



Outside the Box

► by **Tom Field**, University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Selling solutions

Pulling into the parking lot, it is clear that we'll have a lot of company in the stands. A couple of hours to walk the pens one more time watching for any defects that have escaped attention, and then it's time to head inside. We find a seat off to the side with a clear sight line to the auctioneer, a marked sale book in hand to direct purchase decisions and then settle back to wait for the auction to begin.

Within minutes the environment will transform from contemplative to competitive, and by the end of the afternoon, a new set of sires will have been drafted. As the crowd drifts in, I consider why our family has chosen this seedstock supplier.

Principles of buying

Mostly, it's a matter of trust. Our relationship is formed around discussions about cattle and family — performance data, pedigrees, program philosophy and phenotype. They have been supportive of our kids and community. I see them in positions of leadership; but, more importantly, always ready to lend themselves in service to the beef industry. I am confident that in everything they are honest, that every weight and measurement is accurate, and that they have worked night and day to build great cattle.

Our sire search is a multistep process that begins in January with the first of two presale visits to see the bulls being developed for sale. In the initial walk-through — disposition and structural differences are noted, and, coupled with the early data, the sorting process begins. With each round of data, the list is refined. By the time sale day rolls around, we have winnowed the available bulls down to a set of cattle that meet our standards.

No emotional decisions, no getting caught up in the excitement of the auction — this isn't a day to buy bulls. Rather, it is a time to make rational choices as we are buying several calf crops, including the replacement females upon which we will depend for the success of our business. The problem we are solving on this day is not that we need more bulls, but rather that we need the data, confidence and support to make informed selection decisions to improve our products.

Successful selling of seedstock ultimately depends on the ability of the supplier to solve problems for their customers. A strong



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marketing effort is required to prepare to engage customers in the marketplace and involves developing a defined customer target while clearly understanding their values, expectations and needs. Marketing helps frame the solution that a product or service provides to customers. The foundation of a strong marketing plan is built on answers to the following questions:

- What do your customers want to buy?
- What are you selling?
- What gaps exist in the answers to the preceding questions?

What do your customers want to buy?

The obvious answer may not be the correct one — while a junior association member may be looking through a group of heifers — her goal is not just to purchase livestock. Instead, she is searching for a blue ribbon or a division champion or perhaps a vehicle to help her pay for college tuition. Her parents might be in search of an experience that teaches important life lessons or a means to interest her in the family business. Bull

buyers are not interested in taking home one more mouth to feed — they are searching for more revenue from the next calf crop, less stress at calving, more longevity in the cow herd or a host of other solutions. They might be motivated by something as ordinary as genetics that simply don't create any unpleasant surprises in their lives at prices they can afford.

What are you selling?

Again the obvious answer may be dodging the question. Great cattle, high performance, reputation seedstock are all descriptors that dominate advertising headlines

and text, but these don't get to the heart of the matter. What problems do my products and service solve? The key to longevity of a seedstock enterprise is to get beyond "I produce the kind of cattle I like" concept. Great seedstock enterprises are constantly reading the tea leaves to determine what will be required for success in the future for their customers while making effective use of available technologies and data to build solutions that will improve the odds of success for their customers.

The gap

The differences in the answers to the previous two questions will largely dictate success of an enterprise — whether it's software, shoes or seedstock is of little consequence. Success depends on the ability to solve problems and provide experiences that make life better for a customer.

Peter Drucker, one of the greatest business minds of our time, wrote, "The only valid definition of a successful business is a satisfied customer." Devoting resources to a better understanding of which customers you will serve and which problems your products and services will solve is foundational to long-term success.

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