



# Outside the Box

► by **Tom Field**, director of producer education, National Cattlemen's Beef Association

## Chandeliers and lights

*At the turn of the previous century, the manager of a shoe-manufacturing company wanted to expand sales. As he considered the available alternatives, the allure of Africa's scale and population size motivated him to send two sales representatives to scout for market opportunity. After waiting several months, the two reports arrived — the first stated that most of the people he had encountered did not wear shoes and, thus, the market opportunity was limited at best. However, the second report nearly glowed in its optimism, "glorious opportunity to be seized as no one here wears shoes."*

### Seeing opportunity

The ability to see opportunity where others view only a hopeless situation may be the defining characteristic of successful people and organizations. But how can individuals and enterprises increase the accuracy of finding opportunities in the midst of chaos?

The process begins with having the courage to ask difficult questions and to then have the discipline to discover the answers with the help of people both inside and outside the organization.

Management thought leader Tom Peters suggests that the brand equity of a person, group or organization must be capable of being defined in eight words or less. Understand that getting to eight words begins with a several-page description of the history, values, experiences and goals of an entity, which must then be boiled down to a page, then a paragraph and eventually to the core descriptors.

Peter's process goes one step further by forcing the organization's eight words to be compared against a list developed by clients, suppliers, employees and family members as a means to prevent self-delusion.

At a recent meeting, representatives of Costco, the fastest-growing membership warehouse in the country, described the traits

that allowed them to be successful. The leaders of the fifth-largest retailer in the U.S., who generate more than \$3 billion in meatcase and deli sales, defined their success characteristics as nimbleness and maintaining a rock-solid quality image.

Business professor Hau Lee from Stanford states, "We've discovered that those companies are great, not because they were focused on cost or flexibility or speed but because they have the ability to manage transitions — changing market conditions, evolving technology, different requirements as product moves through its life cycle. The companies that can adapt are the ones that will be here for the long term."

### Understanding the customer

Central to being adaptable and nimble is having a clear understanding of the customer. In *The Professional Service Firm*, Tom Peters describes clients as:

- a partner;
- someone who is in it for the long haul;
- a person/organization in whose future I have a big stake;
- someone with whom I have an emotional bond;
- the source of my reputation;
- someone who loses when I lose; and
- someone who wins when I win.

Client relationships are critical in healthy times and absolutely essential during economic stress. Cow-calf producers face a number of challenges in 2009, including the need to optimize reproduction as rising feed and input costs increase sensitivity to the "law of diminishing returns," identifying and adopting technologies with very distinct financial advantages, and dealing with limited labor availability, to name a few.

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In fact, a recent survey found that the No. 1 reason cow-calf producers have not adopted reproductive technologies such as artificial insemination (AI), pregnancy palpation and estrus synchronization is not cost, but rather time constraints coupled with insufficient labor resources. These challenges open the door for seedstock suppliers who provide

stress- and problem-free genetics that offer simplicity and peace of mind to buyers.

Staying in tune with the changing needs of existing and potential customers is not an easy task. It requires the investment of both time and energy in engaging them in meaningful and detailed conversations. History has proven that effective

communication is "easier said than done."

Take for example, the deacons of a little country church who informed their members that they wanted to spend part of the annual budget on the purchase of a chandelier for the foyer. Upon hearing of this plan, an elderly member of the church arranged to attend the next deacon's meeting where he promptly disagreed with the idea stating that, if a chandelier were purchased, no one in the congregation had sufficient education or experience to play it.

On the other hand, he was in favor of getting some new lights.

Current economic conditions demand that we all push a sharper pencil while seeking opportunities for improved cost efficiencies. Unfortunately, humans often react to stress by withdrawing from others or by limiting the scope of their communication. Resisting this temptation will enable the proactive manager to find opportunity by engaging in conversations with customers, suppliers and family members to find solutions so that the lights stay on now and in the future.

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