



Outside the Box

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

Brand loyalty or barn blindness?

Loyalty, dedication and tenacity are among the human characteristics those of us in agriculture value most. "Riding for the brand" is more than an empty slogan in our world; it is a fundamental tenet of our way of life. However, brand loyalty means something different to consumers and creators of products.

Vulnerability

Consumers are recipients who simply want the products they buy to meet their expectations by performing at exacting standards. Those who create brand products have a very different role and responsibility. In essence, we can't allow ourselves the comfort of assuming that our customers love our products as much as we do.

There are dangers in every road we travel, and the hazards of brand loyalty chiefly lie in the chasm of complacency and the arrogance of the longtime front-runner. Complacency and arrogance ultimately make us barn blind, which certainly leads to a loss of market share and missed opportunities.

Products and organizations have highly predictable patterns of growth and maturation. The creative, market-changing idea creates a definitive competitive edge that is slowly worn down by a shifting mind-set that moves from relentlessly chasing excellence to protecting the lead or, worse yet, to believing that no one else could possibly compete.

Successful new organizations and brands win because they are fresh, exciting, and they fill a void in the market or create new opportunities for customers. Unfortunately, the sparkle tends to wear off as the process of formalization and structural complexity transforms the organization and its brand from revolutionarily cool to institutional in nature.

Trust

Kevin Roberts writes in *Lovemarks: The Future Beyond Brands* that most businesses are "determined to frame the world so it fits their own systems and processes. No wonder they find it tough to communicate with anyone, including their own people. They pump out specifications, details, and diagrams; define this benefit; delineate that target; and write plans and strategies backed up with statistics. **It's not going to work!** How can it? Every major industry player now has exactly the

same data, the same research suppliers, the same techniques, the same processes, and in many cases, the same people."

The issue is how to keep our products, services and businesses from slipping out of the awesome experiences created by innovation into the mind-numbing, undifferentiated and marginally profitable commodity approach. Furthermore, how do we create unshakable customer loyalty in a marketplace that is simultaneously more competitive and cynical?

I think it comes down to two core elements — the creation of trust by keeping promises, and delivering products and services that touch the hearts of people. Neurologist Donald Calne writes, "human beings are powered by emotion, not by reason. The essential difference between emotion and reason is that emotion leads to action, while reason leads to conclusions."

Tough questions

What does this mean to the seedstock industry? The seedstock operation that functions as it has in the past, no matter how successfully, will find it difficult, if not impossible, to prosper in the future. In short, if you see yourself behind the leaders there is tremendous opportunity to gain ground if you are willing to undertake transformational strategies. If your business is a front-runner, it's time for some serious soul-searching. In either case, the future depends on your ability to ask difficult questions and to have the courage to answer them. What might some of the questions be?

- Do we measure the value of our product in the same manner as our customers?
- Have we done anything to bring the credibility and integrity of our company into question? If so, what are we going to do about it?
- What do our customers really think about our product?
- How do our customers and suppliers describe us?

- Who are our competitors, and where are they headed?
- Which competitors did we dismiss too easily in the previous question?
- Do we have the right skills, mind-set, team and tools?
- Are the products and services we offer as good as we say they are?

Rest assured there are no simple answers to these questions, and understand that asking them will unsettle both you and everyone in your organization. At the same time, take comfort in the knowledge that, irrespective of industry, leaders of all kinds of organizations are undertaking the challenge of answering the tough questions.

Business consultant Tom Peters tells us all to "pick up the pace or face the prospect of a permanently reduced standard of living." Peters suggests several 'bold objectives' to enable organizations to ratchet up their ability to thrive.

- 1) Offer premium products through the provision of world-class service, a renewed commitment to excellence, and a strategic shift into the realm of higher value and price. "The specialty steel, specialty retail, specialty chemical and specialty forest product companies outperform the diversified and generalist members of their industry by 50% or more," Peters contends.
- 2) Focus on people and organizational structure. Reduce layers of management and get all of your people into a profit orientation. Reward people in alignment with the profits of the company.
- 3) Precisely aim time, attention and resources to your most important strategic goal.

The great struggle is to maintain our balance on that delicate line between brand loyalty and barn blindness. Today's winning solution may yield the bitterness of defeat if we fail to ask the tough questions and if we fail to develop our own bold objectives to assure that our products and services are truly deserving of the brand loyalty we seek to build.

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