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Networking and the Brand

By Tom Marx

Put yourself in my place:

I am at a reception during a trade show. I'm looking forward to spending time with business acquaintances, some of whom have become friends. While I am NOT there to sell, I AM looking for an opportunity to meet that special (but often elusive) contact.

What I focus on is the quality of the event itself. Is it conducive to striking up conversations with both people I know and people I do not? Is the venue high-end or low? Is the food and drink of good quality? Do I have to wait for 15 minutes in line at the bar? Is there sufficient room to sit, stand or mingle? Is there background music or do I have to raise my voice to be heard? Who's there – business decision makers, support staff or a healthy mix of both?

At the end of the evening, I go back to my hotel room, examine the business cards I collected and make an assessment about the value of the time I spent at the event.

Why this preamble? Because these kind of networking events are very important to the successful promotion of your brand. There are good events and there are great events. Whatever the venue and the budget, a great event has a very positive impact on your brand -- as well as your customer's loyalty to your product or service.

For example: We've worked with Randall Reilly Publishing, one of the publishers in the heavy-duty sector (CCJ, Overdrive, Truckers News, etc.), for almost three years now. Randall sponsors an event 2 times per year called *The Bayou Blast*. The event *really* is a blast. It's fun, the accommodations are excellent, the food is good and participants get to fish and party – all the things we love to do. The events are conducive to the easy flow of conversation, activities proceed at an easy pace and Randall, with the support of their sponsors, picks up the entire tab.

Then there's the guest list.

Randall offers this event to a select group of their customers for sponsorship, carefully crafting who will be there so that it's a healthy mix of channel players with little or no competitors present. For example, if a manufacturer of brake products attends, Randall tries to not have another manufacturer of brake products attend the same year. In fact, they go so far as to guarantee their customers (advertisers) exclusivity in their product category. On top of that, each customer is asked to invite their *own* best customers and/or prospects to the event as their own, personal guests. All attendees feel very special from the get-go.

The Bayou Blast is promoted as a fun, recreational event, but the reality is that the networking always creates strong business opportunities. We know of some very lucrative business deals that have resulted from this event. In fact, one of our primary customers has reported to us a ton of benefits, many that were surprising, including obtaining the approval to sell a new product line to a large program distribution group. That's huge!

What's at stake here? If Randall did not produce a great networking event, what could be the result to the Randall brand? If participants returned without a sense of satisfaction, what could happen with their loyalty to buying ads from Randall next year? We know from first hand experience that *The Bayou Blast* shows up as so important to our client, that it is unlikely they will leave Randall. Plus, our customers, by attending this event with other exclusive guests, are sending a strong message about their own brand: that they are strategic about which events they choose to attend.

From a dollar-for-dollar basis, these types of well-thought-out, high production value events create better business opportunities and incredible loyalty. They go a long way toward defining the values of the brand of the sponsoring company, as well as each participant. It's like hanging a 20' x 20' banner in front of your prospects or customers that says "do business with us."

The next time you attend one of those networking receptions, look around and see if you are pleased to have your company's brand attached to the event. And the next time you put on your own event, take a look at the impression that your company is leaving with your guests.

"Tom's Tip"

Look at your calendar and design a customer/prospect event that will take place within the next 12 months. Choose a unique venue, design a small, but powerful guest list and make sure the activities, service, accommodations and networking opportunities are FIRST CLASS – as well as FUN! Spend some time imagining what, where and how. What brand qualities do you want to communicate? What is the impression you want attendees to have? Write them all down, plan it and do it.

We invite you to send us your ideas. We'll treat them confidentially and give you our honest assessment. Send to Tom Marx at tmarx@themarxgrp.com