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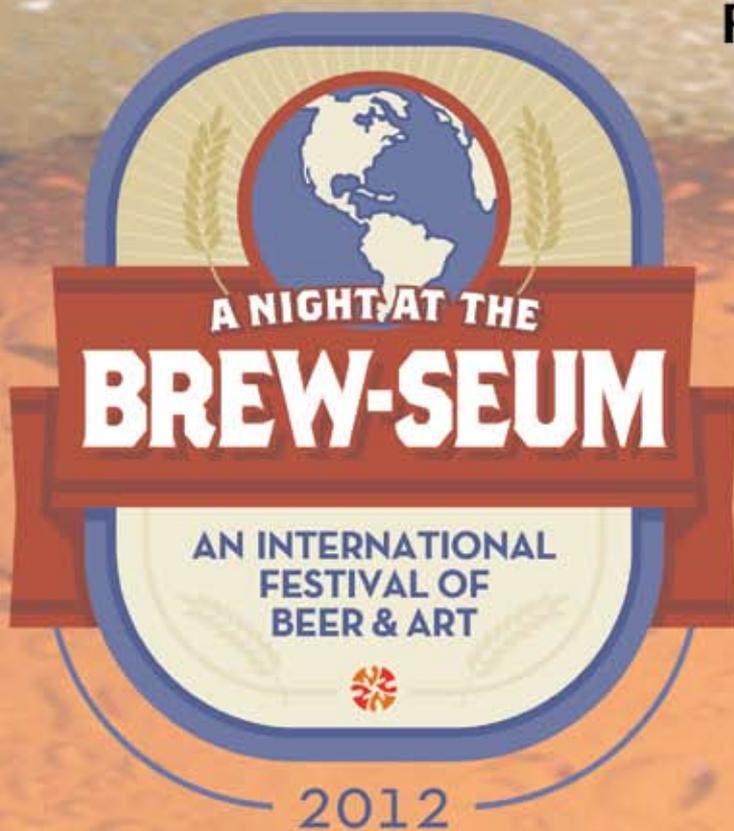
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Intentions Influence Outcome

Why do you do what you do? This is a fair question as you just waved goodbye to the first calendar quarter of 2012. What drives you?

How did you get into the career you currently enjoy? For many, it's a result of our education; for others it's a family business that you learned from the school of hard knocks; and for some – your career path has evolved over the years for a few or a multitude of reasons. Either way, something has steered you to where you are in your professional life. Sometimes we choose our occupation and other times, life chooses it for us.

No matter what position you occupy - company president, doctor, engineer, CPA, director of a non-profit, architect, etc. you're motivated by something. Sure, dollars are necessary but if money is the driving force, we may or may not always be satisfied with the outcome. If you're motivated by making a difference and serving the "customer", the money will come. Will it ever be enough to own a small island in the Caribbean? Probably not, but if so – awesome! But wealth can be measured in many other ways: Health, Family, Happiness. You may say, "Yeah, yeah, yeah," but chances are

you probably know somebody with more cash than Fort Knox who has trouble sleeping at night.

Intent begins the process. As we focus on accomplishing success via ethical and non-self-serving practices, amazing things happen. When our first influence is not the dollar but working to put food on the table for our family, we're compensated with more than just money. Job satisfaction, career gratification, leaving the office headed home in a good mood: that's wealth, too. In essence, money should be the result not the purpose.

So, April is an excellent time to evaluate where we are, where we're going but more importantly – how we're going from point A to point B. For some, this may be a different type of spring cleaning. Certainly, assessing January – March production levels, team and individual sales figures, department and company revenues and expenses are very important.



But I encourage you to also evaluate the "why" behind your goals and objectives. If, after taking a good look at this challenge, you and your executive board answer, "because we want to deliver the best possible product and service to our customer, so every member of our team can achieve professional and personal success," then chances are you and your organization are headed in the right direction. The sports cliché, "It's not if you win or lose, but how you play the game" has some validity. Take it a step further: Win and play the game fairly. This makes a greater impact.

So if it's time to dust off the shelf, re-organize the filing system, and rearrange some office systems, make a plan that brings success to others. Somehow in this world of "what goes around comes around," all parties benefit. Isn't that why we do what we do?

Todd Breland

General Manager

Valley Business Report

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Contents

Executive Summary	3
Costco	5
Carling Technology	7
Q&A Virtual CFO	9
The Fish Guy	10
Wray & Co.	11
Trust Me	13
Phoenix	14
IT Cloud	16
Rancho Viejo	17
Prevent Lawsuits Part 2	19
Caso Document Management	20
Le French Laundry	22
Goodwill	23
Keeping Your Customers	25
Spotlight	26

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Costco Changes the Shopping Climate

By Eileen Mattei

The Rio Grande Valley's first Costco is a game changer. Costco is the largest membership warehouse club in the U.S., according to Greg Brenner, Costco Warehouse Manager in Pharr. It's the seventh largest retailer in the world with sales of \$90 billion annually, while its nearest competitor rings up \$50 billion.

Built from the ground-up in only three months, the 151,000-square-foot Costco warehouse is the 601st store of the Washington-based giant known for retailing at wholesale prices. Selling name-brand and their Kirkland private-label merchandise, Costco limits mark-ups to 14 percent. Costco has jumped into the region ready to compete on price, selection and service. It is going up against existing food service suppliers, office supply stores, membership stores, bakeries, and providers of pharmacy services and hearing aids. Costco has become the largest retailer of wine in the world. Business services include credit card processing, Electronic Health Records, domains and websites, payroll services, and 401(k) plans.

Clipboard in hand, Larry Lindsey walked the frozen food displays comparing Costco prices with those of Sam's Club. As the owner of Plantation Childcare in Mission and Easy Beginnings Childcare in McAllen, Lindsey has a lot of mouths to feed. The verdict: some were higher, some were lower, and some the same. What Lindsey really hopes to see is Costco opening as early as 7 a.m. for business members.

"We are going to be the great equalizer with our pricing strategy on multiple lev-

els," Brenner said. But Costco's economic impact on the Valley will reach beyond increased sales tax revenue for Pharr and pressure on competing businesses.

Costco is known for paying the highest wages in its industry. Starting pay is \$11 per hour with time and a half on Sundays. Some experienced supervisors earn \$22 per hour, Brenner said, along with a comprehensive benefit package. "That creates longevity and the lowest turnover."

It is also geared to create a company culture, with new employees learning service standards and ethical business practices from experienced peers.

One month before Costco opened, 11,000



The low cost roses are certified by the Rainforest Alliance. (VBR)



Costco's Galaxy tablet display caught Danny Aguilar's attention. (VBR)



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online job applications had already been filed for approximately 200 jobs. "It's exciting that we get to pick the best," said Brenner. "A lot of applicants have years and years of retail experience and management. People down here have done their homework and know what Costco is about. They want to get in on a great place

to work. We are strictly a promote-from-within company."

A Shopping Culture

Costco had been on the verge of opening a Valley store twice before but couldn't jump the hurdles. "Finally last year we were able to work things out with the city, and we're where we always wanted be," which is on Kelly Avenue, just off of Highway 83 and Jackson. "The city of Pharr has welcomed us with open arms," Brenner said. The EDC leased Costco a spacious hacienda where the pre-opening team held job interviews, mixers, and made marketing calls. The crew was accustomed to working from on-site trailers so the Pharr experience was memorable.

