

From Rim Shots  
to Results With....

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# **SLAM DUNK MARKETING**

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**CHAPTER 4**  
**"ONE-TWO" TRAFFIC**

By Friday afternoon the details were nearly worked out on the marketing strategy Lou had unknowingly inspired from his post in the Downtown Barbershop. Kate and I, working long hours together for days, decided to revamp what had been a so-so happy hour at the Red River Grill. We had never made the event a top priority, which in retrospect was a mistake. Why do something if you're not going to give it your best shot?

Our new-and-improved happy hour, scheduled to take place from 4:30 to 5:30 p.m. each night of the week, would feature a "Buy One, Get One Free" special on draft beer and an "Extra Shot for Only a \$1 More" discount on mixed drinks. We figured we could not only attract new business through the doors, but also reward the regulars who congregated around the bar after work.

During the first week of the promotion, we planned to set up a fishbowl by the greeter stand to collect

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business cards for nightly drawings. We'd give away T-shirts bearing the Red River Grill logo on the back. A local silk-screener gave us a volume discount — \$10 — for an order of 250. The information gleaned from the business cards would be input into a database for future e-mail blasts, texts and mailings.

Taking another cue from Lou, we'd make an effort to learn and use the names of guests, especially first-timers, making everyone feel welcome and appreciated. To start our own Wall of Fame, we bought a point-and-shoot camera to take pictures of people smiling and enjoying themselves. Perhaps Coach would even drop by one night for a mug shot, which I'd be sure to hang in a place of honor. We'd advertise the details of the promotion on a banner hung in the front window of the restaurant and on table tents placed on every table-top and in front of every other barstool. If the initial response to the new happy hour was encouraging, we'd also run ads in the programs at Wildcat games.

On paper, the event looked like a winner. The banner and table tents would be ready in a week. If all went well, we'd get the \$275 investment back along with the extra margins we'd generate in only three days! Prior to opening night, we'd brief the front of the house on the happy hour, going over the details and what we wanted the staff to do. Kate and I were giddy with excitement. So giddy, in fact, that Kate decided to take the weekend off and I made plans to attend the basketball game that night.

Lacking the time for most leisure activities, I had gotten in the habit of giving my ticket away on game nights, usually to one of my employees. But I kept it this time, not wanting to miss the long-awaited show-

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down between the Mustangs and Wildcats. The game, of course, was the talk of the town. You couldn't walk into any public place, from the gas station to the grocery store, without hearing opinions about who'd win and why.

The local TV stations had been running team features every night of the week preceding the tip-off, including what I considered to be blatant advertising — a report alerting fans that the first 1,000 in the arena would receive an authentic Wildcat towel commemorating the big game. It would be a sure collector's item and just the thing to spin overhead like a lasso to distract opposing players on the free-throw line. The news anchors treated the story with all the seriousness of a political coup.

Towels would be just part of the picture. In all Wildcat games, fans in attendance can come away with team Frisbees which the cheerleaders let fly into the stands during breaks in the action. At half time, randomly selected ticket holders get to try hard-to-make shots at the hoop for a chance to win prizes. The tougher the shot, the better the prize — all put up by the arena's corporate sponsors. There's even a miniature blimp, remotely controlled, that cruises around the rafters dropping "You Win!" tokens into the outstretched hands of enthusiastic fans. The tokens can be redeemed for any number of team souvenirs.

The concession stands, far too many to count, move mind-boggling amounts of hot dogs, cotton candy, nachos, red-licorice ropes and other artery-clogging products. And to wash it all down, there's an endless

supply of beer and soft drinks. The whole Wildcat-watching experience is a marketing masterpiece.

That's what I was thinking to myself as I handed my ticket to the attendant at the door a few minutes prior to game time. Before reaching Portal A, the one leading to my seat, I bumped into Lucinda Robertson, a close friend of mine who manages sales and marketing at the arena. She was straightening a row of stuffed animals — Wildcats, of course — at one of the souvenir stands.

“Dean, how are you? Seems like I haven't seen you forever,” Lucinda said, still going about her work.

“I've been swamped,” I said. “Looks like you have your hands full, too.”

“You have no idea. Getting everything done in time for this game has made me busier than a one-armed wallpaper hanger with insomnia.” Lucinda stepped back from the display to check her alignment. “But now, I'm happy to say, my work is done.”

“You deserve a raise,” I said.

“Because I can put stuffed animals in a straight line?”

“No, because this place rakes it in game after game,” I said.

The roar of the crowd interrupted our conversation. The game had begun and, from the sound of it, the Wildcats had scored the first basket.

"Where you sitting?" Lucinda asked.

"Center court, 20 rows up."

"Tell you what," she said. "Ever watched the game from the sky box?"

"I've been in there, but never to watch a game."

