

What it Means to Ride for the Brand

By Chip Schweiger, The Cowboy Accountant

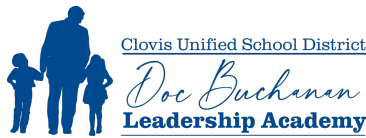
In the old west cowboys lived by a code, the code of the west. This code was informal, unwritten, but well-understood by everyone who agreed to live the cowboy life on the open range. One of those unwritten rules, passed by mouth to ear from old cowboys to new ranch hands, was that the cowboy should always “ride for the brand.” In the early days of the American west, a brand was a ranch’s trademark, used to separate and document ownership of livestock. The brand also represented pride, duty and stewardship, which inspired loyalty and dedication.

A brand could be as simple and straight-forward as the iconic “**Four Sixes**” of the Burnett Ranches or as complex as the Rocking Diamond Lazy Double H brand (think about that one for just a minute). Brands were and are used to permanently mark cattle, horses and sometimes other livestock in spring and fall roundups where cattle are gathered on the ranges in order to brand and ear-mark the calves, wean, sort for ownership and cut out those wanted for shipment to market.

When calves were branded, two “ketch hands” usually rode into the herd to do the roping. Two other cowboys, the “flankers” stood by the fire, ready to catch the calf. The brander, or “iron man” yelled, “Hot iron!” and the “iron tender,” who heated the branding irons, came up from the fire with an iron glowing cherry-red. After the branding, if the calf being branded was a male it was castrated and thus became a steer (which a whole different blog article!). Then came the “doctors,” or “medicine men” with jars of disinfectant to smear on the wounds, and also a “needle man” who quickly gave inoculations for every manner of diseases.

During branding season, the “tally man” was really the only cowboy with an easy job. He was usually an older man or one not physically fit for heavier work. When a roper dragged in a calf he shouted the brand of its mother. The tally man echoed this call and recorded it in his smudged book, which provided the ranch owner an estimate of the season’s profit. Branding was no job for a weakling. It was hard, dusty, exhausting work and a testament to a cowboy’s devotion to his chosen occupation. But, it was also necessary work to promote the ranch’s brand and was a part of the requirement for a cowboy when he signed on.

As to riding for a brand, cowboy poet **Red Steagall** summed it up best in one of his poems that earned him recognition as the Official Cowboy Poet of Texas, “*Son, a man’s brand is his own special mark that says this is mine, leave it alone. You hire out to a man, ride for his brand and protect it like it was your own.*” So, what does it mean to ride for a brand? How do we know when and how to ride for a brand? In the old west, when a cowboy rode for the brand, it meant that he had signed on to the mission, goals and aims of the ranch owner. It meant that he was committed and that he was a dedicated team player. It meant, in the words of Red Stegall, that he gave his promise to protect the brand as though it were his own.



In the early days of the famed **King Ranch**, drought ravaged South Texas and Northern Mexico, which spurred Captain Richard King to travel to the small hamlet of Cruillas in the Mexican state of Tamaulipas. There, he found the townspeople also attempting to survive the serious drought, and made them a proposition: if they would come work this new ranch under his brand, he would provide them with food, shelter, and income. These expert horsemen became known as Los Kineños — King’s people — and became legendary for their contributions to taming the American West. Their decedents still live and work the King Ranch to this day, giving new meaning to riding for the brand.

A few years back, I had an opportunity to travel to The Netherlands to visit the outsourced warehouse of my distribution client. The warehouse was massive, with the latest in barcode technology, which housed — together with the goods of other companies — all the products my client sold into Europe. Being a good accountant, I asked for a copy of the warehousing agreement so that I could evaluate the arrangement. After 15 minutes or so, the warehouse manager brought me back a six-page, single-sided legal document. While it was appropriately signed by both parties, it looked at first glance to me to be a bit light.

Now I’d been trained, mind you, to judge the worth of any agreement by the time honored “weight test.” The heavier the pile of papers, presumable the better the legal protections. With dismay in my voice, I clarified, “I actually need the entire document, including all schedules and exhibits.” With a look of confusion the Dutch plant manager replied, “That IS the entire agreement!” So with confusion equal to my dismay, and matching his frustration, I read this seemingly light-on-details agreement and learned that its elegance was in its simplicity. In substance it said, the warehouse will care for the customer’s goods as though they were their own, and the customer will pay the warehouse fairly and on time. That’s it. Simple, compelling and easy to understand.

“Son, a man’s brand is his own special mark that says this is mine, leave it alone. You hire out to a man, ride for his brand and protect it like it was your own.”

— ***the poem Ride for the Brand by Red Steagall***

If you’re asking what this has to do at all with a cowboy branding a cow, my take is that when we agree to start that new job, be it on a ranch or in a warehouse, we agree to give our best efforts. We agree to treat that business as though it were our own. We agree to an honest effort without excuses, complaining, or shortcuts. And, if we aren’t willing to do so, we have no business being on that ranch’s (or business’s) payroll. We agree to a simple, compelling and easy to understand role.

Now, before accusing me of being preachy, understand that agreeing to ride for a brand doesn’t mean blindly following an unethical business or corrupt owner straight down to Hell. It does, however, mean that when we sign on the dotted line, we should seek to give our best efforts and should look after the company’s assets as though they were our own while doing everything we reasonable can to protect and promote that organization.



I suppose my belief is that we don't need legal documents to tell us what we should and shouldn't do and we certainly don't need reams of paper to govern how we treat each other. Thinking in my naive way, if we would ride for the brand and agree to do everything we could to earn our pay, we wouldn't need HR policies, and dress codes, and performance improvement plans, and counselling sessions. In short, we might make things easier for ourselves and easier for those around us.

When we give an honest days work, each day and every day, we are more personally satisfied with our efforts and ironically we're seen as more valuable by an organization. And, more valuable, means more frequent promotions, bigger raises, and extra bonuses. So, if we want to improve ourselves professionally, perhaps we can think like the cowboy and ride for the brand. Each day and every day, no matter how tired we may be and no matter how much we may disagree with the strategic direction, because, well, just like the cowboy that's what we agreed to do. It's the promise we've made and the code we live by. In that way, whether we've ever thrown a leg over a horse, roped a cow, or enjoyed a meal from the back of a chuck wagon, we are living the cowboy way of life and enjoying the tangible and intangible benefits that accrue to us.

With that, I'm off to do my best to ride for the brand. Until next time, happy trails! ★

PUBLISHED BY
Chip Schweiger, The Cowboy Accountant™

I'm a full-time CPA and a part-time cowboy, aspiring horseman, cast-iron cooker, and cowboy wisdom enthusiast. Together with my horse, Whiskey, we tell the stories of the American West and the Cowboys who feed a nation.