

# PRO TRAINER

NRHA 

THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE FOR PROFESSIONAL REINING TRAINERS SUMMER 2021

**7 Essential Tips to  
Keep Your Customers**

**A Pro's Advice to  
Win on Social Media**

**Prioritize Your Mental Health  
for Professional Success**

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**PLUS**

- Keep Tabs on Your Competition
- Summer Marketing Calendar
- Level-Up With a Newsletter



Summer/21

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# PRO TRAINER



SUMMER 2021

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ON THE COVER: Photo by Traci Davenport Photography for NRHA

# PRO TRAINER NEWS

PEOPLE, REPORTS, EVENTS

## Are You Ready for the NAAC?

FAMILIARIZE YOURSELF WITH THE 2021 AFFILIATE REGIONAL CHAMPIONSHIPS AND ADEQUAN® NORTH AMERICAN AFFILIATE CHAMPIONSHIPS QUALIFICATION CRITERIA TO BETTER SERVE YOUR CUSTOMERS.

In 2020, the Adequan® North American Affiliate Championships (NAAC) held during the National Reining Horse Association (NRHA) Futurity paid out an incredible \$107,000 to more than 900 entries from all across the country. The fantastic prizes, large purses, and prestige of being a NAAC Champion helped the event grow, and it nearly doubled in size from the previous year—unprecedented growth in unprecedented times.

The NRHA Board of Directors has announced the qualification criteria for the 2021 Adequan® NAAC. The rules for the current year are the same as in 2020 when the pandemic forced changes to accommodate both the riders and the local affiliates and Affiliate Regional Championships (ARC). The only addition is that riders must be an affiliate member to show at an ARC.

Once again, anyone receiving a score higher than a zero at an ARC will be able to enter that class at the 2021 NAAC in Oklahoma City. There are no requirements to compete at an ARC other than the rider must be a member of an NRHA affiliate, which they are encouraged to join beforehand. The objective of the NRHA Board is to encourage people to attend the ARCs and support the affiliate program without limiting the number of horses that attend the Adequan® NAAC.



*Once again, the Adequan® NAAC will accept entries from anyone scoring higher than a zero at an ARC.*

“Numbers at the 2020 Adequan® NAAC grew by almost 100%, and the competition was tougher than ever,” noted NRHA Affiliate Committee Staff Liaison Sara Honegger. “Although there were multiple factors that led to this, including doubling the added money, the Affiliate Committee believes that the eased qualification structure was pivotal. It not only allows more people to come to Oklahoma City, but it is also easier to understand the process if you are new to the sport. We want reiners to have a chance to enjoy competing at the Adequan® NAAC and don’t want circumstances out of their control to impact that.”

As in 2020, riders will be allowed to participate in multiple ARCs with one exception: if they win a class, they cannot compete on the same horse in the same class at another ARC.

“For example, a horse and rider that won the ARC Non Pro class at the Northwest Affiliate Regional Championships would not be allowed to compete in the ARC Non Pro class at the Southwest Affiliate Regional Championships,” Honegger explained. “We want to ensure that we continue to promote the affiliates and their membership, and the Affiliate Committee felt this was a good way to ensure that those living in

regions with more pandemic-related restrictions are still able to attend an ARC while also supporting an affiliate.”

Honegger added, “We’re extremely grateful to all the sponsors and participants who made the

2020 Adequan® NAAC such a success and hope to continue that trend into 2021.”

For more information about NRHA membership or the NRHA Affiliate program, visit [nrha.com/affiliate](http://nrha.com/affiliate). ■

## Summer/Fall Calendar

Calendar is subject to change. Please visit [nrha.com](http://nrha.com) and ReinerSuite™ for the most updated information.

### July 26–31

NRHA European Affiliate Championships  
Regstrup, Denmark

### Aug. 1

Fourth 2021 NRHA Futurity payment due

### Aug. 31

NRHA Markel Futurity Sales consignment deadline  
For more information, visit [nrha.com/sales](http://nrha.com/sales) or email [sales@nrha.com](mailto:sales@nrha.com).

### Sept. 1–15

Electronic Voting Open  
Electronic voting for open NRHA Director seats.  
For more information, contact Liz Kelsey at [lkelsey@nrha.com](mailto:lkelsey@nrha.com).

### Oct. 1

Final 2021 NRHA Futurity payment due

### Oct. 1

2021 NRHA Futurity rider designations due  
*Riders and divisions may be changed through close of business Nov. 1 with no penalty.*

### Oct. 27–31

2021 NRHA European Derby  
Lyon, France  
*Open to NRHA-nominated horses ages 5, 6, 7, and 8 in 2021.*

### Oct. 29–31

Judges’ School  
Oklahoma City, OK  
*Hosted at the Embassy Suites Airport. For more information, contact Kristen Liesman at [kliesman@nrha.com](mailto:kliesman@nrha.com).*

### Nov. 5

2021 NRHA Futurity stall reservations due

### Nov. 15–22

2021 NRHA European Futurity  
Cremona, Italy  
*Open to NRHA-nominated horses age 4 in 2021.*

### Nov. 25–Dec. 4

NRHA Futurity & Adequan® North American Affiliate Championships  
Oklahoma City, OK

### Dec. 1

Sliders’ Night Out, Presented by Toyon Ranch  
Oklahoma City, OK  
*Donor opportunities are now open. Email Leslie Baker at [lbaker@nrha.com](mailto:lbaker@nrha.com).*

### Dec. 2

NRHA Markel Futurity Sales  
Oklahoma City, OK  
*This one-day super sale will feature the NRHyA stallion auction and four sessions of consigned horses. For more information, visit [nrha.com/sales](http://nrha.com/sales).*

# ENGAGEMENT

ADVICE FOR THE CUSTOMER JOURNEY

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## Inspire Your Team

ENGAGING CURRENT AND NEW CUSTOMERS IS IMPORTANT. BUT DOING THE SAME FOR YOUR TEAM OF EMPLOYEES MIGHT BE EVEN MORE ESSENTIAL.

BY JENNIFER PAULSON



*Engaged employees feel valued and part of the bigger picture when it comes to your business, which means they're more likely to stay with your program.*

**W**hen you think about marketing and engagement on a day-to-day basis, your mind probably centers on your current customer base and attracting newcomers to your barn. But what about your team of employees? What do you do on a daily basis to connect with and engage your staff? From stall cleaners to assistant trainers to bookkeepers, it's your job to inspire them and make them feel part of your big dreams for the future.

Some studies show it can cost 16% to 20% of an average employee's salary to replace them, let alone the time and effort it takes to train up a new hire to fully function in their role. Do you have that kind of time and money? Probably not. Additionally, when a member of your team leaves, it can make everyone on your team question what went wrong, should they think about leaving, and what impact a short-handed team has on them. This makes engaging with

your staff a critical component to your success.

Here are five tips to inspire and engage your employees on a regular basis, helping you keep your valuable team intact.

### Tip 1: Be the Leader

As the “head honcho” of your training operation, it’s your job to emulate the team you want to see. In other words, you have to walk the talk. Model your core values and mission on a daily basis, and your employees will learn how you want them to behave, carry themselves, and interact with customers and other team members every day.

### Tip 2: Use Your Words

Choosing the most active, team-oriented language makes a difference. Consider the following.

“We accomplished this goal at the horse show,” versus, “I met this goal.” The inclusiveness of “we” recognizes the efforts of everyone on your team, even if the win came with you in the saddle.

