

Think Outside Your BOX

Get out in the open air with your customers

Retailers say a change of venue and the open air – even if it's just outside the store – offer the chance to relate to customers in a new and deeper way. That investment of time and effort can build long-term success – and bring immediate returns at the cash register.

Alex Soubliere is aware of an important aspect of human nature. It's no big secret, but it can be forgotten in an age of pressing schedules and quick meals on the run: When human beings share a meal together — especially a mouth-watering barbecue feast — they become closer.

It's part of being Homo sapiens. When good, hot food nestles into our stomachs and cool refreshing libations swirl around our palettes, we look upon those around us with a sense of family. That warm, convivial feeling is a worthy end in itself, of course, but it can also serve our business interests.

Engaging and harnessing that powerful human trait is not terribly complicated: just gather and serve.

Soubliere bills these events as cooking classes. His customers know a good thing when they see one, and they willingly assemble under the awning in the parking lot of his Ontario, Canada store. Here they are plied with good food and drink, they learn something about Soubliere's grills and how to cook, everybody has a great time, and the business thrives as

BY SCOTT WEBB

Courtesy of Friendly Fires

retail: *special events*

a result.

These somewhat informal soirees have turned into one of the company's most successful customer-relationship building programs, he says.

"We offer hands-on instruction and interesting recipes. Our customers love it and will often pick up miscellaneous supplies while coming to our store for classes. The best part is to spend time chatting with customers while eating the wonderful food prepared during class. We believe that building a true personal relationship with a customer will continue to yield additional business into the future."

The classes not only cement relationships with existing customers, Soubliere says, but they bring new clients into the dealership, as customers often bring friends — friends that are interested in purchasing a new barbecue or outdoor kitchen.

"Bringing customers in for barbecue classes has been a very successful way to develop loyalty and keep our customers visiting our stores. Signing customers up for our loyalty program



Photos courtesy: All Seasons Pools, Spas & Outdoor Living

"The events have truly become something that differentiates us from the local big box retailers. We establish a personal touch with people that builds loyalty. Not to mention we always gain sales from the events." — Dan Lenz

as the class ends, along with giving them a bonus or special reward, is an ideal time to build more loyalty with the customer."

"We believe, fundamentally, that improving our relationships with our current customers provides the greatest growth for our company. A loyalty program for our business means repeat sales and referrals from our existing base of customers — this has been key to our business success."

Party In The Showroom

Dan Lenz arrived at more or less the same conclusion, but by a different path. As he gazed out at the beautiful backyard showroom the company had created at its Orland Park, Ill., dealership, it just seemed like a shame not to have customers come and enjoy it on warm summer evenings. "So we decided to start wine tasting parties and events with the intent to specifically target potential customers interested in doing major construction projects."

By changing the setting for the customer relationship, All Seasons

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"We have always been a pool company and outdoor living spaces grew from that business. However, these events have now led to us often selling outdoor living spaces without a swimming pool. Not only do we foster customer loyalty, but we are expanding our offerings. We have even, as a result, changed our name to All Seasons Pools, Spas and Outdoor Living." – Dan Lenz

discovered a corresponding change in the terms of that relationship. "Having an event like this for potential customers turned out to be terrific for our people," Lenz says. "It allowed them to sit down with customers and follow up on projects in our own outdoor living space."

The events have proven so successful that All Seasons has made them a monthly staple, generally on Friday nights. Customers receive handwritten invitations and then follow-up eblast reminders. This combination approach has ensured a good turnout.

With a local crowd of qualified buyers assembling on a regular basis, the dealership decided to involve other local businesses as well — and allow them to share the expenses. "We serve only local wines provided by one of our local wineries called Cooper's Hawk, and a local pizzeria comes in to make specialty pizza on the new outdoor pizza ovens we sell. We also make fancy finger foods on our outdoor barbeque and kitchen stoves. These partnerships help off-set some of the costs of the events."

All in all, the parties work as part of an overall sales and customer relations strategy, neatly packaged in a very pleasant evening.

"Not only do we use the event to help close sales, but we also use it as a 'thank you' for customers whose projects we have recently completed," Lenz says. "We have learned it's best to keep the events small — something under 50 people — so everyone really has a

chance to chat. We generally run from 7 to 9 p.m. And because turnout is important, we ask everyone to RSVP.

"The success has been exceptional. Not only do we have a high-rate of sales closures, we also have customers who bring in their friends and give direct referrals on the spot!" ~

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