

You Don't Get a Second Chance ...



By Stan Pohmer

Here in Minnesota, winters are long and arduous. Sure, we still go out and play in the snow and on the ice, enjoying all sorts of winter sports. And, despite the snow and cold, people still go to work every day and kids go to school and partake in all sorts of indoor activities without missing a beat. But folks don't socialize the way they do during spring, summer and fall; people have a tendency to hunker down and hibernate.

You can go weeks on end without seeing your neighbors, unless you just happen to be outside shoveling the snow from your driveways at the same time. If you happen to move into the neighborhood in the dead of winter, you might not meet your neighbors until the spring thaw (long about late April!), making for a lonely existence.

Normally in late February, after the Christmas holidays and with the spring thaw months away, one gets a serious bout of cabin fever, a strong desire to re-engage with humans beyond your immediate family that you've been cooped up with for months.

Realizing that most of your neighbors are suffering from the same malady (except those fortunate enough to be able to spend the winters in sunnier climes), you look for an excuse to get together in an effort to maintain the groups' sanity, as well as looking for an opportunity to welcome that new neighbor down the street who just moved in to help them get over their feelings of isolation.

So after kicking around different ideas, my wife suggested that we host a party and, since I am the resident marketing and management guru (and she'd end up doing most of the real work), I was relegated the tasks of planning this event.

Recognizing a Transition

My first task was to decide what kind of party to host. Would it be a formal sit-down affair, a hot or cold buffet, simple drinks and munchies, or a potluck? Should it be for adults only, or open to parents and kids?

The next decision was to decide on the scope of the attendees. Should it be an open house where anyone in the neighborhood could attend, or a select group of households whom we socialized with during the summer months? And I definitely wanted to include the new folks on the street, and wanted to make sure

they weren't intimidated or overwhelmed, but at the same time give them the opportunity to meet a cross-section of the neighborhood.

OK, so we decided on an adult-only, select-guests (including the new guys), hot buffet-with-drinks-and-munchies party. Now we had to figure out the best way to extend the invitations, important because they provide the attendees with all of the details (date, time, type of party, dress code, etc.) and set some level of expectation for them.

We also had to select the best way to communicate the invitations, with email, Facebook or paper as options. And, since we didn't have contact information for the new neighbors, we would need something different for them.

And then, once the invitations were sent, the actual preparation began in earnest, with heavy duty cleaning, getting out the "guest" china, stemware and silverware, food prep, making sure the outside lights didn't have any burned out bulbs, the driveway and walkway were shoveled, and there were flowers on the tables and in the bathroom.

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After all, we hadn't seen our neighbors in a while and we wanted to make our first meeting with the new folks both pleasurable and memorable. You know what they say, you don't get a second chance to make a first impression!

Your Customers As Guests

So what does a mid-winter party have in common with your garden center, you might ask?

Well, kicking off a new season is a lot like planning a party. Since many of your existing customers haven't thought about you since last spring, you're probably not top of mind for them, so it's necessary to re-acquaint them with you every year.

And, to expand your customer base, you'll need to reach out to potential customers who may have no idea you even exist.

Identifying your message to both old and new customers is essential, as is understanding who your target audiences are and what expectations you want to set for them.

Your invitation to them is your marketing and promotion campaigns, where you clearly communicate the reasons why they should visit you, possibly with some form of enticements to help lure them in.

How you extend your invitation to them must be based on their preferred method of delivery, be it via social media, print or broadcast media, and it may be necessary to serve it up differently for your existing and potential customers.

Assuming your customers accept your invitation, you now have to deliver on the expectations you've established through your marketing/brand message.

It goes without saying that the product and displays must be top drawer, the aisles dry and clean, the restrooms sparkling, and your team representing you as the hosts of your party.

And don't forget that the experience starts in the parking lot, so no potholes, well lighted, with clearly marked spaces, and ample carts and wagons are all part of the planning.

There's a reason that some retailers refer to their customers as "guests." It changes your whole outlook on how you come to market, establishing and delivering on expectations, and then doing everything possible to ensure that the guest has the best experience possible.

After all, you don't get a second chance to make a first impression ... **LGR**

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