“Let me share an idea,” versus “Let me propose a solution.” If what you’re speaking about is exactly how you want something done, being direct can ensure the outcome you desire. Leaving room for interpretation—e.g., sharing—might not yield the results you were looking for, can cause confusion, and builds tension between you and your employee.

### Tip 3: Solicit Feedback

If your culture supports it—and you want your employees to truly feel like a vital part of your team—ask them what’s working and what’s not so great in your situation. Do you communicate clearly and effectively? How is their workload? Do they feel like you provide adequate direction? What are their goals? Having these conversations can help you and your employees have stronger relationships and keeps them engaged with you as a leader, as well as helps address any problems that might be on the horizon.

### Tip 4: Don’t Assume They’re Happy

This goes hand in hand with Tip 3. When you

## What Is Employee Engagement?

At its core, employee engagement represents how passionate your employees feel about their jobs, how committed they are to your business’s mission, and how much effort they put into their day-to-day tasks. When employees are engaged, they feel part of your mission. They’re invested in your big-picture goals. This means they’re more likely to put in extra effort to achieve benchmarks or goals. Additionally, they’re more likely to stay with your team, which saves you the time, effort, and costs associated with finding, onboarding, and training a new hire.

solicit feedback, don’t be surprised if there are concerns to address. No employee—not even yourself as the boss—can be 100% happy and satisfied with a job 100% of the time. Accepting that makes it easier to have difficult conversations and find proactive solutions to keep your employees engaged with their work and committed to your brand.

### Tip 5: Provide Benefits or Perks

When you own a small business like your training operation, it can be tough to provide traditional benefits like health insurance or retirement savings. But you can provide other incentives that make working for you better than another barn. Perks such as extending sponsor discounts to your employees, providing housing, taking your staff to lunch or dinner, and offering access to financial expertise help your employees find extra value outside the daily work, which can encourage them to dedicate themselves to your business. ■

## Resources

[BuiltIn.com](https://www.builtin.com)

[13 Effective Strategies to Increase Employee Engagement Across Your Company](https://www.builtin.com/13-effective-strategies-to-increase-employee-engagement-across-your-company)

[EngageForSuccess.com](https://www.engageforsuccess.com)

[What Is Employee Engagement?](https://www.engageforsuccess.com/what-is-employee-engagement)

# DOLLARS & SENSE



*Break out your highlighters and take off your rose-colored glasses. It's time to honestly compare your business to your competitors so you can gain and keep customers in your barn.*

## Keep Tabs on Your Competition

AS AN NRHA PROFESSIONAL, COMPETITION IS AT THE CORE OF YOUR BUSINESS. BUT UNDERSTANDING YOUR COMPETITION IS ALSO VALUABLE OUTSIDE THE SHOW PEN IN TERMS OF YOUR BUSINESS.

**Y**our potential and current customers have options, and they're exposed to those options at every horse show, every day on social media, and in publications and media related to your industry. A competitor analysis—identifying new and existing competitors in your market—can help you identify your path forward in what can be a crowded marketplace of options.

### **Step 1: Identify your competitors.**

Your rivals can be categorized as people in your immediate geographic area—down the road or in your town—or those who share traits that make your business unique. These might include other women-owned training operations if you're a woman or other businesses that focus on non pros or other categories. →

# Summer Marketing Calendar

## Step 2: Set your criteria.

Make a list of parameters for comparing your business to the others. Consider things like pricing, services offered, location, and even the way you market your business.

## Step 3: Make first and second tiers.

Identify your primary (direct) competitors—those who do what you do and are located near you—and secondary competitors—those who are near you but do different things (maybe focus on a different Western discipline).

## Step 4: Do the research.

Look into what each of your competitors does that's similar and different from you. Consider things like customer service, pricing, amenities offered, and other program-centric qualities. But also look at promotions and activities online and on social media.

## Step 5: Analyze the data.

This is when you must be brutally honest with yourself. What are your competitors doing better than you are? Are their programs more enticing for obvious reasons that you can control? What are you doing that they don't do that you could amplify or promote more? What are they doing to promote their businesses that's different than what you do? Key learnings from this step will help you determine your future path to be sure you put your best foot forward to gain and keep customers. ■

*Your show season is in full swing, so it might be tough to find time to create content to post on social media, your blog, and your website. It might be a good time to try one of the schedulers discussed in the [NRHA Professionals' Marketing Toolkit Section 3: Your Social Media](#). Here are a handful of ideas to help your content development.*

**A Day in the Life.** Your entire audience can't be at the horse shows with you, so choose a day to follow your barn's activities at a big event. Promote the opportunity to follow along with regular social media posts, but use Facebook and Instagram Stories (you can easily connect the two for half the work) to show short clips throughout your day.

**Account Takeover.** Talk to your sponsors about opportunities to "take over" their Instagram and Facebook Stories to promote your partnership and your own business. For example, if you have a sponsor who produces grooming products, the takeover could focus on bathing and shining up your mounts for a show. Promote your takeover on your own social media, and repost the stories to your own for double-duty.

**Evaluate a Ride.** Put an assistant or customer on a horse, and roll camera. While videoing the ride, provide your commentary on the horse and rider to help educate your audience about your training program, what people can work on at home, and why you do what you do.

**Show Results, With a Benefit.** It's very simple to share show results, but you can increase your engagement and reach by adding service or deeper information. For example, you can congratulate Suzy on her third-place at the show, but your audience is probably more interested to know what personal goals Suzy and her horse met, how far they came since their last show, and what they'll work on before their next. Keep it positive and light-hearted for a feel-good post that your audience can relate to.

**Clips From a Clinic.** Grab someone to film short clips from your clinic, and ask participants to offer up what they learned, what was most valuable, and what they can't wait to use at home. Save these short items to post throughout the summer or all in one swoop. Then reuse the content at other points in the year. (You're suddenly a content marketer and you didn't even know it!) ■

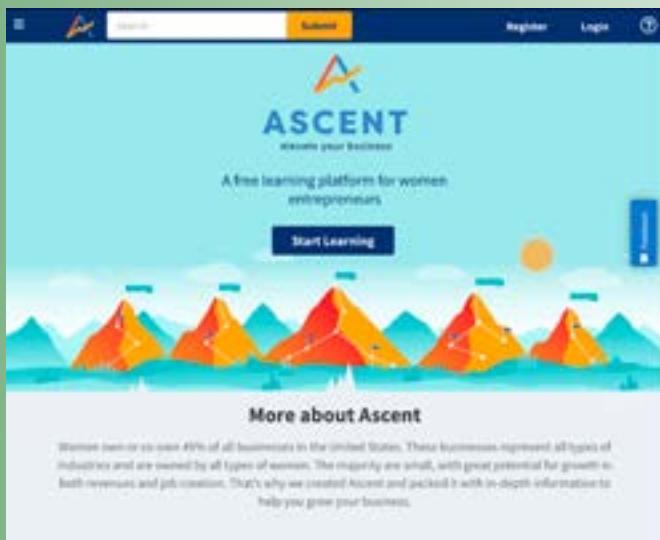
# SBA's Ascent Platform for Women Entrepreneurs

The **Small Business Association** offers multiple resources for professionals just like yourself. The group recently launched the **Ascent program**—a free learning platform for women entrepreneurs.

