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“I’ve waited a long time to have this much fun in the cattle business,” said Tom Field, director of the Engler Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Program at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln (UNL) as he took the stage Nov. 5 during Angus University at the Angus Means Business National Convention & Trade Show in Kansas City, Mo.

Field said he has had a chance to work with all kinds of organizations across many different industries in pursuit of the idea of entrepreneurship, and he has learned that the American Dream is alive and well.

“The American Dream is what we seek deep in our hearts,” he said. “It’s how you live. It’s why [you live]. That’s what entrepreneurship, at its heart, is all about.”

Field cited a Gallup poll that asked employees and managers in all kinds of industries across all types of companies a series of questions about their engagement. What it found, Field said, is that 30% of people who are active in

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business and work today, whether as owners or as employees, are fully engaged. He reported 50% are simply along for the ride, and 20% are so disengaged that their presence undermines the organizations they serve.

Entrepreneurs come from the 30%,

and must be our focus, he emphasized.

Opportunities are everywhere, but there are things that get in the way of us seeing an opportunity and actually taking it to the market, he noted. He suggested that we remember to be relentlessly positive all the time.

A lot of things can get in our way, but they’re not really the problem, Field said, offering a quote by the character Captain Jack Sparrow of the *Pirates of the Caribbean* film series: “The problem is not the problem. The problem is your attitude about the problem.”



Tom Field (at lectern) moderated a panel consisting of (from left) Charles “Chuck” Backus, Terry Beller, Tom Brink and Joe Mayer in discussion of entrepreneurship in the cattle business.

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Asking what you would attempt if you knew you couldn't fail, Field suggested a series of questions to family members and employees based on that premise, and then following up with questions relating to performance now compared to performance a year ago. After the questions, Field said, then we have to embrace "at warp speed" the understanding that a lot of solutions are outside of us.

"The solutions — part of the answers — are going to come from people we're not comfortable dealing with because they don't look like, behave like or understand us," Field asserted. "They're the techies, the consumers and the people who see the world just a little bit differently."

Field insisted that all the value is in the intersection of our differences. Field said this is true even in the business of ranching, cattle production, stockers, feedyards, packers, purveyors, wholesalers, retailers and even chefs.

Though there are many great things going on in agriculture today, Field suggested young people are being discouraged from entering the industry. He asked the audience to encourage young people in agriculture, offering two immediate ways to do so:

- Go home and find a young person, whether a relative or just someone in the community, and encourage them.
- Go to the Facebook page for the Engler Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Program and tell them "We believe."

Entrepreneurial spirit and quality

"What I'm here to tell you is an external validation of what you all have



Former cattle feeder and entrepreneur Tom Brink shares how quality plays into entrepreneurship.

been doing for years," Tom Brink, founder and owner of Top Dollar Angus Inc., told Angus University attendees. Research produces knowledge, he said, and knowledge plus enterprise equals new technology. New technology creates productivity, efficiency and new business opportunities.

There are three types of practices in operation in the beef industry, Brink

noted. Innovation is doing what could work, but hasn't been proven yet. Convention is doing what does work. Tradition is doing what did work. There is risk in both innovation and tradition.

A good balance for most operations to employ is 20% innovative practices, 70% conventional and 10% traditional, said Brink. "Part of being an innovator is providing genetics that benefit the entire

beef supply system. We have to think beyond our farm gate."

Beef competes on taste and quality, not price, Brink emphasized. Grid premiums are driven by Prime and the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand, and superior quality grades drive the grid premiums highest.

Brink shared that in his experience feeding cattle, the top steers grew faster,

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weighed heavier, marbled more, and had larger ribeyes and some degree of finish. Additionally, they were healthier and had better genetics.

“I’ve never lost money on grading Prime,” he said. “Healthy cattle that grow and grade are winners.”

Being an entrepreneur takes a really

good idea. Money should be spent slowly and carefully, and entrepreneurship requires patience, patience and more patience. He emphasized that a tough skin is necessary; be ready to eat the word “no” for breakfast. A support system is also integral; link up with like-minded individuals.

“Thanks to Angus for listening to the

market, paying attention to all segments of the industry, and for giving us better genetics to help the beef business prosper. Angus wins the award for the most entrepreneurial U.S. beef breed during the past 25 years,” he concluded.

Entrepreneurship in the cattle business

“We used to raise straight Herefords for

100 years at our ranch, but when the grid started paying for quality carcasses, we were paid the most with Angus,” Joe Mayer of Mayer Ranch, Guymon, Okla., shared.

Mayer was part of an entrepreneurship in the cattle business panel with Terry Beller, manager of Beller Feedlot in Lindsay, Neb.; Charles “Chuck” Backus, Quarter Circle U Ranch east of Phoenix, Ariz.; Tom Brink, founder and owner of Top Dollar Angus Inc. Tom Field moderated the panel.

Quality was a common theme of panelists’ reasons to use Angus in their various endeavors. Said Beller, “We can be rewarded for quality cattle, so our feedlot is mostly black now.”

Herd expansion is a hot topic with high market prices and more moisture. Backus opined that feed conversion efficiency will play a large role in selecting cattle with which to expand the herd. It can increase the capacity for carrying cattle on less land — an issue integral to the harsh conditions of Arizona.

Brink recommended taking calculated risks. Risk is inherent in the beef industry, but make potential failures as small as possible so it is manageable.

“You will fail a percentage of the time, but you have to get back up and keep going,” he said.

Mayer agreed and added that sometimes the biggest risk is not taking a risk. His operation will try almost any new technology at least once. If it works, he said, they will use it full bore. If it doesn’t, they can scale its use back and try something different.

Beller emphasized communication and lifelong learning being key to entrepreneurial success. As a cattle feeder, he said, he is in constant communication with the ranchers who feed with him. That network helps each other ask questions and move forward together. He recommended having an open mind and said that, often, he uses his “own” time at night to learn about new issues.

Mayer added that, as a commercial producer, a network of “people on the move” garners new ideas. He said he shares ideas with his seedstock provider and other movers and shakers.

Often, those in the beef industry are too transactional, Brink said. “We need to develop those long-term partnerships in the big picture.”

The panel was confident that demand for quality beef will continue to grow in the next 10 years. Mayer concluded, “Angus has been innovative, and if it continues to be, it will still be at the top of the heap. Our future is in our own hands.”

Field, Brink and the panel presented Wednesday, Nov. 5, during the Angus University program featuring “A Story of A Steak.” This extension of the award-winning series of articles in *High Plains Journal* and segments on *The Angus Report* was sponsored with the support of Merck Animal Health. For more information about the Angus Means Business National Convention & Trade Show or to listen to the presentations, visit www.angusconvention.com.