"Let's go. We can catch up on life."

Lucinda and I took back seats in the sky box, leaving room up front for a seemingly mismatched group of V.I.P. sponsors who had provided lavish prizes in exchange for halftime exposure, executives from the school's novelty store and an assistant coach who was taping the game. Down on the court, the Wildcats, 10-point underdogs, were building a comfortable lead.

"So, how are things at the Red River Grill?" Lucinda began.

"Can't complain, really," I said. "But I'd be a whole lot better off if I were just half the marketer you are."

"Oh, I don't know about that," she said. "I think you're giving me too much credit. In my mind, marketing isn't as complicated as a lot of people make it out to be. A little creativity, a little common sense — that's half of it right there."

"I think you're oversimplifying a bit," I said. Several of my own sub-par marketing ventures sprang to mind.

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“Maybe, but I don’t think so,” Lucinda said. “The mistake I see people make again and again is that they view a particular promotion as an end in itself. What they don’t realize is that effective marketing isn’t a one-shot deal. Let me give you an example. We gave away 1,000 towels tonight — nice ones, too. They cost us five bucks each to produce. Why do we do that?”

“Why *do* you do that?” I asked. “Especially when you know ahead of time the game’s a sellout.”

“Fans love the towels is the easy answer,” Lucinda continued. “But we also get a lot of marketing mileage out of them. Was it worth five bucks a towel to get every news station in town to cover the promotion? You bet. We’ve also found that fans who get something cool for free are more likely to go all out at the concession stands. The value added to their experience may even prompt them to buy additional merchandise. At the very least, it further secures their team loyalty, which is good for ticket sales down the road.”

“You thought of all those things when coming up with the towel-giveaway idea?” I asked.

“That’s my job. Believe it or not, my marketing budget is tight. To be successful and make every penny count, I have to generate what I call ‘One-Two’ Customer Traffic.”

“One-Two?” I asked.

“Like a one-two combination of punches in boxing,” Lucinda explained. “In other words, it’s not enough to get people in the door. Anybody can do that.

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The trick, at least in our business and probably yours, is to sell those people something while they're there. And do it in a way that enhances their experience so they come back for more. Repeat business is the name of the game."

One look around the arena confirmed her point. Fans upon fans were munching on food, guzzling beverages, wearing team ballcaps, jerseys and warm-up jackets, poring over \$5 game programs, cheering on the basketball team — all in all having the time of their lives.

"Tickets account for only part, a small part, of the overall dollars generated at a game," Lucinda said. "Without multiple sources of revenue, the Wildcats would be playing in a barn, and I'd be hawking bargain jewelry on the Shopping Channel."

"Or handling the marketing for a beer-and-burger joint like mine," I said.

"Not even *I* would stoop *that* low," she said with a laugh. Soon after that remark, the buzzer sounded, signaling the end of the first half. Lucinda had to run down to the floor to oversee the festivities. On this night they were prepared to award a trip to the Bahamas if some lucky fan could sink a three-point shot. Fat chance, I thought, as the nervous contestant reached mid-court and proceeded to bounce the ball off his foot.

The Wildcats were up by eight points at the half, plenty of reason to be excited and into the game, but I found myself taking out the notebook again from my back pocket. I jotted down the words "One-Two Traf-

fic” and, underneath the phrase, a reminder of what it meant. Trepidation began to replace the confidence I had felt early on in developing the happy hour improvements. But for some reason I couldn’t bring myself to postpone the plans Kate and I had made.

I sat there watching the second half of the game, barely aware the Wildcats were pulling off the upset victory. I was too busy rationalizing why — ready or not — we should go forward with the new promotion. *It’s only a simple happy hour after all. It’s better than the last version we had. We can fine-tune as we go. Enough stalling already!*

The happy hour ideas Kate and I had come up with weren’t poorly conceived. It’s just that, despite our best intentions, our efforts were destined to come up short for reasons that became more clear as time passed.

After we rolled out the happy hour on schedule, business picked up as expected, but it created a false sense of security. We’d learn the hard way that increasing traffic by decreasing margins can produce lackluster results, especially when you don’t maximize add-on sales during the promotion or do what’s necessary to generate repeat customers willing to pay full price on a future visit.

We went into the first night of the promotion thinking the dollars would take care of themselves. It didn’t quite happen that way. We made three big mistakes, and probably lots of little ones.

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*Mistake number one:* The bottom line. We failed to determine a sales strategy to compensate for the profit margins we’d narrowed on the “Buy One, Get One Free” beers and the extra shots for a dollar. Lucinda had talked at length about the importance of generating One-Two Traffic, and I understood what she had said. But there’s a difference between knowing what to do and getting it done. Bottom line, we didn’t train our employees to suggest appetizers to go along with the beverage orders or upgrade cocktail orders to include premium spirits. Considering all the costs associated with the event, our return on investment left much to be desired. Too many guests took advantage of the happy hour, only to take off at the end having not ordered any food.