According to the site, women own or co-own 45% of all businesses in the U.S., and those businesses represent all types of industries, including those involving horses. And we know in the horse business, if a woman isn't the head trainer in the barn, she's probably the partner or wife of the professional and is running the business behind the scenes.

The platform's goal is to help women grow their businesses. Divided into major topics called Journeys and smaller sections called Excursions, the self-led platform offers a variety of formats—videos, “fireside chats,” self-assessments, etc. Each Journey offers an estimated time to complete, allowing you to plan your time wisely and use every minute in your workday effectively.

By creating an account, you can track your progress and easily establish your next steps in your Journeys. However, you don't have to have an account to use the resources. Visit <https://ascent.sba.gov> to check it out. ■



*Are you ready to ascend to your next level? The SBA has developed a program to help women entrepreneurs reach their full potential. And it's free!*

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## Level-Up: Start a Newsletter

*To take your marketing to the next level, hit your audience in the inbox with an email newsletter.*

Email marketing and newsletters might seem like a bit much for you and your business. The concept of putting together newsletters and distributing them to your email list—or even just building an email list!—can seem daunting. But there are many resources out there to help.

For one, [Blog.HubSpot.com](https://blog.hubspot.com) has excellent information for beginners in this realm. (The blog itself offers free information. The main website is for subscribers to their services, which cost money.) The blog even offers a download called [“The Beginner’s Guide to Email Marketing”](#) that helps you get on the right path.

The idea of coming up with content for a newsletter can be daunting, but it's really as simple as using the best content you're loading to your website and social media—your blog posts, videos, photos, and sponsor offers. It's best to change the headline and the copy a little to freshen it up, but the point is, you've already done the hard work.

Your audience wants to hear from you. They want to know more about you and your training methods, your horses, your philosophies—all of it. An email newsletter is a fantastic way to reach them in their inbox so they can take in all you have to offer on their own time rather than endless scrolling on Facebook. ■

# Personal Vs. Professional

SOMETIMES PERSONAL BELIEFS SPILL OVER INTO BUSINESS. BUT THERE ARE TIMES YOU SHOULD AVOID THE CROSSOVER ON YOUR SOCIAL MEDIA.

**T**here's a good chance you have both personal and business social media accounts. While the temptation might be to link both or to post the same content on both accounts, choosing a path of separation can save you professional angst as well as keep your business in a positive light.

The horse trainer/customer relationship is much different than many other professional relationships because many of the typical “lines” are crossed by developing personal friendships. It might be easy to think, “I think this is funny, so the rest of my customers will, too.” However, that's not always true, and it's definitely not always true when it comes to your followers who aren't yet customers in your barn or sponsors with whom you have relationships.

Here are five things to consider before cross-posting personal content on your business social media accounts.

## 1. What's funny to you isn't funny to all.

Horse memes, silly video clips, and other simply funny posts are usually safe for sharing across your personal and professional platforms. But that video of the edgy comedian who can only be seen on a streaming service with an MA rating? Probably not acceptable for your business page.

## 2. Not everyone shares your politics.

Overtly partisan posts can be especially damaging on a professional account. The last two presidential elections are easy evidence of types of posts that can tear relationships apart—and ruin profitable business connections. Your customers, while they might admire you for your training and coaching skills, might not share the same political views as

you have. Sometimes it's best to err on the side of caution and leave politics completely off your professional accounts.

## 3. Sensitive family matters can be touchy.

The NRHA Professional/client relationship can become a lot like family—but it's still not your true family. Sharing potentially sensitive family matters on your professional social media is almost always off-limits. Even in the cases of fundraisers set up for a family member, it's often best to allow someone else to share that information to your professional page to maintain integrity.

## 4. Negativity breeds negativity.

A positive, motivational, uplifting voice on your professional social media puts the same kind of light on your business. Maintaining that perspective helps people see you as part of the solution rather than part of the problem.

## 5. All of your posts can be found.

No matter if they originated on your professional page or on your personal account, just about anyone can find your past posts. If your personal page is public, anyone can see what you post there—from current clients to potential new investors to prospective sponsors. So even while your personal page is your own, those posts can be found via screenshots, shares, and those committed to digging through your social media history. As an NRHA Professional, it's in your own best interests to keep these considerations in mind no matter where you're posting because the Internet doesn't forget. ■

# SOCIAL MEDIA TRAINER

BECOME THE SOCIAL MEDIA EXPERT YOUR BUSINESS NEEDS

## All Eyes on You

...OR AT LEAST YOUR SOCIAL MEDIA.

BY JENNIFER PAULSON



*Uh-oh! Your social media posts are languishing in the no-like zone. What can you do to boost your engagement and start seeing results? Learn here.*

**Y**our posting game is strong. You've figured out a cadence that works for you. You have a decent number of followers. But you're still not seeing results. Your likes are low. You only get comments from your mom. (Hi, Mom!) People don't share or save your content. You're putting in the effort, but you're not seeing the results.

Here are seven reasons why your posts are tanking.

**Reason #1:** You don't ask enough questions. Interaction requires an initial move—a request, inquiry, or something else that causes the other person to react. Ask questions in your posts based on the content. Here are some example posts and questions that can drive interaction.

**Photo of a favorite horse**→What are your favorite characteristics in a horse?

**Photo of a flashy-colored horse**→What's your favorite color of horse?

**Photo of a different breed**→What breed of horse

do you wish you owned?

**Video of a yearling loping**→What do you see that you like in this horse?

**Video of a run at a big show**→What's your favorite NRHA event?

**Reason #2:** You don't respond.

Interaction and engagement are two-way streets. Replying to every comment increases your interaction and can boost your engagement numbers, and then your metrics will follow in an upward trend.

Answering questions is extremely important when building interaction with your audience. Your fans can come to rely on your expertise and willingness to share your knowledge, which goes a long way.

You can respond with a silly emoji or gif, but a written response can pull in that member of your audience and make them feel like a valued member of your community...who can become a new customer someday. →

The same holds true for Facebook Messenger—respond to all messages sent within a timely fashion. (Bonus points if you reply quickly on a regular enough basis to achieve the “Very Responsive” badge.)

**Reason #3:** Your posts lack variety.

People get bored seeing the same thing over and over. They wonder if they liked or commented on a post already because it looks the same as the last one. Variety of post type is critical to keep your audience engaged.

Videos draw a lot of attention, especially if they're entertaining. Try a poll—give three or four options on a topic, and let people weigh in. You can use this information to develop future content.

**Reason #4:** You ignore your insights or don't use the information.

Facebook provides loads of insights to help you post more of what works. Click the Insights button on the left side of your page, and dive into everything you could ever want to know about your audience, trends for post performance, reach, and more.

**Reason #5:** You're phoning it in.

When you use crummy photos or don't make time to edit your posts, your audience notices. Low-res photos get attention...in a bad way. Spelling and grammar errors make people question your professionalism. Both discourage people from liking, sharing, commenting on, and saving your posts.

**Reason #6:** You don't play tag.

Tagging opens your posts to people who don't yet follow your page. For example, if you tag Trainer B in your post, that post can appear in Trainer B's fans' feeds. The same goes for your sponsors.

Remember the bareback spin challenge of a few years back? That went viral because NRHA Professionals tagged their peers to challenge

them to participate—and people paid attention and loved it! Tag your peers. Tag your sponsors. Tag your customers, if they're OK with that. Let your positive messages reach farther than you expected by leveraging your community connections.

