

Making first impressions count

Some say you only get one chance to make a first impression. I've learnt success is built on constantly making first impressions count for each phase of life and business. It's a day by day process that applies equally to business leaders as to those striving for career growth.

There are challenges and pay backs at three key levels. The first is for farming and its image locally and internationally. The second is to secure quality staff. The third is for business leaders to build their "brand" -- letting your world know what it is like to do business with you!

The changes being proposed for Fonterra and the New Zealand Dairy Industry throw the spotlight on the importance of the image of the rural sector. To succeed in its growth strategy the company and the farming needs to be seen as a credible and vibrant option. Inviting investment from outside farming offers a real opportunity to tell the story of its prospects for the good of all involved.

Recently I spent time with a senior city based executive as we shared a flight returning from Europe. We were discussing our respective professional roles. As I explained my involvement in supporting leading farming operations he was fascinated to learn about the modern farming business. The contribution from precision farming and biotechnology, the outlook for product prices and career opportunities in our industry were news to him.

The need for more effective communication about farming was reinforced by meeting someone with such broad experience and training who still had an old-fashioned perception of farming.

Those working in the industry are well aware of the sophistication needed to succeed in farming in 2007 and beyond. Our ability to harness opportunity is heavily dependent on access to trained people, synergies with like-minded industries, access to investment capital and a shared appreciation of how to overcome environmental challenges.

The old-fashioned image of a "mum and dad" based, physically demanding and intellectually starved working environment will no longer serve our future. Planned and effective "first impressions" of farming are vital to provide an umbrella under which all can thrive.

Sourcing staff across the economy continues to be a challenge. This is the second important area for "first impressions"

Positioning your business as an employer of choice is a key strategy for success. Developing waiting lists -- not short lists -- is an approach I've been recommending from some years.

Quality staff select their next career step on more than just money. Satisfaction from being part of a top operation, inspiration from those who lead them and learning opportunities to develop their skills and business prospects are real drivers.

Given an especially buoyant dairy sector, now is the time to evaluate how effectively your businesses can compete for the best people. Ask your team how they feel about what you offer. Develop packages that reward continuity. Understand what's going on in the market and acknowledge expectations for lifestyle, reward and employment relationships of quality people.

Communicating what you have to offer won't happen on its own. Developing strategies to present your employment opportunities in the best of possible light is part of the first impression process.

Finally, growth in dairy and positive prospects across the primary sector long term mean business growth is beckoning. Securing the next step through share farming, joint ventures or growing your existing operation will rely on buy in from bankers, business partners and others of influence.

Their awareness of your business plan and knowledge of results to date will combine to build credibility and open doors. Clearly defined investment criteria are essential to enable you to identify the right moves in a world where there is likely to be too much opportunity.

Effective strategies to manage first impressions will result in early knowledge of options, immediate availability of finance from informed financiers and commitment from business partners. These are the keys to capturing progress in the shortest time.

Business is never easy. The current dairy boom risks complacency and a lack of focus. Making first impressions count will be a cornerstone contributor to those who will reap the rewards.

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