

COLUMN: As The Saws Turn

TITLE: Sometimes Being #2 Pays Off

I remember the tag line that Avis Rent-A-Car used for many years in their marketing campaigns: “We’re Number Two, We Try Harder” The phrase became one of those that was widely recognized, and widely used beyond the rental car business.

In fact, we have used an adaptation of it here in our company for several years: “If we can’t be number one, let’s be number two; eventually number one will mess up.”

On the surface, these two phrases almost sound defeatist. Kind of like we’re admitting that we’re not good enough to be number one. Or we’re counting on number one to screw up so we can slip into that position. But I’ll argue that point. At least for us, it goes much deeper than that. Here’s our philosophy on it, and it gets into not just this line, but more of a marketing strategy as well:

A lot of companies in this industry – much larger companies than ours – spend a whole lot of money on marketing. They use everything from full page print advertising to elaborate exhibits at our industry shows and huge event sponsorships to build brand recognition and (hopefully) garner new business. And in many cases, they are successful.

For us, the decision about whether to do that is simple: we can’t afford it. So how do we build awareness and generate new business? Our strategy is simple: Make friends and have fun. For us it’s all about building relationships. We do this in a lot of ways, but the main focus is getting out in our industry and community and getting to know people and making friends with people. The more people we meet, the more friends we have. People like to do business

with friends. And they like to recommend their friends to others. And this gets me back to that 'number two' thing.

About four or five years ago, I became involved in an industry I had not been connected with before, through a friend. I ended up landing a large account in that industry. We were successful in creating a new image for them, and helping them grow their business. That led to several more clients in that industry, and I began to build my knowledge of that industry's key issues.

Throughout this period, there was one company that was always on my hit list, but they were firmly entrenched with one of my competitors. I was introduced to their marketing director (by a mutual friend) and began to build a relationship with him. I saw him several times a year at his industry shows. I saw him several times a year at local community and business-to-business events. Last year I snuck him out of his exhibit, past my competitor, and bought him lunch. He was still very pleased with his current supplier.

Last month, I was a guest speaker at a local Business Marketing Association luncheon. He was in the audience, with his assistant. One of my account executives befriended his assistant. I spoke with him for a few minutes after the luncheon.

Last week, they called and asked for a meeting with us. They were looking to make a change. We were the first ones on their list. Our meeting with them was more like sitting down in the living room and catching up with someone you'd known for a long time rather than making a capabilities presentation...because we *had* known them for a long time.

We know their company, their industry, their shows, and the issues they are dealing with. Not because we spent a lot of money on marketing, but because

we spent a lot of time making friends. And friends like to do business with friends. It's a pretty simple marketing strategy. But it works for us.

See you on the show floor.

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