



Outside the Box

► by **Tom Field**, director of the Engler Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Program, University of Nebraska

The story

There is no more important task for a business organization than to craft a well-constructed story that resonates with potential clients — those folks who make purchasing decisions, as well as those who influence choices. The truth is the vast majority of us don't want to conduct business with a faceless entity. Rather, we want to interact with living, breathing people. (Remember the last time you got that automated voice when you dialed customer service?) Our story ultimately provides the pathway for customer engagement.

Marketing the story

Developing the story takes a serious investment of time and energy — creating the plot line, the cast of characters and the illustrations that bring it to life are all important steps in the process. The success of the story is measured by the response of the marketplace to its telling. Thus, both the story and the storyteller have an impact on buyer behavior.

Great stories told badly often fail, as do epic deliveries of weak plot lines. Long-term business relationships are created when customers, suppliers or partners trust the story and the storyteller, will testify to its veracity, and choose to become part of the story by adding their vision and successes to the tale.

Sales are driven by the degree to which customers believe a product or service aligns with their own needs, or, in other words, how well their story meshes with those of potential sellers. Repeat business is then driven by the degree to which the buyer found that the experience they were promised in the story turned out to be true. Therefore, developing customers for the long term requires that the story, and by association the storyteller, must answer several questions: Was it credible? Was it authentic? And were the needs of the buyer met in a fulfilling and positive manner? To assure success, then, means that we must carefully assess both the story and the storytellers.

Assessments

Let's start with the story. Assume that the prevailing themes of a seedstock enterprise's story are centered on trustworthy data, superior post-sale service and breeding-stock development under



commercial conditions. Buyers will test the credibility and authenticity of that story based on their experiences and interactions with that business in both direct and indirect ways.

For example, if a buyer passes several retail feed trucks driving up the farm lane on his or her way to evaluate bulls for the first time — they are likely to suspect the authenticity of at least part of the story. Likewise, if a buyer requests performance data on a set of bulls, but receives it in incomplete form or in a poorly presented fashion, then part of the story begins to lose credibility. Finally, if a bull fails to perform for a customer, but the promised customer service leaves the buyer unfulfilled, then trust is sure to erode. In short, if the story fails to live up to its promises, then the buyer is likely to remove himself from the cast!

Beyond the story, the storytellers inside your business and community will ultimately determine the limits of your marketing success. A common misconception is that business owners are the primary storytellers for an independent business and that for larger, multi-employee businesses, the role of storytelling is the domain of the sales force. Businesses have multiple storytellers — family members, employees, neighbors, customers, suppliers and even competitors.

Given this significant list of people who are

in position to tell an enterprise's story, it becomes clear that teaching the story beyond the ownership group and senior management is an important step. Left undone, the untrained storyteller — be it an uninformed employee or a family member who doesn't understand the business or its goals and objectives — may miss significant opportunities to advocate effectively with potential customers.

For instance, what happens when a customer drops by unexpectedly? When they encounter your son, daughter or spouse or perhaps the high school kid who works weekends, will that potential customer receive the story that you worked so hard to craft and have an experience that builds on the message you want to convey?

If you haven't invited your team into the story and the importance of its communication, then the likely answer is that your business will have missed an opportunity to create a connection with the client.

Don't ignore the importance of neighbors, suppliers and others in the community as potential effective storytellers for your business. Does the guy running the convenience store who gets lots of requests for directions to your farm or ranch advocate for you and provide a positive message? What about the banker, the county agent or the high school agriculture teacher?

We are surrounded by opportunities to build and share an engaging story and to invite others to advocate in both direct and indirect ways for the continued success of that story. Investing time and energy into both the story and the storytellers will reap rewards.

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