

Regular readers will know I am apt to bang on about change being the only constant, and that farmers and landowners need to adapt to a customer focused approach to business, writes Mark Weaver of CLM.

Evolving business, by reacting to customer led demand, is being practiced as well as preached but you do need a plan. Businesses need to ask themselves who am I doing this for? And why? The reassuring thing for the industry as a whole is that a lot of farming and rural businesses are asking themselves that very question and are doing it really well.

We assist a £2m turnover farm meat business in Sussex that has been incredibly successful in listening to its customers and is delivering the quality product demanded by them. Allied to that, it has sought and found a customer for every piece of the cheaper bulky fore-end cuts – which those in the meat trade know is a perennial challenge – while maintaining the all important if rather slim margin. Alan Sugar would be impressed and although I don't think our farmer would be too comfortable in the board room, he has the entrepreneurial skills sadly lacking in most of the 'apprentices'.

Recently I was asked to be a farm judge. This is always a genuine pleasure and an opportunity to discover some different businesses. It is always inspiring and always an honour. Of the farms I visited three of them had really thought about the end customer and had moved their business to meet demand and in doing so were clearly reaping the rewards. On the first farm the use of e-marketing and technology from the front seat of a Hi-Lux was impressive. Despite limited resources a diverse consumer driven business is growing out of what was previously a very ordinary farm. Traditional farming on one level but with a twist to add value at every corner. Lack of funds



Evolving a farm business for customer-led demand

had been the mother of invention but now a strategy has evolved and a clear business plan is in place. The trick now will be to develop the business as the market moves, while avoiding over trading. Exciting but potentially risky times.

The second farm delivers quality and consistency to demanding customers 365 days of the year. You could argue that every farmer, particularly those milking cows, do the same, however in this instance the single minded focus on production of a high quality product has led to a high margin. The farm is now a price maker not a price taker. There is not much business diversity in evidence but from a small farm with a small team this is a different but equally successful approach. The plan is simple but effective. The apparent danger is that the market will mature and margins will fall, cheaper alternatives will appear or customer fashion will change. I have a study full of things I thought I could never do without but now never use. A single product business does not want to be making one of those.

of the business from a different angle. This is a man who already had a clear plan and runs a tight ship with many strands but, interestingly, appears to be revelling in the success of something not dreamt up by himself. Evolving the plan for the business and weaving into it a fifth or sixth strand can be challenging, particularly when introducing another mind and opinion! This particular diversification has a huge customer base and involves new direct customer contact via e-commerce and face to face on a daily basis: A trading experience with a new set of skills including a very satisfying retail experience. The challenge to the plan here will be to balance the effect of each diversification and to manage growth.

Hard to pick a winner from six excellent farms let alone these three examples!

Finally, what a pleasure to see the Kent Show evolving again under the excellent chairmanship of George Jessel. The breakfast meeting last Friday added real weight and purpose to a county show that has suffered dilution of the message that farming in Kent and the South East is a force to be reckoned with. The show is a window into what is best in the industry. Kent county council are actively engaging with a £2bn industry on its door step. Depressingly, East Sussex county council don't appear awake to agriculture or the benefits of having successful, stable industry employing thousands of people across the county.



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