"The potential down here is absolutely limitless. This is a major retail hub, a shoppers' culture. People love to shop down here. It's very eye-opening" Brenner continued. With two Costco stores in Monterrey, the Pharr store is not counting on the Mexican consumers who head north to shop at the region's other consumer meccas: La Plaza Mall, RGV Premium Outlet Mall and BassPro. Instead, memberships having been selling like hotcakes to Winter Texans and Valley residents.

"We couldn't wait till it opened here," said Danny Aguilar. His Weslaco family got their Costco membership in January. "We used to shop once a week at Costco when we lived in El Paso. The quality of their products is fantastic." Aguilar homed in on the Galaxy tablet and directed his wife to a nearby display of colorful wraps, saying, "That looks like something you would wear."

Worldwide, Costco has 65 million card members. "Word of mouth advertising is what does it for us. Our members advertise for us," Brenner said. "On a day-to-day basis, our focus is giving great service. We instill that culture: that we always want to go above and beyond what's expected. It has worked for us."

Robert Revelo, owner of Cornerstone Grill in Edinburg, walked through the huge, refrigerated produce room and came away impressed. "They have more variety in dairy and produce than the com-

They have everything from swingsets to camping supplies in the outdoor department. (VBR)



Greg Brenner at the membership counter. (VBR)

petition." He has been a member of another warehouse club for 12 years and bought his paper and plastic supplies there. "But it's more convenient to get everything at one store."

Brenner admitted it will take time for business members to come in and begin using Costco for sourcing everything from asparagus to zucchini, printers to paper shredders. "That doesn't happen overnight. We have to make sure we have the right merchandise mix. We have to carry items that will cater to those members." Other Costco stores do significant business supplying restaurants. "Although each region has a different mix, Costco helps businesses save money on supplies."

Business can shop Costco for LED signs flashing OPEN as well as industrial racks and office water coolers. The Valley's shopping culture has found a new candy store.



Costco is the largest seller of spirits in the U.S. (VBR)

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Training Keeps Carling in Growth Mode

By Eileen Mattei

“Last year we saw a 4.2 percent increase in sales. This year we are looking at an eight percent increase,” said Francisco Miranda, Carling Technologies plant and distribution center manager. Behind him, tidy coils of thin brass, copper and steel alloys sit on pallets next to massive 25 to 125 ton presses or metal stamping machines. The advanced manufacturing plant, in Brownsville since 1973, cuts, punches, bends and forms components for electric switches and breakers. The components are then assembled in Matamoros and returned to the International Boulevard plant for global distribution. Carling Technology produces switches and toggles found on everything from Mack trucks to restaurant coffee makers.

Seeking to keep the plant competitive through higher productivity, increased efficiency, and improvements in on-time shipments, Carling applied for a Texas Workforce Commission Skills Fund Development grant. In late February, Carling received a \$115,000 grant to upgrade the skills of 74 current employees and five new employees through 15 separate courses taught on-site by Texas Southmost College in-

structors.

“The grant came along at a very good time,” Miranda said. The plant, which is ISO-9000 and ISO 14001 certified, had plans to continue to upgrade employee skills. But the training that might have happened over several years now is slated for completion by November 30. “The challenge for us is make it happen without affecting the production. The employees are trained during working hours, and it’s an big advantage that the training is right in the plant. Our investment is the time, space, and the employee. It’s a lot of training (346 hours total.) The university has been very good at scheduling,” to accommodate customer orders. Yet as important as the training courses are, meeting production schedule is the main priority.

Miranda said one goal is to reduce setup time



J. Gonzalez, Juan Tovar and plant manager Francisco Miranda review procedures at a Carling Technology press. (VBR)

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on the plant's 30 machines by one to five percent which would result in a \$20,000 savings. Carling employees get hands-on experience with an instructor and then put into practice what they have learned on their own presses or in their own departments. Courses range from Statistical Process Control, PRO-E for drafting, quality control, warehouse operations and changing dies to Leadership training for supervisors, CNC machining, fire safety, Excel, Effective negotiations for buyers and Kaizen training. The course in Hydraulic and pneumatics is the only one slated to be taught at TSC.

Elsa Martinez, senior HR administrator, noted it took Carling almost a year and considerable red tape to apply for and secure the training grant. She credited Steve Sanchez and Jim Holt of TSC with helping bring the application to its successful completion.

Skilled employees

Carling employees, who average 15 years with the company, include Juan Tovar who has been with Carling since 1973. After training is completed employees will receive at least a two percent raise. The average hourly wage at that point will be \$14.74.

Miranda said Carling, which is hiring this year as demand rises, has always been willing to train employees. He looks for mechani-

cal skills and aptitudes used in past jobs, including oil rig settings. The Puerto Rico native has noticed that companies which want to be in the Valley are thwarted by a workforce lacking applicable skill sets.

That has prompted Miranda's concerns about the future workforce. "The people we have here are going to come to a point where they retire." He recently participated in a career day at nearby Porter High School where there is discussion about reducing or closing the machining technology programs. Miranda was among those who called attention to the short-sightedness of cutting that cluster of careers from the curriculum. "These (machinists) are the skilled people who support our economy. If you don't start in high school, it is going to be very hard," to introduce people to the field.

The plant operates only one shift but has the space to add a second shift as demand escalates. Carling has adapted standard management practices that reduce inven-

Huge 100 ton presses bend, perforate and cut the tiny components that make up Carling breakings and switching. (VBR)



tory, buying less, but more frequently. "We plan around the lead time we promised to our customer. Our customers do the same: buy as they need what we make," Miranda said. Carling also aims to be a single-source shop for its customers, selling an appliance manufacturer all the switches they need for a finished product. "We make it easier for the customer," and of course, better for Carling. Getting ahead of the game, Carling is preparing for a new, non-mandatory certification: OSHA18001-2007.

"We recycle everything we use: metal scraps, oil, paper," Miranda said, and has been commended by Texas Commission on Environmental Quality.

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Q&A - The Virtual CFO

Mark Williams retired after 40 years as a tax accountant and CEO of small to mid-sized businesses in various industries. His MBA in Finance had backed up his experience in dealing with the financial aspects of operating a business. Realizing he had the tools, the knowledge and the interest in helping other businesses navigate their growth, in 2005 he became a part-time, virtual Chief Financial Officer. He stays connected via the internet and phone calls to his clients in construction, printing/publishing, automation technology and medical practice around the country. He recently launched markwilliamsvirtualcfo.com. He talked to VBR's editor from his winter home in the Valley.



Q What does a CFO do?

A A good CFO looks at your business critically and identifies where the cash is coming in and where it's going out. He'll design a financial control strategy to ensure that you don't run out of cash: the leaks are plugged and the flows start to come in. Most business failures happen because the company runs out of cash. A CFO is essential if you intend to grow your business to a decent size. A CFO can provide the higher level of experience that really makes a difference to your business.

Q I have a CPA, so why do I need a CFO?

