



Business Plans, Customer Satisfaction, and Bourbon

SEVERAL DECADES AGO, IN THE PREVIOUS CENTURY, MY WIFE AND I VACATIONED IN KENTUCKY. WE WALKED AND CRAWLED THROUGH MAMMOTH CAVE. WE ATTENDED AN OUTDOOR DRAMA THAT TOLD THE STEVEN FOSTER STORY. WE VISITED A BOURBON DISTILLERY. THERE'S A BUSINESS LESSON HERE.

The distillery was small. Maker's Mark is located in Loretto, a tiny village that's about 70 miles southwest of Lexington. The place had an attitude about the importance of work done there and used the catch phrase *don't screw up the bourbon*. As each bottle rolled out of the filling machine, it was picked up, inverted, dipped into a vat of red sealing wax, and then set upright. The wax dripped down the bottle making each slightly different.

In the four or so decades since then, I've bought maybe a dozen bottles of Maker's Mark bourbon. I'm more of a beer snob, so I don't drink a lot of hard liquor. But nearly every one of those bottles has been from the Maker's Mark distillery.

Around the turn of the century, the company created an Ambassador program and I joined. Ambassadors get free tours whenever they want, a small holiday gift in December, and (after several years) a barrel of bourbon with their name on it. I'd forgotten about the barrel when a large envelope from distillery owner Bill Samuels, Jr, arrived. He wanted to tell me that "my" barrel was ready.

There was also an attractive, well printed certificate in an expensive folder showing that all the *wherefores* and *therefores* were in order and *the parties of the first part* and *the parties of the second part* had taken care of each and every *wherewithal*. The barrel was "mine", and I could buy some of the bourbon in it.

I carried the certificate around the house and showed it to Phyllis and our daughters. I showed it to the cats. They were all duly



impressed. I didn't buy any of the bourbon in "my" barrel, but a lot of other people did. It's a clever way to get someone's attention.

Bill Samuels Jr retired, son Rob Samuels took over, and the distillery became part of Hiram Walker and Sons, which was acquired by Allied Domecq, which was acquired by Pernod Ricard, and then the distillery businesses was spun off as Suntory Beverage & Food Limited in Japan.

The Ambassador program has continued through all those changes. Clearly it works.

Is This Advertising or PR?

WHENEVER I THINK OF BOURBON, EVEN THOUGH IT'S RARE, MAKER'S MARK IS MY TOP-OF-MIND BOURBON.

Both advertising and public relations have a place in every company's mix of communications. What Bill Samuels and company created with the Ambassador program is unquestionably in the PR category.

Some advertising executives might claim that it's really an advertising program, and a case could be made for that view.

Ambassadors receive cards that they can hand out to friends and relatives to encourage them to sign up, too.

Not long after I enrolled in the program, Phyllis bought a special bottle of Maker's Mark for me. It had been dipped in red and gray wax in honor of the Ohio State (scarlet and gray) Buckeyes. Maker's Mark also used other combinations to salute the alums

of various other colleges or fans of pro teams.

Bill Samuels Jr used to send out chatty email messages every month. Rob, who is now the distillery's managing director sends emails less frequently, and the little holiday gifts continue to arrive.

Maker's Mark holds events occasionally. If Loretto has an organization of business owners, they should be working closely with the distillery to make the tiny Kentucky town a destination.

The earliest advertising slogan for Maker's Mark Bourbon was "It tastes expensive," so presumably it was a modestly priced brand in 1953. Today many bourbons cost less; a few cost more. Maker's Mark may not be the best bourbon on the planet, but the company's PR programs have created fiercely loyal fans.

Earlier I mentioned a business lesson. It's really just a question: What can you do to differentiate your company's image from that of other organizations in your business sector? Public relations campaigns don't have to cost a fortune and they can be precisely targeted. Cheers! 🍷

Large Trade Shows: Severely Wounded, Maybe Dead

PC EXPO FILLED NEW YORK'S JAVITS CONVENTION CENTER EVERY YEAR THROUGH THE 1990S.

THEN CAME THE 9/11 ATTACKS, TRAVEL RESTRICTIONS, AND THE DOT-COM IMPLOSION. THE FEEBLE

2003 EXPO (CALLED *TECHX* BY THEN) BECAME THE LEADING EDGE OF BIG SHOW FAILURES.

Nearly 20 years later, as some big events began to show signs of life, the covid pandemic arrived. For the first time in history, the 2021 Consumer Electronics Show was fully online and was widely panned. Adobe's annual Max conference attracted a huge worldwide audience — far larger than any in-person conference could ever hope for — but the excitement of big crowds was missing. This year's South by Southwest (SxSW) Conference in Austin was a fully virtual event.



PC EXPO FILLED THE ENORMOUS JAVITS CONVENTION CENTER EVERY YEAR UNTIL THE DOT-COM IMPLOSION, 9/11, AND TRAVEL RESTRICTIONS ENDED IT 2003.

Consumer Electronics Show organizers charged those who registered early \$100 for the virtual-only event and \$300 for those who registered later. Last year's virtual Adobe Max was open to all without charge. Last year's SxSW event was canceled abruptly; this year organizers charged \$325.



ADOBE MAX TYPICALLY ATTRACTS 15,000 OR MORE ATTENDEES FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD AND MANY OF THEM ATTEND THE KEYNOTE SPEECHES.

PHOTO PROVIDED BY ADOBE.

Large in-person conferences usually have price tags well over \$1000, and that's in addition to the cost of traveling to the event's location, ground transportation around the location, lodging, and all the other expenses involved. So the fees for virtual conferences seem like bargains. But are they?



THE 2020 VIRTUAL EDITION OF ADOBE MAX ATTRACTED MORE THAN 150,000 PEOPLE WORLDWIDE, BUT THE KEYNOTE ADDRESSES WERE DELIVERED IN QUIET, STERILE ROOMS WITH NO AUDIENCE. THE EXCITEMENT WAS MISSING.

There's still value in attending in-person when that becomes possible again because attendees have opportunities to meet each other. Virtual conferences may give attendees close-up views of the presenters, but they make it nearly impossible to interact with them.

The spontaneity is lost. Chance encounters are gone. Discovering an appealing product or service from an unexpected vendor is missing. I remember a chance encounter at a publishing trade show in 1989 that introduced me to a company I had never heard of, and showed me a product that I didn't know I needed. The company was a small Canadian corporation called Corel and the product was Draw.

Had that conference been virtual, assuming that technology had existed at the time to allow it, I wouldn't have given Corel a second glance. Walking the aisles of the trade show and catching a glimpse of the product in operation is what sold me.

Marketplace, a radio program that's distributed by American Public Media, recently examined the value of virtual shows. You can read the report or listen to it on the [Marketplace website](#).

We can hope that the covid pandemic continues to fade and that large events such as Adobe Max, South by Southwest, and the Consumer Electronics Show will be able to resume in-person sessions this year or in 2022. Even those of us who attend virtually will find the in-person sessions more compelling. 