**Reason #7:** You don't put yourself out there. Commenting on other pages gives you great visibility to potential fans and establishes your expertise. Make the effort to comment (as your page—not as yourself) on other pages' posts and in groups that are relevant to what you do. There are many reining groups on Facebook, but also join and participate in local horse enthusiast groups. The keys are to keep your contributions positive and add value to the conversation. Likes and shares can help, too, but comments really show who you are and incline new fans to follow your accounts, too.

Putting yourself out there also means showing your face. Don't be shy—put your mug in front of the camera and smile. Your audience wants to see who you are in all phases of life, not just in the show pen.

Creating engaging content for social media takes time and effort—two things you might be low on when it comes time to work on your marketing. However, it's well worth the extra time and brain power to promote and grow your business, and it gets easier with more practice. If you simply can't commit the time to do it yourself, look into your options for hiring someone to take care of it for you. ■

## Resources

[WordStream.com](https://www.wordstream.com)

[The Easy Guide to Social Media for Small Business](https://www.wordstream.com/blog/ws/2015/03/02/social-media-guide)

[Buffer.com](https://buffer.com)

[Social Media Engagement: Why It Matters and How to Do It](https://buffer.com/resources/social-media-engagement-why-it-matters-and-how-to-do-it)



*Matt Mills stands out on social media thanks to his willingness to put himself out there and offer educational opportunities to his audience, which nets big gains.*

# Million Dollar Q&A: *Matt Mills*

LEARN ABOUT SOCIAL MEDIA, HIRING TALENT, AND GROWING YOUR BUSINESS FROM AN ESTABLISHED NRHA PROFESSIONAL.

ARTICLE SPONSORED AND PROVIDED BY NRHA CORPORATE PARTNER SMARTPAK  
PHOTOS BY IMPULSE PHOTOGRAPHY MB



*“These partnerships [sponsorships] are a two-way street,” Mills shared. “It can’t just be about what you can do for me, but where I can help the sponsor, too. Being self-aware and honest about what your value truly is will help determine how you can help each other strengthen your businesses.”*

**M**att Mills is a name synonymous with the reining industry. He operates his business—Matt Mills Reining Horses—in Scottsdale, Arizona, alongside his wife, Karen. As a rider, Mills himself holds an impressive competition record, including winning the 2006 USEF Open Reining Championship on Easy Otie Whiz with a career-high score of 231.5 and being a member of the gold-medal Team USA during the 2006 World Equestrian Games.

“Winning a gold medal was a heck of an accomplishment that validated in my mind that I could compete anywhere,” Mills said. “It also opened the door for me to start teaching instructional clinics. I started traveling several

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times a year around the world teaching, and I found out that I enjoy helping others and that my approach is very easy for people to apply and follow. Since then, I’ve been able to expand my love of teaching through my online training center at [mattmillsreining.com](http://mattmillsreining.com). It’s been very gratifying that I’ve been able to reach thousands of horse lovers like myself.”

Since getting his start in reining, Mills has prided himself in developing and showing young horses and leading them to success in the show pen. What really sets Mills apart from many is his unique approach to his business using social media as a tool. As a self-starter on these channels, not only has it helped his business blossom, but continue to flourish. Mills shared some of his advice for those looking to get into the sport, the business, and into social.

### **SP: How did you get your start in the sport of reining and eventually become a professional?**

**MM:** I started riding when I was really young, at the age of 9, and have been riding ever since. I was out in California at the time and rode at the local equestrian center, where I started to learn equitation, pleasure, trail, and team penning. I did some showing in these disciplines and did well. But when I was about 15 years old, I saw my first reining horse—I was immediately enthralled by it.

I still remember it to this day—we happened to be at one of the local competitions, and someone entered the reining class where I got to see a horse spin and slide for the first time. I had no idea that you could teach a horse to do the things these horses were doing. I was intrigued to learn more, so I ended up at a summer camp where they would ride reining horses—and the rest is history. →

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I was lucky that during my high-school years—a professional moved to the area and started giving reining lessons. I spent about six months as a non pro rider and knew when I graduated high school that being a professional was where I wanted to take my career. An internship opened up with Dell Hendricks, and I did five years with him learning everything I could. The first week I was with him, he won the NRHA Derby, and I knew then it was going to be the right fit for my riding education. Once I had spent some time there, it was time to start my own business.

**SP: Your business has been on successful trajectory for some time and continues to grow. In your opinion, what has contributed to this success? And what lessons have you learned along the way?**

**MM:** The greatest thing about my business is that I absolutely love every aspect of it. Myself, along with my team, are in it for the love of the horse, and that's the secret. These horses are why the long hours required to move the needle do not bother me. You have to stay passionate, continue with a positive work ethic, and not being afraid to get out of your comfort zone. This is what allows me to keep stepping up my game every year.

Getting to the point of success isn't always easy. I've probably made every mistake that you can, but I wouldn't change any of them either. My outlook is if you are honest and look close enough, there are many things you can learn from failure. It's all about hard work and surrounding yourself with the right people who challenge you to always be better.

**SP: What do you look for when it comes to building the right team (e.g., assistant trainers, barn staff, etc.)**



*Mills has grown as a businessman and reining professional by learning from his mistakes and surrounding himself with capable, talented support staff.*

**MM:** As the business has grown, I've had the need for more help around the barn. Hiring the right employees is so important to the success of the farm. You want to have the best quality team around you and want the people who love the horses and would go the extra mile for them. I always look for self-motivators that take pride in their work. They're easy to work with and can take guidance and commit to what they say they're going to.

Also, surround yourself with the most capable people you can afford. This can sometimes be tricky due to the existing business model that most trainers follow. However, just because it's always been done like that doesn't mean it is

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right for you and your business. It's OK to get creative and hire folks that are good at what they do. There's no prize for the person who does everything on their own. Instead, think about the long-term game, then work backward."

**SP: Many professionals in the industry work with sponsors. What do you look for in sponsorships, and how do you select the ones you work with?**

**MM:** Sponsorships are all about the relationship to me. For example, I have been working with SmartPak for well over 10 years. Their entire culture matches up with the way I do business. SmartPak has extremely high-quality products, exceptional customer service, and a drive to improve and expand on everything they do. This makes it very easy and real for me to recommend their company and to represent them as a rider.

From a business standpoint, having SmartPak as a sponsor has made my life in the barn easier. I'm always on the go, so I know that I can rely on their SmartBarn Services Team to make sure my horses' supplement programs are always up-to-date, shipping on time, and handle any account questions when needed. I also recommend my clients work with them, too, so there is consistency in my program.

These partnerships are a two-way street. It can't just be about what you can do for me, but where I can help the sponsor, too. Being self-aware and honest about what your value truly is will help determine how you can help each other strengthen your businesses.

**SP: When it comes to building a business, how did you know you were ready to expand? Why do you have your business model set up the way you do?**

**MM:** I'll be honest, I didn't plan on it this way; it just happened the way it did. Horses and businesses are similar because there's no overnight success. It takes hard work, creativity, and a ton of patience. Being a competitive person by nature, I always look to improve my position. In the beginning all I thought about was winning titles. That part hasn't changed, but I've added teaching others how to improve their skills along with just creating more fans of the reining horse.