A A CFO has seen successes and failures in business and knows what to look out for. With that experience comes vision of how scenarios will play out. A CFO looks at budgets and loan packages, things that an accountant doesn't do. Clients often tell me, 'Gee, my accountant never told me about that.' But many business owners see their accountant once or twice a year, to talk about taxes. In fact, there are restrictions on outside CPAs being both advisors and auditors of a business. When customers, suppliers and investors talk to a CFO, it raises their impression of the business, its size and its financial viability. Sometimes deals and investments are won on the credibility that a CFO brings. It gives stakeholders more confidence in dealing with your business.

Q What's wrong with staying with the advisor I currently have?

A A virtual CFO brings an independent perspective. He is able to see what is happening and tell you the truth. Your CFO will help you step back from the business and see it in a new

light, which is difficult for you to do unguided when you're buried in day-to-day business operations. Since the virtual CFO is not jockeying for a position in your company, he has an easier time getting cooperation from people who would block an employee viewed as a competitor.

Q What are the benefits of a virtual CFO over a real one?

A A virtual CFO generally will have more experience and skill than anyone you can afford to hire full-time. You have access to the training, perspective, contacts and know-how of a professional with years of experience, but at a minimal price. Your virtual CFO has likely seen the same problems you are facing many times before. He comes ready to solve the problems and you get results much faster.

Q Will I save on my bookkeeping and accounting expenses?

A No. You still need a bookkeeper and an accountant. But a CFO makes sure that they are doing their jobs correctly and complying with the latest regulations. A CFO is alert to the fiddles and frauds that employees have used elsewhere.

Q Can I afford a virtual CFO?

A I charge a flat fee of \$500 month which covers about four to six hours of my time. There is no contract so the relationship can be ended at any time. People who need an outside advisor see they are getting value for their money when consulting me via phone calls or emails. I'm happy to be viewed as a valuable team member. Any good CFO is worth much more than they cost in terms of the value they bring to the business.

Q Can you give an example of your virtual CFO work?

A A client who wanted to expand his operation wrote a business plan, one that investors would not have accepted. I redid the plan to make it more realistic and investor-friendly with projections that were not pie in the sky. I've worked on private placement memoranda for accredited investors. I've shopped loan packages to banks with different investment criteria.

For more information, see www.markwilliams-virtualcfo.com



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The Fish Guy

By Chuck Swanberg

How many times have you visited your doctor and found a fresh or saltwater fish tank in the waiting room? And how many times did you walk over to the tank to watch the live creatures within? Did you notice the calming effect of this watery world and feel less stressed? Health care providers have been capitalizing on this fascination to provide that calming effect for their patients, young and old alike.

Isaac Ramirez is “The Fish Guy” for the Rio Grande Valley and has been supplying fish tanks of varying sizes for doctors’ offices, businesses and homeowners for over 15 years. A native of San Benito and 1991 graduate of San Benito High School, Ramirez discovered his love for tropical fish when his mother bought him a fish bowl and fish when he was a child. It didn’t take long for the youngster to notice the impact of introducing too many fish into the fragile environment of a small tank. Ramirez learned everything he could about fish, aquariums and their maintenance of those tanks. In 1997, Ramirez formally began The Fish Guy business operating out of his home in Brownsville.

“What do you envision for your new tank?” Ramirez asks each new prospective client. “I can make it happen.” It’s this service-oriented approach that makes The Fish Guy successful in today’s market. Since each client is unique, Ramirez spends as much time with each new client as required to help them determine all aspects of their aquarium needs, addressing such issues as tank size. He sells and services tanks ranging from 20 gallons to 450 gallons, fresh or saltwater environment, and helps decide the type and number of fish, pump and filter sizes and types, siting of the tank and the maintenance needs of each new situation. In order to stay abreast of new technologies, Ramirez disassembles each new filtration system and then reassembles it to familiarize himself of its inner workings to provide service on the new system.

Referrals from existing customers account for most of his new business. Nearly 60 percent of The Fish Guy’s business comes from the medical community which includes hospitals, doctors’ offices and doctors’ homes. Approximately 10 percent of the aquarium business is from non-medical business and the balance of the business is in residential installations and maintenance. Ramirez maintains a personal relationship with all his clients and he remembers birthdays and anniversaries which further strengthens



his share of the aquarium market.

Recently widowed, Ramirez is the father of four children and is quickly learning the art of raising children while maintaining his business and taking care of his customers. Ramirez’s wife, Lisa, was the business manager and accountant for The Fish Guy and frequently offered council and guidance to her husband as he navigated the business throughout the Valley. Ramirez feels his wife’s loss acutely, especially since he’s had to shoulder all of his wife’s family and business duties. One of the ways he’s dealing with his and his children’s loss is to encourage their heightened interest in the family business. In fact, Ramirez’ son Jacob, age 15, is assuming some of the administrative aspects of the business such as bookkeeping. Ramirez said grooming his son in the day-to-day operation of the business is but one step in the healing process for him and his children.

Ramirez has two employees, one of whom is his brother, Fernando, who has taken on tank setup and maintenance. The Ramirez family connection is strong and apparent in the way The Fish Guy smiles when speaking of family support.

The Fish Guy loves what he calls his “hobby” business. He has rarely been asked to remove a fish tank, although he has done so when homes are downsized.

Ramirez is a strong supporter of the conservation of the oceans and beaches and is often called upon to demonstrate unusual marine life forms for children such as eels and live sponges. A man who is facing extraordinary challenges in his personal and professional life, Ramirez has demonstrated a strong commitment to his calling, his community and his family. The Fish Guy is not a fish tale, but a strong and vital member of the RGV business community. He can be reached at info@the-fishguytx.com.

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The Second Time Around

By Eileen Mattei

When Larry and Lisa Wray started their second catering company in 2007, they knew how it should differ from their first, the very successful Edible Pursuits which they had sold two years earlier.

Wray & Company Catering by Design, first of all, didn't have to prove their competency to the world. Their reputation was already golden on all counts: menu design and food preparation, event planning and impeccable service. They decided to accept only one major event per day. No more catering five Christmas parties in one day or multiple weddings in a weekend. This time around, too, the Wrays knew to rent, rather than buy, large trucks as needed to move the company's dishes and silverware, massive warming oven and coolers, dozens of huge coffee urns and the food for events serving up to 600 guests.

"Catering is fun. There are a lot of long hours but there's a lot of satisfaction, too," Lisa Wray said. Wray had been working in property management when she and her husband decided in 1992 that catering part-time would give her more flexibility while raising children.

Larry had extensive food service experience. "It was a creative outlet for me. I have always loved cooking," she said. "Menu concept is my forte." That goes back to a childhood when she designed all the menus for family parties.

The Wrays bought a 1930s dairy farm in the Los Indios area and did extensive renovations on the sturdily built, stuccoed milking barn, transforming it into a commercial kitchen. An adjacent barn was upgraded to store dishware, glassware, silverware, serving items and the décor used in catering events large and small. In the beginning, the company had only three employees: the Wrays and Lisa's sister Suzanne Clifton, who continues to work with them as sales coordinator.

Around 2005, the Wrays decided that they had been in business long enough. "We had worked hard for many years and were ready to try something different. We met a group that was interested in expanding their business. It was great

timing," Wray explained. The new owners acquired all the dishes and catering parapherna-



For major catering events, Lisa Wray has five chefs working in the company's commercial kitchen. (VBR)

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lia, but the commercial kitchen stayed with the Wrays.

