

BUSINESS COMMUNICATION | LESSONS FROM THREE FARMERS

Being a good listener can lead to positive outcomes

THE BOTTOM LINE



GLENN CHEATER

Fans of the *Dragons' Den* know that the CBC television show lives up to its name: even normally polished entrepreneurs become flustered when grilled by the sharp-tongued venture capitalists.

But the dragons were almost puppyish when Natasha and Elysia Vandenhurk appeared on the program in 2012, heaping praise on their premium camelina cooking oil, their branding and their company's potential.

The sisters are certainly poised and personable, but Natasha Vandenhurk says their presentation was a success for one simple reason: lots and lots of practice.

"That pitch was nothing new — we'd said it a zillion times before," says Vandenhurk, chief executive officer of Three Farmers.

"We know what our story is, we know what our product is about, we know what aspect people want to hear about. It wasn't a big deal to just get out there and tell our story."

However, the story behind the story is what holds a lesson here, one that applies to any business, including farms.

The tale starts with three farmers — Vandenhurk's father, Dan, and friends Ron Emde and Colin Rosengren, who all farm near Midale, Sask.

The trio was interested in niche crops and at the time, camelina was being hyped as a feedstock for biodiesel and jet fuel.

When Rosengren heard about its food properties — loads of omega 3s, shelf stability, a unique light taste and high smoke point that makes it ideal for high-heat cooking — they figured it had huge potential as a premium cooking oil.

However, potential and five bucks will get you a frappuccino in the world of gourmet products, especially the highly competitive premium cooking oil market.

They were all busy farming, so Natasha Vandenhurk, just 24 and armed with a business degree, was recruited in 2009 to head the company. She was joined a year later by her younger sister, a Red Seal chef who had worked with a celebrity chef in Toronto.

Rather than get a distributor and become lost in its product list, the sisters cold-called retailers.

"I remember my first sales call to a little Italian store in Regina. I was just so incredibly nervous," recalls Vandenhurk.

But the sisters were nothing if not determined.

"We drove to Toronto for our first sales trip and basically left Elysia there for two months, just selling products in stores and banging on the doors of retailers," she says.

Those sales calls taught them a critical lesson.

"Listening is incredibly important," she says.

"Not interrupting and really hear-

ing what someone is saying. Not being too pushy with the whole sales aspect. Listening to what their problems are and thinking of ways you could help. Customizing the presentation of the product to fit their approach, which could be the healthy aspect or that it's local or highlighting the taste profile."

Ditto with customers during the countless in-store product demos.

"We've changed our packaging a million times based on customer suggestions like, 'you should have omega 3 stamped right across the front of the label, not hidden on the back.' We're about to change our whole look again. We started out wanting to look very high end, and

now we're telling people this is an oil you should use daily, and we want our labels to reflect that."

They've learned that being from Saskatchewan and having full traceability, right down to the field where the camelina was grown, resonates with customers.

They now know that \$25 for a 500 millimetre bottle is too much for most people, but less than \$20 is appealing.

It's all aimed at standing out on the shelf and grabbing the attention of prospective customers as their eyes scan rows of premium oils.

"People are very honest," Vandenhurk says with a laugh.

"I don't worry about getting honest

feedback. It's also the body language and the expression on their face. It's a fine line to discern the good advice from the bad, but after a while you start to develop a sixth sense about that."

That sixth sense is paying off. The company is still small, but Three Farmers now has its product in more than 1,000 stores and sales are doubling each year.

For the Vandenhurks, listening became the foundation of their business. It drove improvements in their marketing and allowed them to triumph in the *Dragons' Den*, where they were offered \$150,000 for a 20 percent share. The deal wasn't consummated, but sales soared after

their appearance.

However, you don't have to have a product to pitch to succeed. The lesson is simply that being a good listener can lead to good things.

Typically, it leads to better relationships, which pays dividends at the grain elevator or the input dealer and works wonders with employees.

Choosing the right words in your business dealings makes all the difference. Finding the right ones starts with listening.

Archived columns from this series can be found at www.fcc-fac.ca/learning. Farm Credit Canada enables business management skill development through resources such as this column, and information and learning events available across Canada.



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The winner of the 2014 Western Producer Outstanding Dealership Award will be announced at the WEDA annual convention in Regina, to be held Jan. 6-8, 2015, and printed in *The Western Producer*.

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* Name of dealer being nominated: _____

* Dealer Location: _____ * Ph #: _____ * Dealer Contact (Name): _____

* Customer Name: _____ * Customer Ph #: _____ * Customer Email: _____

* Customer Address: _____

In Part I, rank the dealer on each attribute. In Part II, write a brief description of an event, incident or characteristic that you feel makes this dealer the Dealership of the Year. Use extra paper as necessary. Only Part I has to be completed for your ballot to qualify. Part II will be used to help in the selection process.

* Part I	Unacceptable	Acceptable	Somewhat Above Average	Well Above Average	Outstanding
A. The normal customer service provided by this dealer is:	<input type="checkbox"/>				
B. The honesty and integrity displayed by this dealer is:	<input type="checkbox"/>				
C. When I have needed parts or service, the response from the dealership has been:	<input type="checkbox"/>				
D. The information available from this dealer about my equipment needs has been:	<input type="checkbox"/>				
E. This dealer has demonstrated a willingness to "go above and beyond" to service my needs:	<input type="checkbox"/>				

Part II

Why do you think this dealer should be Dealer of the Year?
(This question helps us see specific examples of dealers doing something special for their customers, so don't worry about the appearance or quality of your writing!)

MAIL TO: The Western Producer Outstanding Dealership Of The Year Award, PO Box 2500, Stn. Main, Saskatoon, SK S7K 2C4
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