**SP: You have a very strong social presence and following, Why did you get started with social media and other digital channels?**

**MM:** I started on social media many years ago because I quickly realized that it would be very difficult to be competitive [in the show pen] and go around to teach clinics at the same time. There just aren't enough hours in the day. With my social media platforms, I realized I could reach so many more people without hitting the road so much. I've quickly grown a loyal fan base, and I'm excited to always bring new content to their feed as often as possible.

One of the main reasons I started my accounts was for education. When I was coming up the ranks as a professional, I remember how starved for education I was and how little was out there. I saw the opportunity to bring this to my audience. While it is a ton of work, I enjoy being a source for horse owners to come and get help. I also enjoy pulling back the curtain, so to speak, and letting the social media world see that we are people, just like them.

**SP: You're essentially an influencer. What does it mean to you, and how does it tie in with your training career?**

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## Help in the Feed Room

From the feed room to the tack room, SmartPak, the Official Equine Health Care Retailer and Official Supplement Feeding System of NRHA, offers innovative solutions to help riders take great care of their horses. SmartPak was founded in 1999 with the introduction of the patented SmartPak supplement feeding system. The revolutionary, daily dose SmartPaks are custom-made for your horse, individually labeled, and sealed for freshness. With the success of this simple and convenient feeding system, SmartPak has continued to expand its offering of quality products, including its own line of more than 55 supplement formulas called SmartSupplements, and a wide variety of tack, equipment, and supplies. The company has grown rapidly each year and is powered by a passion for delivering an unbeatable customer experience.

**MM:** One of the great things about teaching is that you have to be accountable. So, when I'm making videos (for [mattmillsreining.com](http://mattmillsreining.com)) on different topics, I have to stop and think, "Is this good information? Am I doing what I preach?" There have been many times that the lights clicked on in my head about a certain issue I was having with a horse, and I literally had the answer right in front of me. I'm able to stay sharp with my training by teaching others.

**SP: Did you have a target audience in mind when building the platforms? Did you have a strategy in mind, or have you adjusted throughout?**

**MM:** A huge goal of mine is to help bridge the gap between your diehard reining enthusiast and the average horse owner. Some consider our sport elite and untouchable. Through social media, I show people that the same methods we use to train our horses to do reining maneuvers will work on theirs, no matter the discipline.

**SP: What's your advice to someone who's looking to start social media for their business and/or personal reputation? How does someone get past a fear of putting themselves out there?**

**MM:** My best advice for others looking to jump into the social media world is to do it! Do it now, and do it today! There's no magic formula, but doing nothing will for sure get you just that. Find what works best for you. Being consistent, honest, and true to who you are is what works for me. Building an interested following doesn't happen fast; do your research, and plan on being in it for the long haul.

**SP: Where do you see the sport of reining going in the next five, 10, and 15 years? What developments do you want to see?**

**MM:** I really hope to see our sport branch out to new people. There are still millions of people who either don't know what a reining horse is or don't understand how well-trained and safe these horses are. I want the opportunity for everyone to learn, and it's only going to benefit the sport and the equine industry.

We've been lucky to have fellow riders like my close friend Taylor Sheridan, who has already done so much for the sport by putting it on mainstream TV with shows like *The Last Cowboy*. It's time for all of us to run with that momentum and doing what we can to increase our exposure. ■



*Cultivating long-term customers is an essential part of every professional's business. Communication and honesty are two cornerstones of these lucrative relationships.*

# *In It for the Long Run*

KEEPING LONG-TERM CUSTOMERS DOES MANY THINGS FOR YOUR BUSINESS, OUTSIDE OF PROVIDED RELIABLE INCOME. THREE NRHA PROFESSIONALS SHARE THEIR TIPS FOR MAINTAINING CUSTOMERS FOR THE LONG HAUL.

**BY JENNIFER PAULSON**

**A** full barn is a full barn, in many respects. But a barn full of longstanding customers can be a major key to your success in business. Many experts say it costs five times as much to get a new customer as it does to keep a current one, including all the marketing costs to attract newcomers. That can make a massive difference in your bottom line, not to mention help you sleep better at night knowing that you understand exactly what your customers expect out of you because you've known them for years.

We spoke with three established NRHA Professionals to determine key elements that can help you keep your customers in your barn and participating in your program instead of taking their reining horses somewhere else or—

worse—trading in their horses to take up hobby boating or another high-end pastime.

## **Key #1: Communication**

All three pros point to communication as the No. 1 key to building long, successful relationships with customers. It's the cornerstone of each of the keys that follow and the foundation for a trusting, honest, lucrative business relationship, as well as the more personal side of this industry. It also establishes your credibility and sets the tone for every interaction with your customers.

"I find that we as pros aren't good enough with our communication," said Shane Brown. "We don't always understand the need to communicate, and some of our customers

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might be shy or feel under-educated, so they're intimidated to ask us questions. You can lose a customer pretty quickly if you don't set the standard for open communication and make yourself approachable."

An open dialogue is especially important when purchasing horses. Open communication can make the endeavor less stressful for all.

"Talking to your customer about what they can invest in their horses can be tough, but it's essential," David Hanson pointed out. "If they've spent all their money on a prospect that doesn't work out, will they leave your barn—or the industry entirely? I find communicating about keeping a reasonable investment with room for moving up makes all the difference. We try to convey it like buying a car—when you take the horse home with you, he depreciates. It's up to us to accept that depreciation and invest wisely so the customer has money to sell that horse and upgrade when needed."

## Key #2: Understanding Their Goals

Part of the communication effort entails understanding a customer's goals and how they align with your own. Goal-setting is a major component of Kari Klingenberg's program.

"We spend a lot of time identifying each rider's goals," she said. "We both need to understand why they're doing this. Is it for fun? To compete? Or is it a business endeavor? The horses are a job for us, but it's their passion and hobby. Knowing why your customers are involved sets everyone up for success."

Regular goal-setting sessions help riders feel confident that you're on the same page, help you track benchmarks, allow you to reset and refocus when needed, and show a vested interest in your customers' success and reaching their goals.

"If you can help a rider reach their goals, it builds your reputation," Hanson added. →



**Name:** David Hanson, Clements, California

**Career and business:** Hanson established his business in Northern California in 2000 with his late wife, Becky. Before that, the pair trained reiners in Europe. Hanson's clientele are regulars at the barn, as many live close by. They're active participants in

their affiliate and regular champions at the Adequan® North American Affiliate Championships. He was named the 2020 NRHA Horseman of the Year.

**Longest customer:** Some more than 20 years, and cross-generational with grandparent/parent/child combinations in the mix.



**Name:** Kari Klingenberg, Scottsdale, Arizona

**Career and business:** Klingenberg started her career as a professional in Washington in 2008 and moved to Scottsdale in 2015. Her business touches on a little of everything, from coaching youth riders to training and showing aged-event horses to managing a breeding program.

**Longest customer:** One since 2009, and another since 2010, and now with her first mother/daughter combination.



**Name:** Shane Brown, Elbert, Colorado

**Career and business:** Brown's primary focus lies in coaching non pro riders on all levels—from elite to beginner—and was named the 2014 NRHA Non Pro Coach of the Year. You'll also see him in the aged events and as an active participant in the governance

of NRHA by serving on committees and the NRHA Executive Committee as Director-at-Large.

