

# OUTSIDE THE BOX

by Tom Field, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

## Who's Your Customer?

*"It is not your customer's job to remember you, it is your obligation and responsibility to make sure they don't have the chance to forget you." — Patricia Fripp*

If we as business leaders take Fripp's admonishment to heart, there are a whole series of questions that ought to keep us awake at night:

- How do my current customers perceive my company and their experiences with my organization?
- What do they require from me to retain and even grow our business relationship?
- Do I understand their plans, concerns, problems and needs?
- Who will be my customers in the future, and how will they be different from my current clients?
- If I quit tomorrow, would anyone miss my offering?

The path to a restful sleep lies in developing a robust and intentional process to deepen knowledge about current and future customers, as well as an action plan to assure our enterprise is delivering memorable products and services.

The first step is to confront the assumptions that underpin what we think we know about our customers. The venerable Mark Twain reminds

us, "It ain't what you don't know that gets you into trouble. It's what you know for sure that just ain't so."

Beyond a mailing list of names and contact information and perhaps a list of buyers and their purchases,

Knowing and serving today's customer will largely determine today's revenue. However, tomorrow's revenue relies on solving problems for the next generation of customers.

what do you know about your current clients and those you are striving to reach? Are they planning to increase herd size? How long

will they be in business? Do they have a successor? What are their goals and aspirations? What worries them? Why are they involved in the beef business? When's the last time you had a discussion or made a visit to their place of business?

Developing customer relationships requires heavy lifting, and the process may make us uncomfortable as we learn new skills and implement unfamiliar processes. However, the task is more palatable when we remind ourselves that paying customers are what differentiates an enterprise from a hobby. Motivation rises further when we acknowledge our competitors are busting their

tails to capture market share.

Knowing and serving today's customer will largely determine today's revenue. However, tomorrow's revenue relies on solving problems for the next generation of customers. The key is uncovering unmet needs and designing products and services to fill the gap.

For example, Amazon was so focused on the customer experience that it put the squeeze on vendors, ultimately alienating those who actually created the products Amazon's customers wanted to access. That mistake allowed Shopify to bring online marketing tools to vendors that allowed them to bypass the need for Amazon's endorsement.

So how do we learn about today's customers as well as those in the future? In a recent Harvard Business Review, Barsoux and colleagues suggest four perspectives or lenses through which to better understand the unmet needs of customers:

Microscope — zoom in closely on the experience of current customers.

Panorama — focus broadly on the mainstream customer using aggregated data such as errors, complaints, compliments and referrals.

Telescope — focus closely on

those users outside the core customer base, fringe users, extreme users and nonusers.

Kaleidoscope — focus broadly on users outside the core customer; challenge assumptions and beyond the list of usual suspects.

Peering through these four lenses has value for every single business leader regardless of the size, scope and maturity of their enterprise.

The key is to explore and understand the user's experience. That means lots of listening, observing and following up with people. The microscopic and panoramic views use both deep user

interaction and analysis of current data to uncover opportunities with current customers or those most likely to become customers.

The telescope perspective sheds light on new opportunities to serve a very specific client who has unique needs. For example, those customers who do not retain replacements or who own cattle only as a secondary source of income. The kaleidoscope helps to uncover the unmet needs of an entirely new set of customers that opens the door to use our resources and talents to move into a new entrepreneurial realm. For example, the quality of facilities and setting may provide an opportunity to grow

an experience-based enterprise; or capabilities in data management may lead to a new service others will gladly pay to access.

Understanding and serving a specific set of customers assures we won't be forgotten in the short term. Developing an ongoing interactive relationship that allows for anticipating customer needs assures relevance over the long haul. **AJ**

*Editor's note: Tom Field is a rancher from Parlin, Colo., and the director of the Engler Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Program at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.*

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ABB February	Jan 3	Jan 10	Feb 15-20	March
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