

# OUTSIDE THE BOX

by Tom Field, University of Nebraska – Lincoln

## The Target

*Learn how to navigate your relationship with target customers.*

Pat was a big, strong mountain-raised high school center. On the opening jump ball, he leaped skyward and hit the basketball so hard it sailed to the backboard and dropped through the hoop. It was an amazing feat, and it would have been even more amazing had it counted for our team. Unfortunately, he had hit the opponent's target.

Can the same mistake be made in business? The answer: a resounding “yes!” How often do we lead with solutions based on the assumption we know what the customer wants? It is quite possible to design a solution that is ingenious and innovative, but that never gains traction in the marketplace.

As a case in point, a design team was handed the challenge of finding a way to provide affordable power to a well pump in a developing country where electricity was not available. The team developed a merry-go-round with the assumption kid power would spin the device that would mechanically pull water to the surface. For a few days, it worked, but then the kids got bored. Alas, it was a workable solution rejected by the people it was designed to serve.

Knowing the target's location does not ensure there is a straightforward means to hit it. *The 33* — a movie that portrays the story of Chilean

miners who were entombed as the result of a mine collapse — contains a scene where engineers in charge of the rescue are ready to give up because they can't get their drill to hit the cavern where the men have taken refuge. The rock is so dense the drill deviates from its true course.

Ultimately, one of the engineers has the insight to ask the question: “What if we aim to miss?” Using the new paradigm, a path to freedom was ultimately created.

The point of these three stories:

- It is possible to hit the wrong target.
- Solutions don't always gain traction with the target customer.
- The path to the target is not always a straight line or the shortest distance between two points.

### Eying up the target

There is much to be gained from these three lessons for cattle breeders. First, carefully define and understand the target(s) while considering the consequences. Do the points count for or against your team in the long run? Is the target stable or likely to change? What factors and influences will shape and define the target? What rewards are associated with hitting the target?

What about the penalties that arise when you miss? Are there multiple targets? If so, what patterns emerge when all of the aforementioned inquiries are directed at each of the targets that may be important for you to consider?

Know thy customer is Rule No. 2. Ready-made solutions created with a spirit of goodwill — but based on incorrect assumptions about customer behavior and needs — will ultimately fail.

As the industry evolves into the concept of specific supply-chain alignment, both product-specific and management-specific demands related to sustainability, animal well-being and other social issues will emerge. Understanding direct and downstream customers will become more important.

Finally, the straight line is not always the correct path. Hitting the target can be accomplished from a variety of angles, perspectives and methodologies. Applying creativity, seeing the same problem with new eyes and embracing the vision of the explorer will define those who prosper.

Ready, aim, fire! **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.*