**Longest customer:** Still has his first full-time/lesson customer since he went out on his own 30 years ago.



*Your location and facilities can have a big influence on customer retention. Focusing on keeping your place well maintained and able to cater to customers in your area makes people feel comfortable and want to stay with your program.*

**Key #3: Practice Honesty** “Even when it hurts a little, honesty is the biggest thing,” Brown asserted. “You have to be honest, even if they don’t want to know the answer. Maybe the horse they bought isn’t the caliber they’d hoped, or the horse isn’t ready to go to a major event. It’s hard to say no, and I’m not always good at it, but when it comes to what matters and doing right by the horse, it’s essential.”

Brown says this is especially true when buying and selling horses, which can play a major role in establishing your credibility.

“Be honest about a horse’s abilities,” he said. “I’ve seen buyers with a lower budget rush to buy something that won’t make them happy in the long run. I’ve also seen buyers with endless budgets buy more horse than they can handle. Neither customer will be happy in either of those cases. Getting the right horse and being honest about it is a win-win that keeps customers around and allows them to trust you.”

#### **Key #4: Treat Everyone Equally**

“We treat all our owners the same,” Hanson shared. “Whether they spend a certain amount on a weekend-type horse or a little more on a more competitive horse, everyone gets the same treatment in our barn.”

A feel of equality builds community and can also help keep dreaded barn drama in check.

“We try to make our barn environment one that supports everyone equally,” Brown said. “We discourage—and don’t really allow—drama. All the youth riders are expected to pitch in, practice, clean stalls, and participate in their horses’ care on the same level. All the owners and non pros receive the same level of customer service.”

#### **Key #5: Location**

Hanson’s business has been established in one location more than 20 years, making his barn a reliable stalwart in the Northern California horse community.

“We’re established and have created a reputation based on longevity in our location,” he shared. “We also have a strong affiliate in Northern California, which means we have great, fun local shows, and that’s what many of our customers are looking for. Additionally, most of my clients live fairly close, so many are at the barn at least once a week. Frequency of coming out and seeing the facility and horses in good condition is important.” →

For Klingenberg, moving to Scottsdale from Washington put her smack in a reining hotspot. The range of her career means her customers visit the barn at varying intervals, depending if they live close or are snowbirds, and the location allows her to successfully conduct all facets of her business.

### **Key #6: Consistent Level of Service**

“I grew up showing Arabs, and that’s all about customer service,” Klingenberg shared. “That taught me to keep my business as organized as possible in terms of using my time and their time wisely and efficiently. We make time for socialization and going to dinner so we can all enjoy time together, but my job is to ensure that their horses are prepared for them to go show and

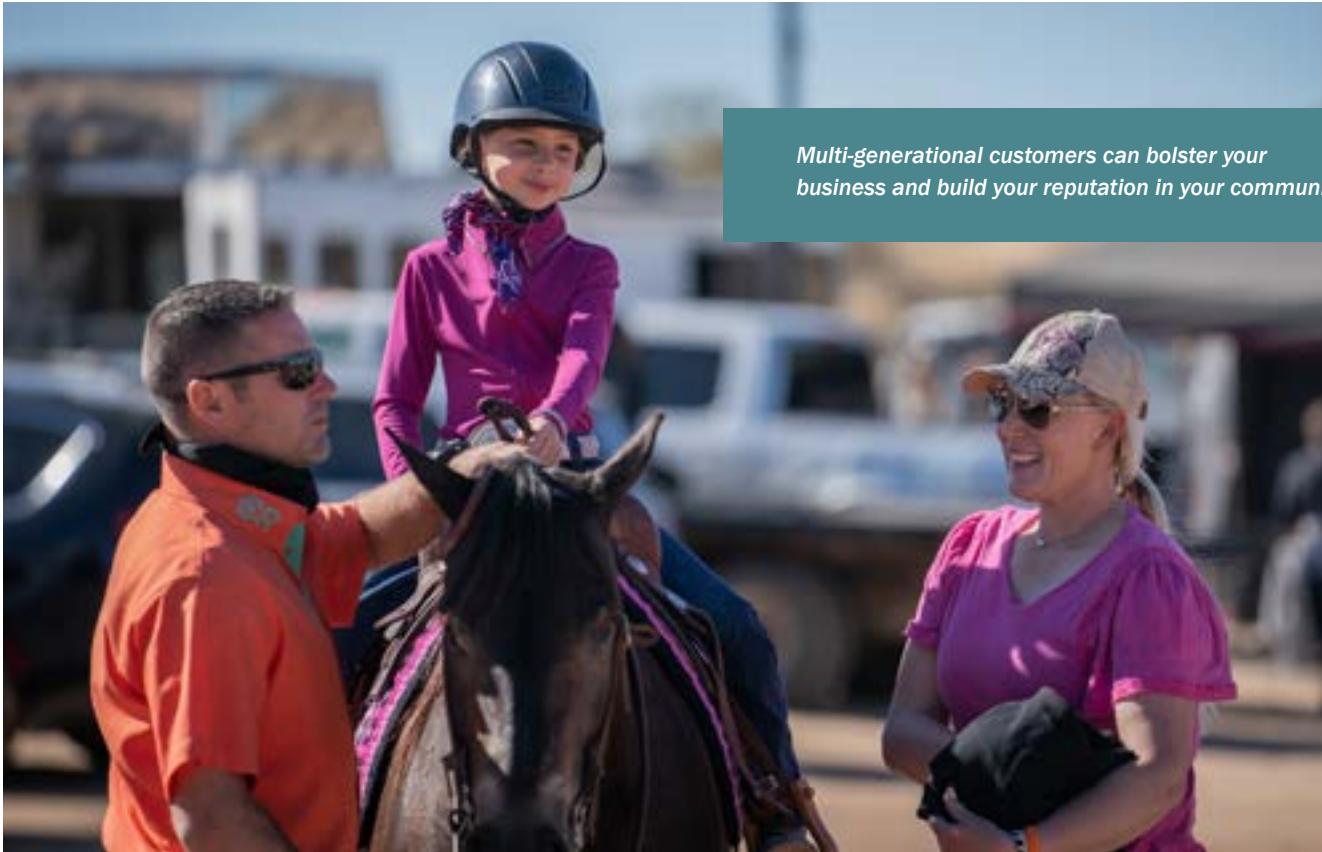
achieve their goals.”

Hanson said that also means offering opportunities to compete that make sense for each horse and rider.

“We try not to fill the calendar too much,” he said. “We like to go to shows throughout the entire year on the West Coast, which usually means a show a month. It keeps expenses manageable for my customers, keeps their horses happy, and allows the shows to be fun.”

### **Key #7: Recognize Opportunities**

It’s not uncommon for a client roster to include multiple generations of a single family. Maybe grandma started with you as an owner, her daughter comes to you as a non pro, and her child joins your program as a youth



*Multi-generational customers can bolster your business and build your reputation in your community.*



*Catering to your clientele's goals allows you to focus your business and provide top-notch service.*

competitor. Recognizing these opportunities, and encouraging your customers to make horses a family hobby, can be a boon for your business. All three pros here have several multi-generational customers.

Additionally, long-term customers might allow you to expand your business in ways you might not have expected. Klingenberg's breeding operation came from having a long-standing relationship with a customer who wanted to expand her involvement in reining to include owning a breeding stud, which Klingenberg now manages.

"It's a huge undertaking, but having a great relationship with the stud's owner makes it work," Klingenberg said. "Not everyone is into breeding, but she's very passionate about it. It's added more dimensions to our relationship and has helped it grow to new levels—from breeding, to raising foals, to training them and selling them."