After a two year hiatus, the Wrays had a change of heart and an event they wanted to cater. "It got to the point where we missed catering. But we decided if we were going to go back into it, we would be more selective," she said.

Weddings comprise a solid half of the business now, and the other half is split between corporate and social and fund-raising events. The head count is typically 50 people and up.

"Suzanne or I work with the clients to get their menu ideas," Wray said. Wray & Company meets with their clients at Social Situations, a venue for event vendors: florists, photographers and linen suppliers. "I work with such a great network of other vendors at different ends of the Valley."

Wray describes herself as a web searcher, and she is connected via Facebook with catering companies that she admires. "I look at what others are doing around the country. We try to stay on top of what's going on." Some clients are willing to try trendy plates, and Wray is open to ideas from brides about what they have seen elsewhere. She also attends a catering industry conference in Las Vegas to get

information on trends in foods and decorations.

On the Road

To an outsider, catering seems like a logistical nightmare. Once the contract is signed, Lisa Wray meets with her banquet supervisor and the two lead chefs. They go over the menu detail by detail, discussing the timing and display and making up a loading list. They decide what needs to be made the day ahead of the event, cooked the day of, and cooked on site. The head chef does a prep list for each menu, filling clipboards with tasks. Recently the kitchen recently added another walk-in cooler because so much food has to be refrigerated.

Wray & Company has 25 employees, including five chefs. "When the guys (chefs) are all in this kitchen, it's amazing what we put out. For larger events, we have a network of people that we have used for years and years." But when the guests go home, the caterers are still working: packing up, driving home, washing everything and putting it away for next time, including décor items such as candelabras and an authentic ranch wagon.

Wray said they made the right decision to limit themselves to a booking a single major quality event per day. That can still bring them marathon catering bouts: in March, the caterers completed 14 straight days of 12-hour days, catering a major golf tournament and weddings.



Last year, Wray had her own one-minute television spot called Savor the Flavor. She enjoyed giving catering tips, such as how to decide between a seated dinner and a buffet. This year, the company has created a professional portfolio that shows different events the caterers have done.

"A big thing about our company," Wray added, "is we like to give back." They have helped the local school districts by donating a BBQ dinner for 25 for a fundraiser and participated in tablescaping for Dining by Design cancer fund raiser.

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Trust Me...

By Susan LeMiles Holmes

“Trust me” is what a stranger says to you during a team building exercise, just before you close your eyes and let yourself fall backwards into his arms. Companies all over the world went crazy for expensive facilitated team-building activities. Believers in teambuilding exercises still spend money on river rafting adventures, paintball wars and walking on fire.

Taking people out of their normal work environment can eliminate distractions and provide opportunity to leave old assumptions behind. It can stimulate interaction, promote cultural unity and provide an environment conducive to creativity you can't get at your desk. But eventually, the term “teambuilding” took on a generic existence that included corporate recreation, confidence building, reward for performance, planning or goal setting and.....ugh, preparation for life altering, strategic change.

To my knowledge, no one has come up with a formula measuring the return on investment for dollars spent on teambuilding activities. Even though results are subjective and deemed unmeasurable, most leaders and managers understand their importance. In these “post recession” times, executives bent on cost justification and focused on ROI have moved teambuilding events to the company cafeteria.

The best professional teambuilding providers have acknowledged that understanding the dynamics of personality should be included in any kind of team intervention. This is an activity you can investigate with your team without a paid facilitator. Imagine, figuring out the motivations, innate gifts and blind spots of individual team members in thirty minutes or less and using the new knowledge and the time you saved leading your team to conquering the competition.

Our brains are all wired differently. We can quickly discover how to best communicate with each other, accept each other and complement the other members of our team by using one of the personality inventories on the commercial teambuilding market. Almost all of them are based on original research done in the 1940's by the mother/daughter team of Katherine Cook Briggs and Isabel Briggs Myers. They developed a paper and pencil test that is known as the MBTI or Myers Briggs Type Indicator.

The ladies initially tested family and friends, in hopes of resolving conflicts and matching people to appropriate work. This test is given to about 2,000,000 Americans annually and has been translated into thirty languages. The MBTI is a self-assessment and its ease of use and high statistical validity make it

one of the most respected personality instruments in existence.

Understanding how people get and expend their energy, take in information and make decisions allows us to get our teams moving and meet the needs of the individuals performing the work. Taking the inventory as a team and sharing results openly allows nonjudgmental discussion of differences, conflicts and bottlenecks that would otherwise fester and prevent team progress. It further assures that each team member is assigned tasks within their natural personality skill-set thereby multiplying the likelihood of their individual and collective success.

To introduce your team to Myers Briggs personality analysis, go to www.teamtechnology.co.uk. The following items are offered at no cost: completion and scoring of the questionnaire, a seven-page online report of each person's personality type and leadership style, information to help you clarify individual personality type and a printable, one-page summary of each person's results.

Of course you exchange your contact information for the testing tool. The assessment itself will not explain how to apply the knowledge to team building. You will have to buy Team Technology's products or find a book on Amazon to get that. But

this teambuilding exercise is still cheaper than a raft trip or a fire walk...and a lot less messy than shepherding.

MBTI will be especially helpful if you have a new team. One blog, personalisis.com, describes a team as going through the same developmental process as a child, “a group of babies who must learn to walk and talk together... then face the awkward teenage years – full of angst, conflicts, misunderstandings and upsets to eventually grow up and experience the pleasures of camaraderie, efficiency, effectiveness, esprit de corps, and high productivity.” Even high-functioning established teams aren't bullet-proof. Teams are fluid; they do not remain the same. Teamwork is not automatic; team spirit is not constant. Keep the fires burning and occasionally reignite the spark.

Trust me.....

*Susan LeMiles Holmes is Director of Career Services at TSTC and a published novelist. You can inquire about hiring TSTC graduates by emailing susan.holmes@harlingen.tstc.edu or learn about Susan's novel set in The Valley, *Touch the Mayan Moon* at www.susanlemiles.com.*

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Non-traditional Students Study at Phoenix

By Eileen Mattei

Mikal Powers, the Campus Director for the University of Phoenix's new Mission campus, said the school's average student is a lot like him: someone who chose a different path and did not immediately go onto a college degree. He served in the Navy for five years, and his priorities changed. "I came to a point where I knew what I wanted to do: to ad-

vance in the military and become an officer. I knew I needed a degree." Powers, who earned an MBA from the University of Phoenix and is working on a second master's degree, is now an officer in the Coast Guard Reserve.

The University of Phoenix, established for adult learners in 1976, uses technology to expand students' access to learning and to undergraduate and graduate degrees. Currently over 400,000 students are enrolled and taking courses online and at some 230 bricks and mortar campuses. Non-traditional students like Powers comprise 76 percent of the enrollment. The average undergraduate is 32 years old and the average graduate student is 37.

Phoenix students report they are more comfortable in classes with their peers: individuals in their 30s who are working full-time, Powers said. "The vast number is cur-

rently employed and working to move up in their organizations." Some are in a degree program in order to change careers into a field with a better job outlook. But they are all adults who realized that further education was essential for their career. Every day, Powers mentioned, several Americans who work at maquilas will stop by the Shary Road campus and ask about the school and graduate courses.

