

The Bentonville Effect

A journey to the center of the event universe

One of my favorite consumer events of all time is the Pillsbury Bake-Off.

Such a humanistic and quiet event program would never pass today's ROI test. In 1949, Beatrice Harlib of Lincolnwood, IL, won \$25,000 for her "Snappy Turtle" cookie recipe. What was the short-term ROI impact? Very modest. Long term? Pillsbury is a multiple category leader as a multi-billion dollar unit of General Mills.

Retailtainment is driving much of our industry, and one specific longitude and latitude intersection is driving much of the world of retail. Grab your compass, set your gaze toward the stars, switch on the GPS unit, and follow these coordinates to the epicenter of event marketing (truth be told—all marketing): 21° 51' N, -94° 12' 59" W.

As I type these words, I'm a few feet from this spot, sitting in my car in the parking lot of Wal-Mart's home office in Bentonville.

For me, it doesn't require 24 GPS satellites hovering 10,350 miles over my head to know where I am. I've been here before, and the experience of visiting the "Home Office" never ceases to amaze and educate me. If you haven't been here, get here. Every brand has a reason to stop by, to taste the Kool-Aid, to learn from the king. If you're a CPG marketer and you don't visit Bentonville at least twice a year, you're on a career path to becoming a consultant.

Wal-Mart is not the leader in consumer marketing because of its size. It is the undisputed leader in many business disciplines because it understands and cares about human nature—all while putting customers first. And that "caring" and dedicated passion is what created and now supports their success and size.

The simple truth is that sports sponsorships and all other forms of event marketing exist for the most basic of reasons: to ultimately sell more stuff. While the "bright guys in the power ties" are able to produce 124-page PowerPoint presentations full of great terms like "amplification of brand equity," few of them know how to sell stuff to people. Sam Walton understood how to sell because he took the time to understand people—their needs, their values, and their dreams.

when they want ROI results in weekly increments (when we know in our hearts that building meaningful brand/consumer relationships takes time). We should celebrate Beatrice Harlib, and make the Snappy Turtle our industry's official cookie.

The gulf between knowing how to get to Bentonville and what to do when you get there is wider than the literary divide that separates *Maxim* readers with those of the *Harvard Business Review*.

Yes, things are great in the event marketing industry by many measures. Brand activation continues its upward trajectory, and after years of banging on the door, event marketing entered this new millennium with a front-row seat at the big budget table of "brands." No longer subservient to "advertising" and "sales promotion," event marketing can now drive those disciplines, and not just support them.

But just because these are "good times," are things *really* that good? I'd like to argue that things could be better, that our work is not yet even close to being done, and that we've got a long way to go, baby. How long of a way? Well the answer will not come in quantity—not bigger mobile units, more samples thrown at consumers, louder event music,

or a larger army of senior-citizens marching around 14,000 retail outlets trying to sample the newest, coolest thing to a bigger army of disinterested consumers who are just trying to fight their way to aisle five for more toilet paper.

The answer will come out of greater "emotional investment." And this truth is connected to people, not things. **EM**



And in all his years, I don't believe that Mr. Sam ever muttered the term "strategic." He didn't need to. All he needed to build the world's largest company was the passion and empathy to understand people (associates, vendors, community leaders, consumers, etc.).

We as event marketers could benefit from stepping away from our tactics and toys once in a while to really focus on the human dimension of what we do, and why we do it. We should fight more ferocious battles with the bean-counters

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