### **Key #8: Know When to Let Go**

"Sometimes it just doesn't work," Klingenberg admits. "Sometimes personalities just don't click, or your teaching style and their learning style don't work together. It's hard, because this hobby and business are built around passion, but you have to treat it like a business transaction when an owner or rider doesn't fit your program and leaves for another. I've fought to keep relationships going longer than they should, even though it creates havoc in my life. I didn't want to feel like a quitter. But I had to learn that sometimes things don't work out, and that's fine."

"People come and go for a variety of reasons—personal, social, whatever," Hanson added. "Be confident in the service you provide, and stay dedicated and committed to what you do well. When it fits the right person, it's successful. But realize that personalities sometimes don't match, and that's OK." ■



*The endless responsibilities of owning your own training business can leave you feeling empty and alone. Prioritize your mental health so you can keep pursuing your passion.*

# *Prioritize Your* **MENTAL HEALTH**

YOUR OWN HEALTH CAN FIND ITSELF AT THE BOTTOM OF YOUR TO-DO LIST, BUT FOR A SUCCESSFUL BUSINESS AND A HAPPY LIFE, IT HAS TO WORK ITS WAY UP TO SOMETHING YOU PRIORITIZE.

**BY JENNIFER PAULSON**

It's no secret that being an NRHA Professional can be a 24/7 job. High-level performance horses require constant attention. Customers of all budgets expect your expert care for their animals. Staying at the top of your competitive game doesn't happen without extra effort. And let's not forget the time required to maintain a property and market yourself to acquire new customers. All of these factors can lead you to feeling burnt out. But more than that, they can take a toll on your physical and mental health, which can test your personal relationships and your ability to perform at your chosen career. Carving out time to care for yourself and meet your own needs might seem impossible in your current framework, but you're not alone. Small business owners and operators from all sectors face the same challenges. We did some digging

outside the horse industry to find insights and tips that you can apply in your own business to help you care for your health and help your relationships prosper, even under the stress of being a successful NRHA Professional.

## **The Reality of Mental Health**

In March 2020, small-business owners faced unprecedented uncertainty. In the Western performance industry, professionals feared owners would take their horses out of full-time training and care due to the cancellation of events and tightening of belts. The intensity and uncertainty caused stress and anxiety, but it wasn't the first time NRHA Professionals faced those hurdles in their professional careers.

Being a reining professional is a high-profile endeavor, with many people looking up to you,

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valuing your advice and insight, and relying on you for your expertise. While it's a celebrated position in the industry, the day-to-day of owning your own business and attempting to achieve in the arena can lead to anxiety, stress, and depression. Mental health plays a huge role in your success in and out of the arena, which is why it needs to be near the top of your list of priorities instead of languishing near the bottom in the "I'll Get to It Someday" category, or even being forgotten altogether.

Here we'll arm you with strategies to create time to focus on your own well-being, even if just for five minutes at a time. As you start to create these short segments focusing on yourself, you'll see results and learn that taking care of yourself is just as important as finding the next customer or winning a big event.

### **Find Exercise...That Isn't Horse-Related**

Every person who's actively involved with the care and riding of their horses knows how much physical effort is involved. While that's great for your metabolism and ability to burn fat and calories, it's just part of the everyday requirement of your job. That means it also could be one of the things causing your stress and anxiety.

Finding a form of exercise that you enjoy—or one that at least gives you a release—helps burn off tension. Running, cycling, lifting weights, etc. all give you an opportunity to focus on something other than your business, and the physicality lets you work out your emotions and relieves stress. Additionally, you might find the endorphin release offers a calming effect or even motivates you to push farther.

When you begin, start small. Commit 15 to 20 minutes a day to your new focus on physical activity. Can you wake up 15 or 20 minutes earlier than usual? Carve out time midday? Or maybe you'll find it's best to end your day with a short



*Create time for your family, whether around horses or in other parts of your daily life, to maintain connections, build strong relationships, and develop a support system that fills your tank and makes you ready to push toward the next goal.*

time to focus on yourself. Once you get started, you'll find it's easier to add 5 minutes by cutting out other unnecessary elements of your day, such as mindlessly scrolling social media.

### **Create Boundaries**

It can be hard to put up walls where once there wasn't any separation. Your customers become comfortable with calling and texting at all hours because you answer. They expect ultimate flexibility for their lessons because you squeeze them in over and over to accommodate their schedules. You become their de facto therapist because they unload their family and work issues on you, and you listen.

Those types of situations don't serve your mental health. In fact, they add more burden for you to bear and don't allow time for you to recharge to give your business—and personal life—the attention it needs.

Just as with exercise, start small. When an "emotional vampire" (someone known to emotionally unload on you) starts on a rant, find a way out. Ask an employee or your partner to

text or call you requesting help with a fictional problem, or create your own exit, and politely excuse yourself. Set days and blocks of time for things like lessons, answering phone calls and texts from customers, and other things that can eat up your time without adding to your productivity.

Further your boundary-setting by designating days when you'll be "out of commission." For example, the 48 hours after you return from a show become "non-contact" days. Sometimes it's helpful to have your partner involved in this endeavor and enforce it.

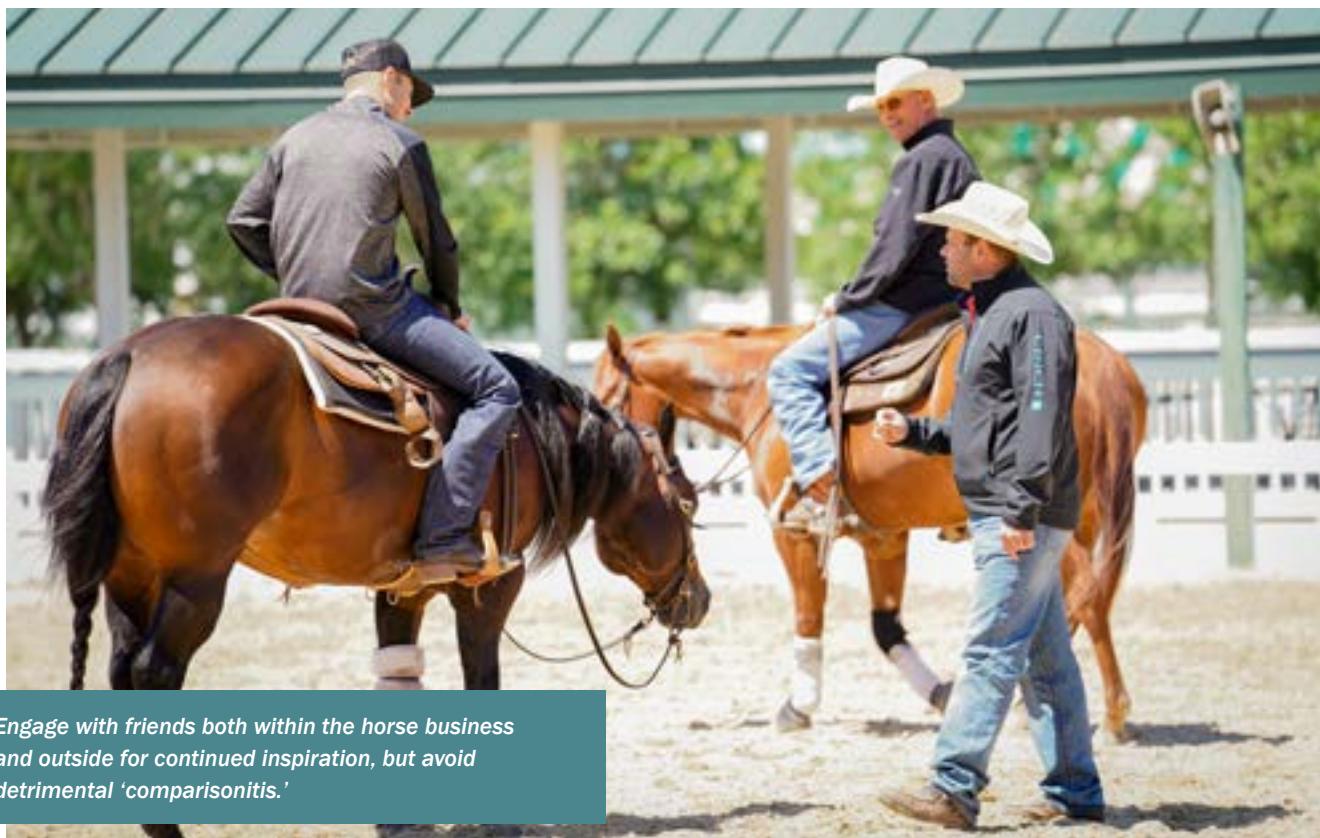
You deserve to have a life outside your career just as much as your customers expect to have in their own lives. Set the boundaries to make it possible.