The Mission campus, which opened last September, has a student research area with 24 computers, an adjoining resource center with free popcorn and coffee, learning team rooms and classrooms. Students can test out of lower division classes by demonstrating competency in a subject.

Approximately 500 students are currently enrolled there in bachelor or master degrees in business, criminal justice or healthcare administration programs on the graduate and undergraduate level. Powers said each student has a committed graduation team of academic counselor, finance advisor (scholarships and financial aid), enrollment advisor and student service coordinator that stays with them, making sure only classes needed to graduate are taken. "Because of the level of support that we provide, we hear positive feedback that we are always there for them, plus we have 24 hour tech support."

Phoenix relies on a local faculty of 40, most of whom are working in their field of instruction. Some have taught at local universities and all have at least a master's. "Faculty go through a rigorous assessment process and are evaluated on facilitation style," said Powers who is still seeking faculty. "The faculty member is one of the key components of the learning experience for students." Immersion in the field makes their instruction "applicable relevant and timely. Students can take skills learned in class and apply them the next day."

As elsewhere, Valley students take a mix of online and on-campus courses. The depth and breadth of online programs is extensive and includes students from all states and many countries. Those courses start weekly, unlike the on-campus offerings.

Phoenix officials met with Valley Workforce Solutions staff to determine where the growth in jobs was projected and what programs South Texas College and UTPA already offered. "We're here to complement the work they have already done and work in collaboration with them," Powers said. Phoenix intended to cater to students who were not able to attend college full-time. Articulation agreements have been signed so STC graduates have pathways



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Mikal Powers, University of Phoenix campus director, and Dr. Ken Romano, Academic Affairs, in March launched the school's on-campus MBA program. (VBR)



to continuing their education at Phoenix. In another scenario, when a UTPA student needs only a class or two to their degree, but the course is not offered for every semester, "we can help with single course offerings online."

Nationally the University of Phoenix partners with business, such as T-Mobile, PepsiCo., Frito-Lay, Allied Barton and AT&T, to address skills gaps in a company's current employees and to improve program structure. "We are adaptable and flexible when it comes to meeting employers' needs," scheduling classes that accommodate the work day and course priorities. Phoenix offers discounted tuition rates to employees of partner companies and can function as a continuing education source that enables employees to maintain qualifications for jobs and achieve professional development.

The University of Phoenix has teamed with the RGV Vipers to help promote literacy and has a mobile reading room set up at every home game. That is one of multiple partnerships Phoenix expects to develop in the region.

Locally the school has an active 700-member alumni association (from online and on campus classes.) "I'm excited about the opportunity for growth here in Mission," Powers concluded.



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Preparing Businesses for Cloud Computing

By Edward Lugo

The IT industry may shout that Cloud Computing is the way of the future and that all businesses should move their IT to the Cloud. The reality is that any IT solution should be investigated and planned, whether it's within your office or accessed via the Internet. So, what factors will you need to consider? The following guidelines address some of the pains that can be experienced with a hurried, unstructured move to Cloud computing.

Identify what you want in the Cloud. Cloud computing doesn't need to be an 'all or nothing' project. Start with a picture of your current IT setup and the functionality that it gives your business. If you're just starting up, this will be different than if your business is already established with historical information. Is there something new you want to explore, like email marketing or a prospect database? This could be perfect for the Cloud. But if you are looking to only move pieces of your existing IT capability, consider any flow-on effects to other systems. Make sure that a move to the Cloud won't hinder any future integration opportunities.

Confirm your ongoing costs and savings. Cloud providers will point out the cost savings from using a centrally owned and managed system. Certainly this may give your business access to IT at a fraction of the cost of owning it yourself. However, can your business handle the cost on an ongoing basis instead of a one-off purchase when you have the cash to invest? If there is still a large amount of technology needed in your business, Cloud computing may not significantly decrease your support costs. Do your homework and know the costs you will be committing to and where the savings will be coming from.

Confirm the flexibility. Cloud solutions can be cut-down versions of the full software, so if you are getting 'email' (for example), make sure you know what functionality is included and what isn't. How flexible is the hosted system if you want to make changes, like increasing attachment size limits? Are you locked in to what you can change and what you can't ... and are you OK with that?

Prove the Backup & Disaster Recovery plans. Debate rages on whether businesses with their information in the Cloud also need their own local backup. Thoroughly reviewing your provider's agreement is only the first step. Ask about their last Disaster Recovery test. Include offsite backup testing reports

in your contract. Plan how your business will survive if your Cloud provider fails and ensure your plan is implemented and tested on a regular basis.

Review your Infrastructure. Your Cloud solutions still have to be accessed via your local computers with your internet connection. If your PC is slow, or if you are significantly increasing your internet usage, then your Cloud application may be slow or unreliable. Consider your local IT components and plan for any necessary upgrades. Also consider additional redundancy, like a backup internet connection or spare internet modem, as any failure in your connectivity will have a larger impact.

Ultimately, Cloud computing must deliver increased business benefits or reduce IT costs overall without reducing functionality, unless your business is prepared to make sacrifices to improve your bottom line.

Edward Lugo, owner of Computer Troubleshooters in the Rio Grande Valley, can cut through the hype and make your Cloud adoption a success. Contact him at elugo@comptroub.com.



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Investors Revive a Tropical Beauty

By Eileen Mattei

The lush 1,400 acre resort with palms towering over the red tile roof of the white hacienda brings to mind postcards of a tropical getaway. The seven-mile long waterway me-



Xavier Montemayor has been President of Rancho Viejo Resort Country Club since December. (VBR)

andering through the resort enhances the tranquility and beauty of the destination. Among the amenities at this hidden gem are two 18-hole championship golf courses, fine dining restaurants, a lagoon-style pool with a waterfall and swim-up bar, and guest rooms in secluded villas surrounded by tropical landscaping.

Valley residents and travelers have slightly different views of this storied property, Rancho Viejo Resort & Country Club. But both those views are destined to change as Rancho Viejo goes deeper into a major two-year makeover.

In December 2011, two Valley families, the Arguelles and Lawlers, purchased the golfing paradise and resort which since 1978 had been operated by the Trapp family. "We all loved the property. Honestly, it's beautiful. We felt it had so much potential that hadn't been tapped. We knew the Valley had a void when it came to a country club resort," said Xavier Montemayor. He is president of Rancho Viejo Resort & Country Club, a member of the Arguelles family, and experienced in finance.

The new investors had been members

of the Rancho Viejo Country Club since its beginning and believed that tender, loving care could return it to its former stature. "We wanted to bring it back. Things are a little quirky here, like your great-grandmother's house, but that's what gives it personality and charm. We locals have forgotten how pretty this area is," Montemayor said.

The new owners' two-year plan of capital improvements and renovations aimed to stay true to the resort's spirit, building on its 'good bones' and mature landscaping. They turned away architects who wanted to raze the existing buildings and put in new structures similar to what every other resort has.

Remodeling began at the clubhouse, the heart and soul of the resort, but it is no easy task to keep your current customers and members happy in the midst of a makeover.

"We can't close to redo things, so we have to move step by step," Montemayor said. The Rancho Village dining rooms have been relocated while ceilings and floors are replaced and the interiors refreshed. The Convention Center has undergone major renovations and reopened with weddings and conferences al-

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ready booked. The revamped fine-dining room Casa Grande is also booking events. The large resort pool, which years ago won awards for its innovative styling, re-opened for Semana Santa with a new pool deck along with a full service

bar and grill for an expanded poolside menu.

