse because of mediocre scores. You weren't the one in the saddle. Have a frank conversation with the seller. You could be looking at a highly competitive horse that has been shown by a lesser rider. Maybe those scores weren't the horse's fault. Please remember: "Information in absence of context is dangerous. Yet people routinely make decisions without context and are surprised by the results." Pick up the phone. When you understand context, you are ahead of the other 95% who are passing over the horse.


Social Media and Digital Dirt

Think twice before you make that post! We all know horse ownership has more than its share of ups and downs. When things aren't going great, we all feel the need to vent, be validated and seek consolation; however, people tend to forget that the internet is NOT the same as picking up the phone and talking it over with your best friend.

Today, when our sales barn buys a horse for investment or represents any horse, digging deep for dirt is part of the process. Why? (This is a true story.) Recently, a prospective client called me before booking a flight to see a horse we were representing. This horse was an awesome adult amateur horse and had never stepped out of line at our barn. We were happy to represent him for his owner until that fateful phone call. It went something like this: "Jeff, my trainer and I really like this horse, but we can't come to try him because I uncovered some very disturbing information posted about him by his owner on a chat forum four years ago." His owner, who was a teen at the time, found lots of "help" in the forums for every issue she could post about. It




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didn't matter that he was no longer four years old or that she shouldn't have been breaking/training a horse on her own. What did matter was her hundreds of posts in her virtual diary open to one billion viewers that she had long since forgotten about. Our professional sales operation won't represent a horse that has a history of "issues" online. We regrettably sent the horse home.

The innocent post on Facebook about how you were dumped yesterday may come back in the form of a lawsuit. You sell your horse and, years later, a rider has a freak accident and is injured. Next, you are served papers by an as-seen-on-TV law firm intent on trying to convince a jury of your negligence by reasoning this was always a dangerous horse. Your posts are part of the public record and may be used against you. Don't think it can't happen.

A Parting Shot

Whether it's shopping for a horse, reading a post or watching the nightly news, information in the absence of context is dangerous. Please take a minute and understand the context when making decisions. 

About the author: *Jeff Johnson owns and operates Impulsion Unlimited Dressage Horse Sales in Virginia with his wife, Grand Prix rider and trainer, Susan Cooper. Their focus is matching quality dressage with new owners. He also provides sales improvement and marketing advisory services in both the equestrian world and for leading businesses on a national basis.*