

# OUTSIDE THE BOX

by Tom Field, University of Nebraska–Lincoln

## The Road to Profit

*Twenty-three conversations with entrepreneurs in four days and more than 1,000 miles on a bus — TREK is the most intense learning experience the Engler Program offers its students.*

We met former elementary school teachers running robotics companies, a business leader who had been the No. 1 salesman for Tiffany's in New York and now in transportation logistics, innovators tackling irrigation problems, serial entrepreneurs transforming small-town business districts, agricultural producers developing new markets, visionaries bringing high-speed connectivity to rural places, a feedlot owner who had left the Atlantic coast because he loved ranching, and a soap maker who started in his dorm room and is now running a multimillion-dollar company.

Andrew Vrbas, the founder of Pacha Soap, reminded us that after traveling the globe in search of a system to create not only a profitable business but one that would be intentional in its influence, he had concluded free enterprise was indeed the tool and advancing its role was a great and noble cause worthy of a person's life work.

Common to every one of those rural-based enterprises was a founder who understood purposeful action would be required. Each possessed the quiet courage required to take the first step and the next and the next. In every case, continuous

learning was emphasized across their organizations. What was surprising is how many of the founders had built companies that delivered products and services outside their area of expertise at the beginning of the journey. The message — don't let what you don't know today get in the way.

Each enterprise was built to meet a need and serve a defined set of customers. Furthermore, rural entrepreneurs rarely stopped with the creation of one business.


Most had multiple ventures often created because they had uncovered a problem in their core enterprise. Rather than living with it or hoping someone else would create a solution, they put farmer ingenuity to work and solved the puzzle.

A common thread always stitched into the framework was love — a love born of dedication to community and commitment to family, faith and team members, fueled by the belief that making conditions better is always effective due to local action inspired by the private sector.

Finally, while each leader was actively seeking the creation of wealth, they were also dedicated to working with partners to invest in strengthening their communities.

Those days on the road reignited hope, offered encouragement to the next generation and strengthened our resolve that the forces seeking to quench the spirit of entrepreneurship, will not be victorious.

Mile after mile, community after community and business after business, the map of true prosperity emerged — not a series of straight lines but rather a set of guideposts, lighthouses and landmarks. The travelers on that map are not superhuman, trained in some deep and mysterious techno-wizardry nor enabled by a family fortune.

Rather they are engaged citizens, gritty by nature and brave enough to live the ethos described in Ayn Rand's classic, *Atlas Shrugged*, "Do not let your fire go out, spark by irreplaceable spark, in the hopeless swamps of the not-quite, the not-yet and the not-at-all. Do not let the hero in your soul perish in lonely frustration ... the world you desire can be won. It exists — it is real — it is possible." 

*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.*