

OUTSIDE THE BOX

by Tom Field, University of Nebraska – Lincoln

Field of Dreams

Understanding, attracting and growing customer relationships should occur early in the process of business development.

W.P. Kinsella’s epic “Shoeless Joe” adapted into the film “Field of Dreams” has been credited as the inspiration for many entrepreneurial ventures. Specifically, the mystical line “Build it and he will come” (frequently misquoted as “Build it and they will come”) has been misinterpreted to suggest that the entrepreneur’s imagination and passion is sufficient to attract market interest. Unfortunately, the story of Ray Kinsella’s quest to build a baseball diamond in his cornfield misses the mark as a treatise on effective marketing. The problem arises when we get confused about the differences between enterprise and hobby.

A hobby requires no customers to be successful. An enterprise depends on the ability to attract and satisfy clients. It is not enough to find customers — the key is to serve the right customers. Grandmother’s homespun wisdom was correct, “You can’t please everybody!” We want customers who are loyal, who will tell others positive stories about what we do and with whom we share a sense of community.

Certainly enterprises with staying power offer processes, products and services that are remarkable, memorable and even transformational for their customers. However, before they start building

they have invested considerable energy and time in understanding the challenges and problems faced by a well-defined set of customers. Understanding, attracting and growing a relationship with customers should occur early in the process of business development.

A beef industry rule of thumb is that the average seedstock venture has an effective lifespan of less than 7 years. At the heart of this poor rate of sustainability is a failure to identify and connect with a specific customer base. Regardless of business sector, when the entrepreneur builds without client engagement, success in the marketplace is highly unlikely.


Connecting with customers

Gaining market traction involves focusing on a relatively small group of potential customers or users. Conventional thinking suggests that we should reach the maximum number of people with highly repeated messaging across a number of communication channels. However, such an approach simply contributes to the “noise” which almost certainly assures that our message never gains traction. Furthermore, the blast ’em approach ignores Grandma’s sage advice.

Marketing thought-leader Seth Godin advocates that our

most powerful tool to connect to customers is to create tribes — communities that are comprised of “people like us who do things like us.” Based on his advice, the first goal of the seedstock supplier is to win the business of those closest. The first wave of customers can be reached by pounding the pavement, knocking on doors, making personal phone calls and writing letters. Personal attention focused on human-to-human interaction is the best way to break through the deafening noise.

A word of caution to those enterprises who have won the battle for local market share and are seeking to grow — momentum can be lost when business leaders are lured into the siren’s song of maximizing growth and chasing the metrics of more. The mass market mentality is not one of distinction, but rather yields the slow slide into a commodity mindset. Once the edge is lost and the offering has become commonplace, the advantage shifts to the more focused competitor.

If we want to build and sustain a field of dreams then we must invite a tribe to help us imagine, create and ultimately play upon it. 

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