

Wooing, Dining and Inning

CUSTOMERS

With businesses scrutinizing their bottom lines, it's no wonder that lingering martini lunches are about as rare as the unlimited entertainment accounts that used to pay for them. But has all customer wooing at trade shows, golf outings and lunches fallen to the wayside?

Definitely not. What has changed is that most local businesses have scaled back – and/or gotten creative about – acquiring and keeping customers. And the ways they show appreciation have gotten more personal. “The face of business entertainment has really evolved. Our clients don't expect or want lavish treatment and, like everyone else these days, their schedules are packed...they don't want to spend an evening away from their family to go to a social dinner,” says Susan Finco, Leonard and Finco Public Relations.

Most of us have heard the statistic thrown around that it can cost upwards of 10 times to gain a new customer than to keep an existing one. And with everyone living more lean and mean, attracting new customers is no simple exercise, either. That said, budgets rule supreme in figuring out how to prioritize customer attraction and retention activities.

- **Trade shows.** Nicole Marchand of Radisson Hotel and Conference Center in Green Bay acknowledges the economy has forced them to evaluate attendance at trade shows. “We are focusing on what will bring in business. There are some shows like Meeting Professionals International (MPI) that we will continue to attend because they are critical, but it is likely that we will cut back on some,” says Marchand.

“The key for us is getting business planners onsite to show them what it is like to be here,” she adds.

- **Free “samples.”** New customer acquisitions have always figured prominently in the Radisson business model, and the complimentary “familiarization stay” at the hotel remains part of that process.

At Hinterland Restaurant and Brewery, Owner Bill Tressler is likely to thank repeat customers with not only a warm welcome, but also a free refreshment. “We pay particular attention to our supporters and are more inclined to send a complimentary drink to a regular customer. We are conscious of their support,” he says.

- **Tickets to popular events** – and that's not just the Packers. Dennis Garrity, Events USA, has felt the impact of corporate customers scaling back on their business entertainment. Given that he is a provider of skyboxes and client recognition parties, he's had to soften some prices in response. “We've negotiated better deals with hotels since their occupancy is down, football tickets are cheaper now and we have cut out some margins for good long-standing customers,” says Garrity. Indeed, for Garrity the key is to cater to existing clientele with specials. That means cutting down on some overhead, largely through a reduction in advertising he sees as less than successful.

“We try to show appreciation by looking for things they enjoy,” says Finco, of her clientele. “For instance, if they're big Packers fans, we invite them to the Chamber's Welcome Back Packers Luncheon.”

Jeff Bassindale, DFI, often shares his personal Packers season tickets with customers so they can enjoy a game at Lambeau. “We don't

Nicole Marchand of the Radisson Hotel and Conference Center continues to offer a "familiarization stay" at the hotel as a means of wooing customers.

entertain too much, but good customers and prospects need to know you appreciate their business and time," he says.

- **Just desserts.** Tanya Atkinson, sales, NBC26 and MYNEW32, stretches a smaller entertainment budget for client lunches and entertainment by meeting at a coffee shop for a late afternoon pick-me-up instead of a full-fledged meal.

- **Gifts tailored to a customer's interests.** "We have the benefit of being able to trade out gifts for advertising, so we will do holiday gifts this year," says Atkinson.



Leonard & Finco Public Relations may purchase a gift card to a store they know a client likes or even make a donation to a charity the client supports. "Showing appreciation is never out of style and there are ways to entertain in an affordable manner," says Finco.

Don't hesitate to join in the fun if it's a shared interest. Bassindale has had many client relationships turn into friendships over shared outings of fishing, hunting and golfing.

Sometimes, it's just a matter of knowing you're thinking of them. When Bassindale is traveling, he might pick up a local favorite treat to share with customers. Whether it's See's Candies or Kringles, it's the thought that counts.



Susan Finco, Leonard & Finco Public Relations

- **A relaxing outing.** Instead of tackling a full day outing, some companies are opting for smaller "excursions," enjoying a group cruise on the Foxy Lady or a visit to the Green Bay Botanical Garden. "Once a year, my husband's business takes clients out for a cruise on the Foxy Lady," says Atkinson. "[It makes for a] great captive audience, and it's surprising how many people have never been on the Bay."



