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Boost Donations to Winterfest Auction With a bit of Menaker's Magic

[Photo of MM, with caption: Michael B. Menaker, CBC]

BMA's biggest party of the year is also the organization's most critical annual event -- the Winterfest Auction, December 12, at the Hyatt Regency. Michael Menaker is already making plans for Winterfest... in September.

"Think of the Winterfest Auction as an advanced exam for CBCs [Certified Business Communicators]," he says. "This auction will raise more than 90% of our operating budget for next year, so it's not just fun -- it's essential. To make it a success, we've all got to tune-up our communications skills and sell the very real value of this event to our business associates."

Few folks know the value of BMA better than Michael. He's a past president of our chapter, one of our first CBCs, and serves on the national BMA's board of directors. BMA has been good to him, and he's always trying to return the favor.

"The Winterfest Auction is a real win/win for all involved, but it's not always easy to communicate that. Sure, everyone wants to come to the party on the 12th, but they're often shy about asking their business associates for donations to the auction. That's a shame, because this is not about 'greasing our palms' or any kind of quid pro quo. It's all about the value of education and the strength of our business relationships."

"Here's how I explain it to people..."

The Value of BMA

"BMA is an all-volunteer organization dedicated to marketing professionalism and communications excellence. To deliver that to our members, we need to spend money -- on bringing top-notch talent to our monthly meetings, by hosting special seminars, by handing out books on the latest industry developments, etc."

"We also invest in the future. In 1999 alone, the Colorado chapter awarded \$35,000 in

scholarships to bright and promising marketing students along the Front Range. We also offer student memberships below cost, to make sure they can mingle with and learn from working professionals."

"I'm glad to say that many of these students have made us proud, by going on to corporate success and by becoming a new generation of BMA member. 'Passing the torch' isn't just for the Olympics!"

"All this spending on member and student education isn't cheap, but the benefits are very tangible: Savvy members who know how to use all the tools of our trade. And strong, long-term business relationships that are forged through BMA interactions. All this doesn't just benefit BMA members -- it benefits the entire network of people we work with."

The Value of Winterfest Donations

Michael pauses, then grins. "That's the basic BMA elevator speech. Once they hear that, most vendors understand that investing in their BMA relationship is money well-spent. We're the kind of customer they want to work with, and we'll bring them new business every year. They value that."

"Of course, sometimes you'll run into objections. Here are the two most common ones, and how I respond to them:"

"'I can't afford it.' But if I'm talking to a publisher, for example, I can point out that donating ad space is essentially the cost of ink and paper. Then I'll promise him that it won't go against my frequency count. Finally, I might pull out the impressive list of BMA-connected companies and ask him, 'Wouldn't you like to be talking with these folks? We talk with them everyday.' Between the logic of it and the value of a favor to a good client, it's often a no-brainer."

"'I can't approve it.' If so, I'll ask, 'Would it be better if I talked directly with your decision maker?' Generally, they're glad to refer me, and I'm glad to make a new contact. That's what business communications is all about -- trying new approaches until you find one that unlocks the door."

Nailin' Down those Donations

"Once that door is open, you've got to nail down the specifics. Here are some of the things you can say to do just that:

- Once you have their agreement in principle to donate, *follow-up quickly by giving them a BMA Auction Form*, available from Marilee. And *give them tips on the donations that are most in demand*: full-page color ads, for example, are hot but fractional ads or card deck insertions are perceived as low value. Again, in the case of publishers, it's really the cost of ink on paper.
- Ask them, *"Would you contact the publisher's reps you work with and solicit their contributions? You'll be talking with them anyway. And if they have any concerns, guarantee that you'll bid on their donation."*
- And in closing, ask them, *"Can I count on you to make 'x' number of calls in the next 'x' number of days? Great! Thanks."* Then be sure to check back with them periodically and support them in any way you can.

Michael pauses again, straightens a scale model Harley-Davidson on his desk, then continues. "That's the process in a nutshell. Like I said, soliciting donations for the Winterfest Auction is primarily a matter of being crystal-clear in communicating the value proposition. BMA is very good for both members and their business associates, so it's in everyone's self-interest to keep BMA strong and thriving."

"Besides, it's one of the best damn parties of the year. Count on me being there! And if it's a nice, warm December day, I may even arrive on my Road King..."

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