

OUTSIDE THE BOX

by Tom Field, University of Nebraska – Lincoln

Customers: You Gotta Love 'Em!

My mother ran a wonderful children's store in our hometown for 27 years, during which time she was focused on delighting children. She loved kids and their families — she didn't try to be everything to everyone — she was laser-focused on a very specific consumer.

She knew that casting a net to capture every possible customer or client is costly, unfocused, and ultimately a source of frustration. She sought and served customers who wanted to spark imagination, curiosity, confidence and joy.

Not long ago, one of her longtime customers shared her appreciation — “What your mom did with that store was to make so many great memories for kids and families in our valley — without her, many children would have missed out on experiences that lifted them up.”

Her compliment has triggered me to wonder how the customers of our ranch might view the impact of our business. Our feeder cattle have sold to repeat buyers so we assume they are performing within the customers' expectations. I'd like to know the experience that pen riders, processing crews, and yard managers have with our cattle. I hope they experience the benefits of our stockmanship, health program, and genetic selection.

One of the frustrations of a commodity industry is that those conversations are difficult to facilitate. However, I wonder if it's just a convenient excuse?

Final stop

What about the final customer — those people both domestically and internationally, who consume the beef that began its journey on our little piece of heaven in the high country of Colorado — what do they experience? Our goal is to be part of the team that creates nourishment but more importantly that the burgers, fajitas, steaks, prime rib, briskets, and variety meats from our cattle are part of celebrations, family dinners, special nights out, backyard barbecues, tailgate parties, and business lunches that enhance life.

I find the ranching experience more satisfying when I think about those we serve and aspire an opportunity to connect to a more defined customer base. However, until we find that opportunity, I pause to watch people enjoying a beef meal in a host of environments and ask myself, “Did that product come from cattle we cared for and nurtured on our ranch?” And then I ask myself the most important question of all — did we do everything in our power to help create a product that uplifts that person who has chosen beef as part of their meal? Did we earn their business?

To be fair, serving customers is not all sunshine and roses. In fact, there are potential customers we don't want to serve. Wait a minute, you might ask; “I need every customer I can find, I would love it if everyone was my customer!”

Do you want customers who pay late or default on their obligations? Do you want customers who misuse your product or service and in the process damage your reputation? Do you want customers who are driven only by finding the cheapest price? Do you want customers who are unnecessarily harsh or rude with your employees? We don't want all the customers, we want the right ones.

In a chaotic world, it is all too easy to get caught up in trying to be everything to everyone. However, by developing a deep understanding of a well-defined customer base and aligning our product and processes with their needs and desires, we can find not only profitability but also find fulfillment. **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.