The golf courses, El Diablo and El Angel, are having water features restored and extensive landscape work done along with other updates. The goal is to satisfy current members, attract new members and guests, and once again host tournaments including a PGA qualifying tournament.

What sets Rancho Viejo apart from other resorts are its guest rooms. Instead of a central hotel building, the resort offers 58 individual guest rooms in villas, now equipped with high speed internet. The first of the Villa rooms have already been remodeled with Saltillo tile floors, European kitchens, upgraded bathrooms and new furniture, and the rest should be completed by June.

A resort doesn't thrive on its grounds and buildings alone. While Montemayor is directing the changes at Rancho Viejo, Kelly Cuff of Scottford Enterprises, a hospitality management firm, is the resort's general manager. Wendy Werley Bullock, a LPGA pro, is the Director of Sports & Wellness. Bullock, formerly of

the La Costa Resort and Spa, coached author Deepak Chopra. He based his book "Seven Lessons for the Game of Life" on her teachings. She will lead a new

emphasis on fitness including kids' camps for golf and tennis.

Montemayor said some resort guests come for stays of up to six months. Others arrive for a four-day golfing trip or an extended stay while traveling on business. "It's a comfortable place to be because this is a resort with two different restaurants attached. One of the beauties of this community is it is safe." He noted that because of security issues in Mexico, Mexican families visiting country club homes are staying longer, which is drawing additional family members to visit.

Originally, residents of Rancho Viejo were all members of the country club, but when town incorporated in 1980, membership was no longer required for residents. The new owners are positioning country club memberships to attract both Valley and Rancho Viejo residents. Memberships range from Dining, Social and Recreational to General Golf and Corporate levels.

By late May, many of the most important cosmetic changes will be completed, Montemayor said. "There has never been a dull moment. There's a lot to do and we're going as fast as we can."



These golfers from Monterrey, dubbed Team Scorpion, have been coming to Rancho Viejo for 14 years. (Courtesy)

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Top Ten Ways to Prevent A Lawsuit: Part 2

By Michael Pruneda

Last month's article, which began the series "Top Ten Ways to Prevent a Lawsuit," discussed the number 10 reason why a business might be vulnerable to a lawsuit. Hiring the right employees involves due diligence and establishing proper policies and procedures that will protect business interests from unscrupulous or reckless employees.

Step #9: Establish Privacy Policies

Melissa* was an account manager for a local bank. During the course of the business day, she would check her personal email and Facebook account and exchange emails or post on her page randomly. Melissa's Facebook page included both her personal information and the name of her employer. One day, Melissa posted that her employer was treating her unfairly and that she hated her job. Melissa was fired the next day. Melissa immediately filed for unemployment benefits and sued her employer for wrongful termination and for a violation of her privacy rights.

Melissa's case was not as clear-cut as she thought. The company's policies prohibited the use of company property for personal use. The

company also had a policy prohibiting employees from engaging in conduct that adversely reflected on the company. The Court ruled the company had no legal right to monitor Melissa's private conduct from her personal computer or cellphone; however, Melissa lost both her wrongful termination and privacy claims because she violated the company's policies by using the company's computer for her own personal use and spoke negatively about the company.

In today's internet age, it is vital that policies and procedures be implemented that address the unlimited and differing circumstances of workplace conduct. Company review and implementation of policies should adapt to technological advances. Otherwise, a company could end up in court having to face these challenges and legal issues. The fine line that exists between what is private and public is being decided in courtrooms throughout the country. Enabling yourself to monitor computer usage and email accounts should be supported by policies that meet legal standards. It has been argued that disclosing any information online about a company and its employees entitles the employer to have access to these private accounts to protect the company from further exposure, especially if it is disparaging and casts the company in a negative light. But in many states, there

is not a legal precedent for firing an employee for the private content of their personal social network accounts and because of it, precautions must be taken in the form of strict and unambiguous privacy policies and procedures.

Implementing policies that protect business interests and that respect state and federal privacy laws will allow you to control the use of company property and operating systems without violating the rights of your employees. Because much of today's business transactions occur through electronic messaging (email), it is necessary to communicate to personnel that your business policies restrict personal activity. Inform your employees that all content written and sent is subject to scrutiny by you or by a specially trained manager. You can implement computer software that will send alerts to your employees if improper language or specific words were used in the course of an email exchange.

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This course is an introduction to basic Revit software utilization. Emphasis is placed on setup; creating and modifying geometry; storing and retrieving predefined shapes; placing, rotating, and scaling objects, adding text and dimensions, using layers, coordinate systems, and plot/print to scale.

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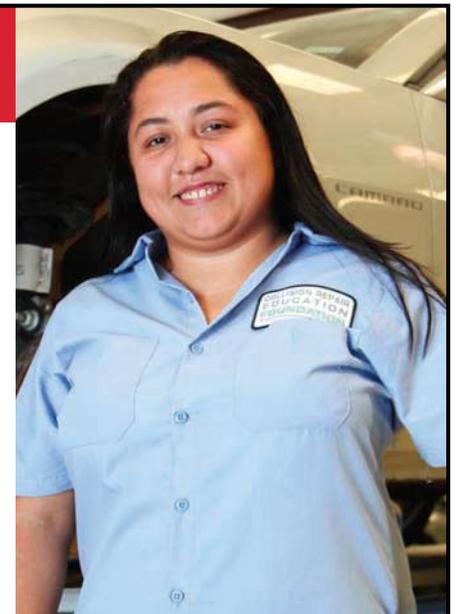
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proper conduct of management or colleagues should not be revealed to the general public in any social networking outlet. This should be stated clearly in your company's policies and procedures. The use of office equipment on company time should be subject to employer scrutiny, but if it violates employee rights, then you may be subject to a lawsuit.

If you already have computer systems in place that check your employees' personal email accounts and are unsure if you are in violation of your employee's rights, consulting an attorney is advisable. The best way to protect your company is to establish safeguards that prevent you and your employees from any missteps that are not clearly communicated from the onset of their employment. Disregarding laws and violating their right to privacy, even if it is in an office setting, can be a costly mistake that may have to be settled in court.

If you have questions about inserting the right privacy policies and procedures in your business, or need counsel if you find yourself in a violation of privacy lawsuit, contact Michael Pruneda from The Pruneda Law Firm at 956-702-9675, or via web at: www.themcallenbusinesslawyer.com or www.michaelpruneda.com.

Caso Simplifies Documents

By Eileen Mattei

When you're dealing with something as potentially yawn-inducing as document management, it helps to have a company founder who identifies himself as the Chief Entertainment Officer.

Casey McClellan, founder and president of Caso Inc. Document Management, realized that offices get overwhelmed by documents: coffee-stained, misfiled, mountains of paper. In 1997, he started Caso to provide document management. Caso's forte is problem solving: seeing what needs to be done and doing it. "I've been fortunate enough to hire really smart people, technical people," including an actual Chief Executive Officer, he said. The company has grown because it helps its customers improve their access to data, lower operating costs and streamline workflow.

Documents exist in many formats: paper, emails, images, audio tapes, electronic forms. For the companies that have boxes of documents and rooms filled with document boxes, maybe the time has come to adopt a new approach.

