

OUTSIDE THE BOX



by Tom Field, University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Lessons from the parade ground

History resonated across the quad from the chapel to the barracks and beyond as dusk enveloped the War Memorial. The quiet and solitude of evening highlighted the reverence for the sacrifice of those who had given their lives for the principles of honor, duty and respect.

One-hundred and seventy-five years of service have found The Citadel often at the crossroads of history. The chaos borne of human conflict shaped its history, much like its host city, Charleston, S.C. Yet, The Citadel stood resolute. How had this remarkable institution traversed the changing landscape?

“Understanding their sacrifice requires some understanding of The Citadel. It is not for everyone, as anyone who has matriculated here will attest. Men and women come here for various reasons, but they expect to be challenged, to be instructed, perhaps inspired, and be tempered as the leaders demanded by an increasingly complex world. The Citadel experience ... molds and shapes us in ways the traditional colleges and universities would not.”

Without hesitation or apology, the leaders of The Citadel purposefully chose to be distinct defining what they were and what they were not. This clarity provided the landmarks that had conserved its capacity to serve society for nearly two centuries.

Four lessons

Cattle breeders and business leaders can harvest four primary lessons from this story.

1. Clarify and stay true to your core purpose and mission.
2. Be distinct and clear as to the value proposition.
3. Reject the commodity mindset.
4. Embrace a smaller, more defined customer base.

In the face of a world defined by noise and confusion, many hope success comes from being somewhat attractive to a large market, as opposed to being indispensable to a clearly defined smaller market segment. The “everything to everyone” approach sets the table for mediocrity and assures impact will slowly decline.

There is a better way but it is an arduous path; design the business or breeding program purposefully. The heart of purpose is defined not by what we do but why. Comprehending the underlying motivation provides organizational momentum and drives people forward in both times of ease and challenge.

Those businesses with a precisely defined value proposition have a substantially better chance of building loyalty. Generic commodity-based approaches are only successful when the supplier can provide massive scale of production and distribution.

However, a strong value proposition offered in a vacuum is barren. Embracing a clearly defined slice of the potential market is essential to attract and retain the right customers. Assuring appropriate client-product fit is the magnetic force sustaining customer loyalty and thus recurrent revenue.

One question remains: How will you conduct business? An enterprise is doomed without an intentional, values-based approach to the fundamental principles guiding behaviors and decisions.

“When we leave, we lean on that experience ... to navigate life’s rougher shoal, its sudden dips and curves. And we lean on it to rise, to excel, to lead.” The Citadel reminds us that legacies are always built on solid ground.

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