

Cultivating the Culture

This month has been particularly busy with conference presentations to a number of sectors across the country. My focus has been people management and business planning and the time spent challenging audiences to 'think again' in these two critical areas has highlighted the importance of business culture and brand to success.

My focus in consulting over the last 18 years has been to adopt best practice from the commercial world and apply it to rural businesses. Given the rate of growth and sophistication of farming, we are very much at a point where many of the systems have been refined for the needs of the Rural Sector.

Strategic plans, job descriptions, appraisal processes and systemisation have all found their way into most leading operations and have been adapted to add value through profit and job satisfaction.

An area that I have been conscious of for some years is that of branding. There is a risk of seeing this aspect of business management as irrelevant to the Primary Sector. Many see it as only associated with sale of products where I see branding as a method of maximising the value from relationships – both internal and external.

It's a fascinating area. We have found that our businesses have benefited in a number of ways from a planned approach.

Focus Areas

There are three key areas where branding can bring top results.

The first is by communicating a culture of achievement and performance that brings confidence to financiers and business partners. Developing a brand that communicates reliability and professionalism brings confidence to financiers and business partners that results in them being readily prepared to 'invest' in your business. Those who focus on accurate budgeting, timely reporting and walk the talk of being in control of their business inevitably get the pay back from those who can provide resources for business growth and expansion.

The second is negotiation. A culture of credibility, research and realism adds strength to resourcing, purchase of new assets, identifying new opportunity and pursuing diversification. This is enhanced by everything from the quality of planning to the style of communication that goes into such interactions. It is in this environment that opportunities to develop "preferred supplier", relationships and capacity to achieve ongoing business advantage is achieved.

Strategies need to include regular renegotiation of existing supplies and making yourself easy to deal with. Don't mistake quality relationships as an invitation for others to take advantage of you. Underlying this must be a regular review of performance of other parties and a gentle reminder to them that they should not take your business for granted.

The third key benefit is the ability to attract and retain staff in your business. Developing your business culture around job satisfaction, challenge and career progress for your team is what will have them stay and get them talking to others about the benefits of working in your operation.

Strategies should include how you can become an employer of choice to compete with an under-supplied rural staff sector.

It's been interesting to assist a number of farmers with seasonally late staffing assignments. My input has generally followed their own efforts at advertising and recruitment. My approach has been to encourage applicants to "think again" about their future and respond to broadly worded advertisements that create intrigue and encourage enquiry. Such strategies have yielded a pleasing level of enquiry which in some cases has resulted in filling multiple positions.

Compelled or Impelled

My experience with both branding and business planning is that they offer one unique component to the business. That is that both your statement of goals in your business plan and your statement of business culture associated with branding both involve public statements of your intentions and the standards you wish to achieve. A "handover heart" declaration to your world that you intend to deliver on these results in your business is being impelled towards those results.

Sure it will take time for them to materialise and no doubt there will be changes in directions as you respond to changing circumstances. There is, however, an unstoppable momentum achieved once you have communicated your business plan and your branding expectations to your team.

This whole process is underpinned by a business owner who knows how to 'walk the talk'. I like the statement "don't try to talk your way out of problems you behaved yourself into" when thinking about some of these areas. The way you and your team behave builds the culture and inevitably the brand of your business. If you want to create opportunity, address this in a planned way. If you want to live life as a lottery then take the wait and see approach.

Just as I am enjoying growth and new horizons in my business, I can definitely confirm opportunity for yours if you take the time to learn more and apply techniques in this area.

Kerry Ryan is a Tauranga based Agribusiness Consultant, Speaker and Publisher. You can contact him at www.kerryryan.co.nz