"As technology gets more advanced, we come up with easier ways to do the things we do," McClellan said at a presentation in Harlingen. Caso provides "on-site conversion" (document scanning at 50

Casey McClellan. (VBR)



pages in three minutes) and Enterprise Content Management (ECM in industry jargon) which organizes access to the digitized electronic files. The process begins with capture (scanning) of the documents, turning stacks of files into lines of code. Then comes classifying which is the sorting of the contents by a customized index that automatically identifies, organizes

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and routes files, often to multiple locations. That is followed by extracting and validating which assures the accuracy of the entire document, checking the data base against content and routing. The last step is exporting, moving the electronic files to an indexed archive. Caso provides customized solutions that are non-proprietary, by getting to know the client's company structure and environment.

ROI

The ROI for ECM is \$6.12 per dollar spent, McClellan said. Most of us spend embarrassing amounts time hunting for documents, which is an expensive use of time. In addition, storing boxes of documents eats up space that could be used more productively. Caso's clients have the option of archiving their documents in an Enterprise system, which is the client's in-house silo, or else they can use hosted, exterior cloud storage. The enterprise base requires the user to purchase storage servers based on the company's peak usage. Using the hosted cloud is much cheaper because the fee is based on how much access is used from minute to minute. Capital outlay for servers is avoided.

"Images are much safer in a silo instead of on a business' own server," McClellan said. Cloud silos have invested in multiple site redundancy and backups.

Additionally, documents put into ECM systems go through an image cleanup process which removes smudges and darkens faint document. Files can have areas redacted which is useful for HR files (hiding Social Security Numbers and sensitive information). Software makes the files, such as shipping data, immediately accessible by staff or customers with appropriate passwords. In AP for example, ECM can reveal where an order or payment is waiting for approval and where the bottlenecks are. Electronic forms filed in the system adhere to individual "business rules" that keep documents from being filled incorrectly.

"More and more government agencies are saying that, provided you keep a form of documents electronically, you can destroy the original," McClellan said. In some cases electronic files have turned out to be complete while the hard copy over time has had pages go missing.

"I spend most of time teaching," said McClellan, who was once production manager at Carnegie Hall and in show business. "We are committed to building in the Valley and providing exceptional service." Melba Estapa heads the regional Caso branch.

For more information call Melba Estapa at 956-264-6261 or see www.caso.com

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Crafter Takes Le French Bags Uptown

By Eileen Mattei

So far this year, Rebecca Warner has filled an order from cosmetics giant L’Oreal for 200 of her branded handbags. The custom bags were given to guests at Fashion Week 2012 in New York City in January. Warner was also one of four artisans invited to the January Dallas Market where her Le French Laundry burlap bags were such a hit that she has been invited to return in June. Her bags, which she now wholesales only, are carried by 81 upscale stores in eight states.

That’s a strong start to the year for a woman who has turned her lifelong aptitude for crafts and a current fondness for burlap into a thriving cottage industry. “I’ve been crafting all my life, crocheting next to my grandma when I was six years old,” Warner said. “I’m self-taught. I read blogs and figure out to make things at my table. I’ve always liked making my own handbags. And I love burlap.” For years, Warner had rescued old wood furniture and embellished chairs and tables with an underwater scene or a landscape.

In 2007 she started selling on the craft website Etsy. She had developed three brands and websites for her crafts, targeting rustic,

country and eco-fabric markets. “I thought it was a great way to show everything I do. It was my gateway to the world,” Warner said. “But it’s all happened so fast. It really took off last year.” That’s when she met Harlingen Downtown merchants Carlos Garcia and Alex Hernandez and partnered with them on the KWL & Company boutique on Jackson Street. They encouraged Warner to attend a vintage market in Austin where her burlap bags and pillows caught an important eye.

“A woman came up to me there and said ‘I’m from the Dallas market. I love your bags. I love your pillows.’ I didn’t understand what that meant,” Warner said. She soon learned it meant the golden pot at the end of the rainbow: Warner was one of four artisans invited to sell their handiwork at the fabled wholesale showcase.

An outgoing and sunny “people person,” Warner started talking to fellow craft and fabric shoppers at Hobby Lobby and Wal-Mart, meeting women happy to sew for her on an informal contract basis. Warner had grown up in the LeMoyné Garden housing project and knew that her mother would have jumped at the opportunity back then to earn money sewing at home. So Warner went to the LeMoyné housing office and told the director that she was looking for grandmothers or single moms who had sew-

Rebecca Warner continues to market her shabby chic furniture through KWL & Co boutique in Harlingen. (Courtesy)



ing skills and wanted to work from home part-time.

Warner said she has discovered excellent seamstresses. “I’ve got the most wonderful ladies. Their work sewing the bags is beautiful. I give them my sample, and it’s like they read my mind. It’s just perfect.” In addition, Warner is gratified she can provide a source of income for people with a background similar to hers.

Warner didn’t have her cottage industry in place when a L’Oreal representative found Warner’s burlap bags on Etsy last fall and initiated negotiations and design talks. By the time the order was placed, Warner had only two weeks to fill “our biggest order ever.” She enlisted her husband to cut fabric, her 8-months-pregnant daughter to put on the art work, and her son-in-law to cut handles. Warner sewed everything together, met the deadline and heard about the raves her bags won from L’Oreal’s guests. “My husband is such a trouper. In real life he’s a fireman,” Warner said, while helping tend store at KWL where her shabby-chic furniture is displayed.

Now Warner is turning out one-of-a-kind designs, preparing for the Round Top Antiques Festival which begins April 30. Then comes her summer collection at the Dallas Market.

“We have been so busy we had to close down our three (retail) websites,” she explained, still amazed at the popularity of her products. “Everybody has art in them. Everyone can craft,” said Warner, who enjoys mentoring crafters with original ideas. She bought her first sewing machine last year and laughed that she hasn’t had time to learn anything beyond sewing straight lines. “I think I have enough to keep me busy through the years.”

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Doing Good

By Eileen Mattei

Relocating a busy retail operation into a building smaller than the original store does not at first seem like the brightest decision. But location makes a big difference, as Goodwill Industries determined before they moved their Brownsville thrift store from Price Road to Ruben Torres Blvd., near the busy HEB and the north bus transfer station. Marjorie Boudreaux of Goodwill explained that surveys have shown that the most important factor for people who donate clothing and household goods to a thrift shop is the convenience of accessing the shop. The second factor is the mission of the non-profit.

“Part of what we wanted do was to elevate the Goodwill experience,” said Boudreaux, inside the bright, high-ceilinged new building. Elevated monitors run digital messages announcing the current discounts on the tidily arranged racks of clothing. Rapid merchandise turnover is a Goodwill given, with inventory in the store no more than a month. “We have folks who come in every day to go treasure hunting,” she said. “Some of donors shop here and joke about buying what they just

donated.”

The Brownsville Goodwill store averages 10 to 30 donors a day. That store, combined that with the thrift store in Pharr and the two manned donation stations at Valle Vista mall in Harlingen and in McAllen on Nolana Loop, account for a daily average of 100 donors. At each location, the donors set the value of the donation and receive a tax receipt, said Katherine Fenner, regional operations manager. Clothing and household goods come from people who are cleaning out their closets, moving to a new home or have garage sales items that didn't sell.