*Mistake number two:* The T-shirts. First of all, they were of high quality and cost us a bundle to produce. Guests were happy to receive one in the nightly drawings, and they might even wear it around town, giving the Grill some free advertising. But it dawned on us later that it’s probably best to put the logo on the front, where it’s more readily noticed. What’s more, the T-shirts by themselves lacked the pull to encourage a high percentage of return visits to our restaurant. We should have made wearing them part of an ongoing promotion: “Wear the T-shirt and receive a free appetizer with the purchase of an entree the *next* time you come in and every Friday during basketball season.” Or something like that.

In other words, establish a bounceback offer. Clearly, more brainstorming needed to be done.

*Mistake number three:* The fishbowl. What started as a simple idea turned into a nightmare. We hired an hourly employee, at minimum wage, to input the business card information into a database that could be merged with any number of marketing pieces we developed. As the first step — and as sort of a test — we sent e-mails to thank the guests who put their cards into the fishbowl. Problem was, some people didn't have cards so they wrote on the back of someone else's, but invariably didn't put down enough information. A lot of other people threw in more than one card, and we forgot to check for duplicate names on the 332 e-mails that went out. Our employee actually noticed the problem, but drawing on a supernatural IQ, he figured it was supposed to be that way. The Red River Grill has never been more generous with its graciousness. Hell, one of our regulars got thanked 10 times. The screwup not only embarrassed us, but also drove up the happy hour expenses all the more.

About the time we came to these disappointing conclusions, Lucinda dropped by the restaurant for a visit. The night we had sat together at the big game, a problem had arisen at half time, preventing her return to the sky box. She came to apologize and eat a bite of lunch. I joined her at the table, both of us splitting a quesadilla appetizer and a Grilled Chicken Caesar.

“Sorry about that night last week,” Lucinda said, between bites. “We had run out of Wildcat basketballs — kids just go nuts over them — and I was looking for an extra box I knew I had tucked away somewhere. I searched the rest of the night, but I couldn't find it. Still haven't found it.”

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“No need to apologize,” I said. “It was actually productive to sit there alone absorbing the marketing advice you’d given me.”

“Did it help?”

“Well, to be honest ...”

“Uh-oh, I’m sensing trouble,” Lucinda interrupted.

“It was nothing that you said,” I continued. “In fact, what you said about generating One-Two Traffic was a real eye-opener for me. We tried to incorporate it into a new happy hour promotion we had in the works, but in the end we just didn’t execute very well.”

“Happens to the best of us,” Lucinda consoled. “I remember this one halftime promotion. We pulled six fans out of the stands and had them put an umbrella between their forehead and the floor. We made them spin around and around — something like 10 times — then had them try to make a layup. What a disaster! Two guys stumbled head first into each other, knocking both out cold. A third person, a woman, got nauseated and threw up on the court. The other participants were too dizzy to put the ball in the basket before time ran out, so we ended up with three injuries and no winners.”

“Holy cow!” I felt better already about our shortcomings with the happy hour.

Lucinda wasn’t through. “I had no idea, Dean, that you planned to take what I said about marketing and put it to use overnight. Otherwise I’d have stressed the importance of planning and execution. More often than

not, you can't just pull the trigger on some idea you've dreamed up. You have to think it out, develop a game plan, execute and follow up, analyzing what worked and what didn't work."

"You're sounding a lot like a coach," I said.

"Well, think about it," Lucinda went on. "It's exactly like Coach and his Wildcats. Long before they work on slam dunking the basketball, they fine-tune their offense — their plan of attack — which sets up the possibility of a slam dunk in the first place. Without a game plan, the Wildcats wouldn't have won the other night. *With* a game plan, they were able to knock off probably the best team in the league."

Lucinda was right. It's better to execute a mediocre idea properly than botch a promising idea, which is what happened with our happy hour. Not all was lost, however. Repairs were under way to fix the damage caused by the duplicate mailings. We also invested in two off-the-shelf training videos — one covering the art of suggesting and selling craft beer, the other demonstrating upselling techniques with appetizers. Both promised to teach our servers how to improve service while building check averages. We showed five-minute segments of each video at our daily team meetings. We quit giving away T-shirts. Slowly but surely, we were shoring up our marketing approach.

As we ate, I reviewed and added to the reminders in my marketing notebook.

After Lucinda finished her lunch and was headed out the door, she turned and said: "We've been talking

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a lot about short-term marketing measures, but you know there's a long-term angle, too. You hear what I'm saying, Dean?"

I heard what she was saying all right. What she meant, however, was a whole different story.