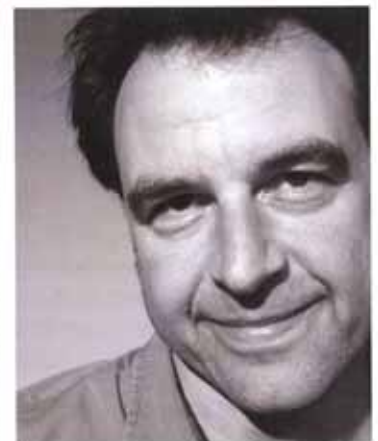
Brenda Krainik, Greater Green Bay Convention & Visitors Bureau

When you stop to think about it, the Green Bay area is bursting with draws that many of us know about – but haven't taken the time to visit or enjoy. What Brenda Krainik and the staff at the Greater Green Bay Convention & Visitors Bureau does with clients outside the area can also apply to those of us who live here. Consider an outing to a Bullfrogs, Gamblers, Phoenix or Blizzard game.

"This is an inexpensive way to entertain AND show off our facilities," says Krainik, director of marketing. "It gives them a real feel for the venue, and they can imagine what their event would look like."

When the bureau hosts travel writers from across the country, their main goal is to show them the sites that make Green Bay unique. Consider a get-together at a local winery or the National Railroad Museum, NEW Zoo, Heritage Hill, Green Bay Botanical Garden, Oneida Nation Museum or Neville Public Museum. Many of these destinations offer venues for small groups.

burnham richards has hosted several client events called "bar elevations" as a thank you and relaxed way to let their clients interact. A recent one was open to clients, friends and more with the intent of raising money for the House of Hope. They asked attendees to bring donations in the form of supplies. And every time they tipped the bar staff (burnham richards staff), the money benefited the charity. "It felt like the right thing to do given the economy and an overall refocus on the important things in life," says David Richards, creative director.



David Richards, burnham richards

Ways to woo customers on a budget

- Send small birthday presents. Depending on your industry, you could send a coupon or special offer that's applicable to your business (if you're in hospitality or retail) OR to a store you know your clients love.
- Present customers with handmade delectables - fudge, cookies, etc.
- Handwrite personal thank you notes
- Sports events are always popular - IF the customer enjoys sports. If not, steer clear. Consider buying tickets at reputable online auctions as an alternative to paying full price.
- Meals are a mainstay of business entertainment. Be conscious of any client eating restrictions/special needs. Take all business meetings at lunch - it's less costly and clients are less likely to order alcohol.
- Offer a lunch learning event at your workplace for multiple clients. Tie in an educational component and rein in costs with a catering package.
- Golf. There's a reason it's still on the radar. It's a client-friendly activity that allows for lots of interaction. Many golf courses are offering incentives including purchasing rounds in advance/in bulk.
- Host an event at your own home or backyard or a local clubhouse.
- Theater. Take full advantage of each intermission.
- Relaxation. A light lunch and massage at the spa can go a long way.
- Entertain in groups. Invite multiple potential or existing clients to one event, such as a boat ride.



Bill Tressler, Hinterland Restaurant and Brewery, finds that complimentary drinks can go a long way with a regular customer.

- **Swing sticks.** Yes, golf remains a mainstay of networking, probably ranking second only to a good meal. Golf offers an ideal way to enjoy the relatively short-lived summer season in Wisconsin and establish camaraderie with clients. Why has its popularity endured? Probably because no other sport provides a quiet and beautiful setting for developing professional relationships.

Steve Van Remortel of SM Advisors, Inc., uses golf as one form of business entertainment. It gives him and the client a chance to get to know each other in a more relaxed and fun environment. "It helps develop a deeper relationship," he says. "You get to see another side of a person that you might not get to see if you never get out of the office."

A word of advice: Van Remortel suggests forming a foursome in a golf scramble with clients or prospective clients. "You can build a stronger sense of team competing with other foursomes," he says. 