Goodwill thrift stores exist to fund the non-profit's job training programs for individuals with disabilities or disadvantages that create barriers to employment. “We keep our administrative costs to four percent and the rest goes into job training program. We take folks with disabilities and give them experience and dignity and a small paycheck,” said Boudreaux. In January



Katherine Fenner, Marjorie Boudreaux and Dan Owen welcomed the opening of a Goodwill store more accessible for Brownsville donors. (VBR)

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Goodwill in the Valley had 81 participants. Goodwill's Workforce Development division provides the training for the participants/clients employed through the Goodwill Temporary Service (GTS) or other commercial contracts, which include janitorial and document management. Typically clients are assigned a case manager who helps them overcome employment barriers ranging from physical handicaps and mental illness to a lack of skills.

Not like 20 years ago

Because of the philanthropic nature of Goodwill, the nonprofit once assumed that businesses and agencies would favor Goodwill clients over standard hires. "That was true 20 years ago," said Dan Owen, Goodwill's Vice president of operations. "One of the things we've come to realize is that nowadays you have to have quality workers and the right price point," to win a service contract. "So we've positioned ourselves companywide to compete. We are completely centered on training."

Goodwill invests significant time in training people to high standards. "We invest time in the people. Ultimately that's what business is about: the human element. It's about your customers and your employees," Owen said. "Along the line, sometimes companies

forget it's about people. I personally think many businesses fail because they don't keep eye on human element."

The Rio Grande Valley is considered one of the fastest growing areas in America. "With that comes great opportunities," Owen said. Goodwill has a track record of providing contract services (janitorial, document services, mail room operations) to state agencies such as TxDot, DPS and HHS as well as to federal agencies like IRS and the U.S. Army. For Goodwill of South Texas, the strongest growth area may be in document management services – storage, imaging, and destruction, according to Owen. "We do quite a bit of business with state agencies already. We are seriously looking at

contracts with municipalities, universities and school districts." Facilities management including custodial and groundskeeping, and even turnkey services, can play a growing part of the Goodwill scope of services on the border.



Goodwill President & CEO John Owen prepares for the walk-through of the new building with Dan Owen. (Courtesy)

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Keeping Your Customers

By Janie Caballero



The economic downturn has dramatically changed consumer spending.

Customers have become less brand loyal and are more willing to try new companies in the hopes of saving money. This uncertainty has prompted entrepreneurs to

step back and consider new strategies for generating sales. Still, one definite strategy to maintain and perhaps increase sales lies with a group of people who are often overlooked - current customers.

A much-repeated and veritable axiom states that it is more expensive to recruit new customers (and obviously even more expensive to win back dissatisfied clientele) than to keep regular customers. Clearly, business owners should concentrate on keeping existing customers satisfied to generate repeat sales. Ultimately, the goal is to convert current customers into loyal customers.

This loyalty is frequently attained through excellent customer satisfaction, which is generally achieved through above-average and personalized service. First-rate satisfaction requires a strong understanding of what customers want and meeting these aspirations with value-added benefits.

What do customers want? The answer lies by knowing and collecting information on what customers have purchased in the past, their buying tendencies, and predicting possible purchases in the future based on these patterns of behavior.

Large companies spend great sums of money on existing customer databases that collect consumption behavior. These databases are regularly utilized to effectively promote sales, events, and other news-worthy notes to entice customers to return for more purchases.

Even though small businesses may not have large budgets to spend on sophisticated databases, this should not be a deterrent to collecting customer information. Business owners can use simple spreadsheets or other less expensive software programs as tools to input information. An effective method to continually build data using this tool is to capture customer contact and purchasing information

when customers visit the store or company. E-mail addresses, for example, can be obtained through surveys, comment cards, or upon making transactions.

Contrary to what some might think, existing customers are not annoyed by receiving emails from businesses they frequent, especially if not all emails are sales pitches. Birthday and holiday greetings or e-mail invitations to special events are generally welcomed, even more so if the emails include discount coupons or early-bird shopping opportunities.

Additional customer information may be obtained through the use of these coupons. Coupons, in comparison to most newspaper ads, have the advantage of tracking purchasing patterns. Business owners should always keep track of which advertising methods work best to increase sales for a truer picture of their customer base.

For a small business, it is crucial to foment customer loyalty, especially with the current changes to consumer spending. It is good to remember that one ready strategy to maintain, and perhaps increase sales, lies with current customers. If business owners can provide value and personalization in addition to excellent customer service, they are more apt to build a loyal client base for their long-term success.

Janie Caballero is a certified Senior Business Advisor for the UTPA Small Business Development Center (SBDC) and holds a Bachelor of Business Administration in Finance and a Master of Business Administration from The University of Texas-Pan American. Recently, Janie was named the 2011 State Star for the South-West Texas Border SBDC Network for her outstanding performance. The UTPA SBDC is components of the Business Development & Innovation (BDI) Group at The University of Texas-Pan American (UTPA) in Edinburg. For further information on BDI Group services, please call (956) 665-7535.



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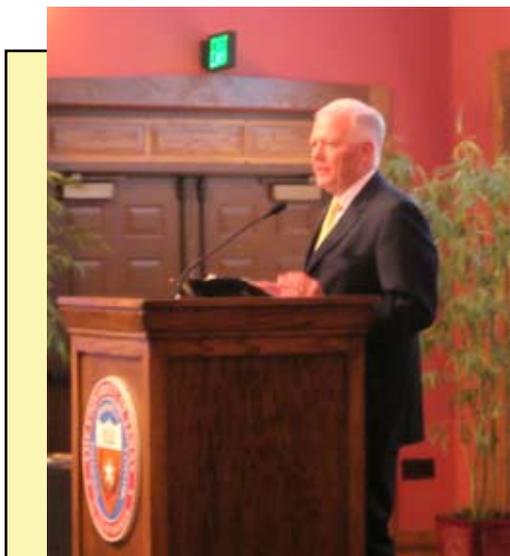
In the Spotlight



HEB's Read 3 program brought Oscar Casares, acclaimed author of "Brownsville" and "Amigoland," back to his hometown to read to Martin Elementary school students at HEB's Boca Chica store. As part of its philanthropic program promoting early childhood literacy, HEB established an in-store reading center there stocked with children's books creating a spot where parents can sit and read to their children. The objective is to encourage parents to read to their children three times a week in the years before kindergarten to help them develop reading skills so essential for success. About a half million Texas pre-schoolers or 26 percent do not have books read to them regularly. The Read 3 program is accepting donations of new and used kids' books that will be donated to non-profits. (James Byard UTB)



TSTC held an interview practicum event for their graduating students on March 22nd. Business people, like Ryan O'Reilly of Dish Network volunteered their time to give soon-to-graduate TSTC students an opportunity to practice their job interview skills and be evaluated on their performance. (Courtesy)



Ray Hunt, CEO of Hunt Oil, listed the five attributes of successful businesses at UTB's first Business Appreciation Breakfast. What separates a great business from a good one, Hunt said, are a strong corporate culture of shared values and work ethics, a differentiation from others in the field, adaptability, the ability to move quickly, and a willingness to be contrarian. The event honored Serigo Arguelles of FINSA, Rene Capistran of SpawGlass and Jo Wagner of CTO, Inc. (VBR)

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