



Outside the Box

► by Tom Field, professor of animal science, Colorado State University

Brands are dead

“Riding for the brand” is one of the foundational tenets of cowboy philosophy. The concept of loyalty to the employer was fundamental to the success of a ranch under open range conditions. Riding for the brand was, however, much more than a business principle — it was a statement of honor. Many of us have spent our lives confident in the belief that a sure sign of a person’s worth was his or her ability to ride for the brand.

The age is over

You can imagine the shock when I read “Brands are dead!” I couldn’t believe my eyes. Tom Peters, the management architect who had convinced me years ago that the only solution to long-term prosperity was to create unique-attribute brand identity, was now declaring the age of branding kaput, done, finished.

According to Kevin Roberts in the must-read work *Lovemarks: The Future Beyond Brands*, our traditional view of brands has lost its luster as the result of six factors:

1. overuse;
2. lack of mystery;
3. failure to engage the new consumer;
4. competition making it difficult to gain and hold brand loyalty;
5. brand initiatives too dependent on recipe approaches; and
6. the steady slide into risk-avoidance dulling brand efforts into the blandness of commodity approaches.

A different approach

Agriculture has traditionally dealt in the commodity marketplace, where products might be categorized by grades, but where there is basically little differentiation in the product from one farm to the next. The launch of the *Certified Angus Beef®* (CAB®) brand provided the impetus for the beef industry’s transition into the world of branded programs. But, as is typically the case, agricultural marketing lags behind the other major industries.

If Peters and Roberts are correct, then it is absolutely critical for the beef industry and the multitude of participating enterprises to begin considering a different approach to marketing.

Consider the seedstock industry. If we accept the premise that the fundamental product sold by breeders is genetic merit, doesn’t it follow that in the age of artificial insemination (AI) and embryo transfer (ET),

it is very difficult to create product differentiation on genetic merit alone?

Something else has to drive the decisions made by bull buyers — geographic proximity, guarantees, added services, brand awareness or reputation. Or, perhaps it all boils down to the quality of the relationship established between genetic providers and their clients. At the end of the day, is it possible that buyers make their choices based on emotions rather than logic? After all, when the product attributes alone are insufficient to connect to people’s needs, doesn’t it make sense that it would take some deeper connection to get bull buyers and beef consumers to move beyond the price tag in making a decision?

Incorporating love

Roberts advocates just such a case: “When I first suggested that love was the way to transform business, grown CEOs (chief executive officers) blushed and slid down behind annual accounts. But I kept at them. I knew it was love that was missing. I knew that love was the only way to ante up the emotional temperature and create the new kinds of relationships brands needed.” Roberts believes that the key to connecting with consumers is to move beyond brand image into what he calls the creation of “Lovemarks.”

A recent survey revealed that nearly 20% of Harley-Davidson motorcycle riders either had already or planned to tattoo the company’s logo on their own bodies. What is so special about the Harley product that people would integrate the logo into their own anatomy? I don’t think it is the product; I think it’s the mystery, the image and the experience associated with a Harley motorcycle that clinches the deal. In other words, according to Tom Peters, “If you can’t compete on ‘cost,’ then you are left with ‘cool.’”

For example, take a look at the marketing

of Oregon Country Beef. They move beyond the traditional approach of brand identity through logos to a more personal approach that captivates the consumer through the use of a vivid and stirring description of what their product represents: “Our product is more than beef — it’s the smell of sage after a summer thunderstorm, the cool shade of a Ponderosa Pine forest. It’s 80-year-old weathered hands saddling a horse in the Blue Mountains, the future of a 6-year-old in a one-room school on the High Desert. It’s a trout in a beaver-built pond, haystacks on an Aspen-framed meadow. It’s the hardy quail running to join the cattle for a meal, the welcome ring of a dinner bell at dusk.” Can you feel the product? What connects first — your head or your heart?

Necessary transformation

So maybe brands aren’t dead, but, rather, they are undergoing the necessary transformation into something more meaningful. The transformation requires us to do something that doesn’t always come easy to the world of business decisions and seedstock production — the emotional process of tapping into the dreams and aspirations of our customers. To be successful in the future it is becoming apparent that we will have to use more than our heads; we’ll have to use our hearts as well.

Just as the cowboys of old made “riding for the brand” an integral component of their personal code of honor, we, too, must look beyond the strategy, the protocols and the logic into the realm of legends to be able to create brands that are worth riding for.

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