



THIS AIN'T NO FAIRYTALE

By Trish Brock

Once upon a time, there was an office furniture dealership in a mid-sized market. It had been in business under a few different ownerships for about 20 years.

Early on as a new business, this dealership was the underdog when going after projects and competing against the big guns in its town.

This small dealer lost often but, bit by bit, and over time, it began to win more and often large projects.

And even though the dealer was still small, fairly unorganized and scrappy, they began to make a name for themselves in the community among prospective customers and their competition began to take notice.

At that stage of the company's growth, there was an energized climate within the dealership. Salespeople and designers alike felt empowered and motivated to pursue new business in a fearless way.

There was little to lose and management was not only encouraging, but as involved in the "street fights" as everyone else. They had a shared vision and pulled together as a team.

These folks just went after business and loved the thrill of the chase. There was internal competition, but even more importantly, there was a camaraderie that fueled their will to excel.

They loved being irreverent, innovative, scrappy and smart. They saw no limits on how to approach new business, and were often out of the box and unconventional.

They thrived on being different and creative in their approach to business and when they won a project away from the "established" dealers in town, there was a rush that lasted for days.

Wanting to harness this energy and get more clarity about why they were winning, the dealer initiated some research. They asked clients, manufacturer reps, designers, competitively held accounts, and anyone else who would talk to them, why they had won or lost business. What made the difference?

They believed once they figured out what their appeal was, they could do more of it ...whatever "it" was.

While they learned that they had great products, that the salespeople and design staff were very good at their jobs and that the installation and delivery group were professional and competent, they recognized the same could be said for many of the other dealers in town.

It was their enthusiasm, their scrappy attitude and the "can do" approach to winning business that set them apart.

They were fun. They played by their own rules and people wanted to be around them—including and most especially, new customers.

This dealer made existing and new customers feel important and a part of something. It was contagious.

Over the years, business continued to grow and so did their reputation. They reorganized the structure of the dealership to support the selling process and to keep their sales people in front of their customers and not behind their desks.

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The dealer became larger and smarter about their internal processes and purposefully nurtured a culture that set them apart from their competitors.

It was the culture, they realized, that allowed them to attract and retain some very talented staff as well as happy and loyal clients.

Their culture became their “brand” and their marketing strategy and materials were developed to support this differentiating attribute. They promoted this shamelessly.

As a company, they were very self aware and built on it to further differentiate themselves. Everyone in the dealership knew what they were a part of and became “brand champions.”

And they had the sales support materials and promotional mentality to further their cause.

The dealership enjoyed explosive growth and became one of the top two dealers in their market, a position they held for a number of years. They were getting national recognition and other dealers were trying to duplicate their success.

Competitors looked at the internal processes, the low error rate, profiled the qualities of a successful salesperson, the higher margins, etc—all the standard benchmarks, and certainly all important.

But what they failed to see and understand was that it was the culture and the resulting brand within the dealership that drove the success. That was the most important thing of all.

They failed to understand that purpose and values are not created. They already exist within an organization and when they have relevance and meaning for everyone within, the company flourishes. It was the culture that propelled the success of the salespeople and the creativity of the design staff.

Other dealers could not hope to emulate a dealership that “owned” a culture and felt empowered by it.

It was a culture of winning and fun and without that culture, the great processes wouldn’t have made a difference.

The brand and the supporting sales materials were all a result of a cultivated, then defined and developed culture. The dealer was living its brand, and the materials reflected it in its entirety. They were truly authentic and customers knew it, and were attracted to it.

But, as we all know, not all fairy tales have a happy ending.

Fast forward. The dealership that had it all, that was on top and couldn’t be stopped, has now been bought and sold several times.

With each transaction, the buyer bought a name, a reputation and a heritage of sorts. But with each transaction, the essence

of the company was compromised.

Each new owner failed to recognize what they were truly buying and because of that, the culture that once drove success and made the dealer unique eroded.

The new owners failed to embrace and nurture the value of a culture and the value of people who make up that culture.

People soon felt disconnected from the company. Good people left, new people came but without the benefit of understanding the legacy of winning and things changed quickly.

The dealership went from “can do” to “can’t because...”

This dealership still has the same name, is in the same location, represents the same manufacturer and sadly, still tells the same story when pitching new business, but now with little credibility.

It’s a fraction of the size it once was, long ago lost its top of the list status, and word on the street is that it is “no longer a contender.” A few of the original people remain, but there is a distinct “tiredness” about the whole operation.

Many suffering dealerships will attribute their losses to the weak economy. And while there is no doubt that the economy is in play, what they are failing to realize is that the culture of their company has direct impact on performance, relevance and productivity. Not to mention how prospective customers perceive them.

The economy is bad for everyone, including the dealer who understands the importance of creating an atmosphere of “make it happen” for the people who are giving it their all to do so. They are the ones surviving and even thriving in this economy.

In bad times or good times, this business of culture and marketing it to your customers cannot be left to chance. It is something that needs continued nurturing and constant attention.

It requires a leadership which understands that you can’t tell people how to feel and what to value.

But when there are shared values and a vision among all the people within an organization, it creates a powerful collective force. Leading by example.

Successful dealers will generate an optimistic outlook, a “can do” attitude, and a marketing strategy with supporting messaging and materials that will all combine to take them where the clinical doom and gloom, blame and shame types will never go. And that is what will differentiate you and propel you in this challenging market.

As with most fairy tales, regardless of whether the outcome is

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good or bad, there's a lesson to be learned.

This story is not unique or unfamiliar. In many cities there are dealers who were once the leaders and enjoyed great success, and love telling stories from the old days.

A favorite and telling quote, "The older I get, the better I was," often applies.

As we begin 2012, consider the value of the talent within your dealership. What are you doing to empower them and harness their attributes and will to succeed?

Enable them to participate fully in helping to build a collective vision and equip them with the support they need. Embracing the talent that exists within and building upon it might be the best gift your dealership could receive for the New Year!

Trish Brock, Principal of Trish Brock & Associates, is a well-known industry consultant. Her cross functional consulting group specializes in increasing sales through effective differentiating brands and materials that support the strategic sales process. TB+A also conducts Mentoring Circles for groups wanting to accelerate new business development. She can be reached at 720-747-5547, via email at tbrock@trishbrockassociates.com or visit her on the web at www.trishbrockassociates.com

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