### **Ditch 'Comparisonitis'**

As a successful NRHA Professional, you're

competitive by nature. Your "achiever" mentality might lead you to endlessly compare your business, your success, and your lifestyle to your peers'. While learning from others in similar situations can be helpful on your path to success, constantly comparing your situation to another's can cause unnecessary stress and anxiety.

Part of eliminating "comparisonitis" involves developing an attitude of gratitude. It sounds cheesy, but being grateful for every victory—no matter how big or small—and for all the things you love about your lifestyle can help minimize the tendency to try to measure up. One way to embrace this idea is to start a gratitude journal. Take time each night to write out five things you were grateful for that day. It can be a simple list or involve more writing, if you find it's an exercise you enjoy doing. →



*Engage with friends both within the horse business and outside for continued inspiration, but avoid detrimental 'comparisonitis.'*

PHOTO BY JENNIFER PAULSON

## Common Signs of Mental Health Issues

Recognize these signs—or an increase in these feelings—to identify when you might not be taking care of your mental well-being.

- Lack of focus
- Feeling overly tired
- Substantial mood swings—sadness or anger
- Irritability
- Focusing on worries
- Feeling overwhelmed and unhappy
- Substance abuse
- Isolating yourself
- Inability to make decisions
- Losing interest in hobbies
- Difficulty sleeping

### Reduce Social Media Exposure

Social media is likely a large portion of your marketing effort, whether you do it yourself or hire it out. However, endlessly scrolling Facebook, Instagram, and other social media can wear on your mental health. If you can't resist taking a break or limiting your exposure, at least remember that social media is a highlight reel. Everyone has highs and lows, good times and hard times, victories and struggles. Behind every "highlight" lies at least one struggle that the person won't share publicly, whether it's on their personal or business page.

Most of all, think about the time you could be doing things to enhance your mental health instead of getting bogged down in likes, comments, and retweets. Your phone probably has a function that shows how much screen time you have each week. Be mindful when it increases. Consider what led to that uptick, and did it benefit you in any way?

### Don't Forget Friends and Family

Horse-show life doesn't allow a lot of time for weekend BBQs or Sunday golf outings with friends. With most events running over weekends, free Saturdays and Sundays might be difficult to come by, but finding time to include friends and family in your life is an essential part of your mental health.

If horse-showing is a family affair for you, start mini traditions that focus on your partner and children. Dinners can be tough to schedule, so consider breakfast dates with your family MVPs. When you're at home, make yourself available to go watch baseball or gymnastics practice. You might not be able to commit to being the head coach or even attending every game, but you can show support in other ways.

Seeing and connecting with friends at horse shows is as easy as a trip through the barns or around the warm-up arena. However, nurturing

friendships outside the horse world is valuable, too. Getting away from the stress of your day-to-day activities and interacting with people who work in different fields can be an excellent release, a way to share concerns about your business that you can't share with your staff or customers, and a way to learn from others.

### Consider Your Diet

In a fast-paced industry that can also involve a lot of hurry-up-and-wait, it can be difficult to adhere to a strict diet of nutritious foods. But you can make easy decisions that contribute to a healthier lifestyle and can help with your mental status. You wouldn't skimp on your high-performing horse's diet, so why should you on your own? Remember: garbage in, garbage out. Additionally, drink plenty of water! Hydration is a huge contributor to how your body operates, especially under stress.

### Share Your Habits

Your employees learn from how you work—and how you care for yourself. Extend your mental-health philosophy to your entire staff to keep them engaged, interested, and putting their best effort into your business. A team that cares for itself achieves beyond expectations. ■

# NRHA Professional Code of Ethics

We, the members of the National Reining Horse Association Professionals, in carrying out our role of providing service to the reining horse industry, recognize the need to do so in a professional manner, and to represent the sport of reining in a professional manner with the highest degree of integrity.

Therefore, we have set forth the following code of ethics, which shall govern our endeavors in the industry. By signing this application, I agree to be bound by the rules of the NRHA Professional Code of Ethics. To participate in this program, I concede to maintaining a continuous individual membership with NRHA.

As a member of the NRHA Professionals, I will:

- Adhere to the professional standards of the NRHA and work to further its goals and objectives.
- Ensure that the welfare of the reining horse is paramount and that every horse shall always be treated humanely and with dignity, respect, and compassion, regardless if the horse does not reside under my direct supervision.
- Positively influence all members to refrain from any perceived misconduct or inappropriate actions towards either horses or other members.
- Conduct my affairs in the sport of reining with integrity, sincerity, and accuracy in an honest, transparent, and forthright manner.
- Act with integrity in my dealings with reining clients, other NRHA members, and the public when representing the sport of reining. In this regard, any horse shown by my spouse, client, or child will be economically owned as prescribed by applicable NRHA rules.
- Handle my reining horse business, operations, and communications (including those through social media) in a manner, which promotes a positive image of the reining horse industry.

- To fully disclose to customers the actual sales price and commissions involved in the sale or purchase of a horse.
- To not charge or receive a monetary commission, or other remuneration constituting a commission, from both buyer and seller of a horse.
- Model the proper ideals of positive sportsmanship and fair competition, and show cordial courtesy to fellow competitors, members, and Judges.

The Professional Code of Ethics is intended as a general guideline for reining professionals' behavior and is not intended to be an exhaustive list of conduct for NRHA Professionals. NRHA Professionals' conduct is also governed by NRHA Rules. This Code is intended, however, to state basic standards, which should govern the conduct of all professionals and to provide guidance to assist professionals in establishing and maintaining high standards of conduct within the reining horse industry.

This Code of Ethics generally identifies the ethical obligations of NRHA Professionals and does not substitute for, nor is it intended to substitute for, or in any way alter or modify the NRHA rules.

*The members of the NRHA Professionals Committee created the NRHA Professional Code of Ethics to further promote the humane treatment of reining horses and ethical business practices. If you have questions regarding this code, please reach out to Sara Honegger at [shonegger@nrha.com](mailto:shonegger@nrha.com).*



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