

A Rich blend of teas and marketing make for good business

By Bruce A. Love

As I sit down to write this week's column, I am listening to the ethereal sounds of New Age diva, Enya, and sipping a cup of Earl Grey Winter White tea. The serenity of this moment is a stark contrast to earlier events of the day, which involved a flat tire and a reluctant spare that had to be pried from the undercarriage of my Dodge Caravan.

Fortunately, I've just returned from an outing to "Tea Merchant 101" in Duncansville, which offered a unique experience and several concoctions that have allowed me to put all stressful thoughts aside. Tea Merchant 101 is an oasis of tranquility and sophistication located in the Olde Farm Office Centre on Old 22. It's in the large white Civil War-era Victorian house we've all passed as we travel between Hollidaysburg and Duncansville. I'd say, "You can't miss it," but I did several weeks earlier when I first attempted to visit this merchant using directions provided online by MapQuest.

Joe Doyle, proprietor of Tea Merchant 101, seems to know all the right moves in presenting and selling his gourmet teas. Upon entering the store, customers are greeted by soothing music, stylish displays, and an attentive, knowledgeable, and genuinely appreciative, host. Joe's eagerness to share his passion for teas is evident, but not annoyingly so. He seems to enjoy and respect his guests as much as he does his teas. Doyle has sampled all of the 101 varieties available in his store (which may explain his high energy level), and can therefore provide descriptions and opinions on each, if assistance is needed.

Teas, like wines, can be intimidating until you learn a bit about them. I have enjoyed a variety of teas for years, but my knowledge about this beverage is still very limited. Fortunately, we have a local expert on the topic (Joe Doyle is just the third Pennsylvanian to be certified by the Specialty Tea Institute of New York). Unlike wine connoisseurs, Doyle does not look down his nose at novice tea fanciers, and he won't make any disdainful remarks if you happen to pick the wrong crumpet to go with your selected tea. In fact, I don't believe there is a wrong crumpet (or scone, or biscotti) for any tea! This is probably because the tea culture was elevated to an art form by the British, not the French.

Joe Doyle uses many of the business tools available to the skilled marketing retailer. First and foremost is the store itself. The loose teas are meticulously and attractively displayed in clear glass canisters. The colors and textures have a way of seducing customers to take a sniff. Unusual teapots from around the world are arranged throughout the store and add a museum-like ambiance. Of course, these are available for purchase too. There are even a couple of tables where customers can sit down to enjoy a pot of tea.

In addition to the stylish store layout and tranquil atmosphere accentuated by New Age music, Joe uses a variety of other techniques to entice patrons to visit his store and sample his wares. Joe maintains a mailing list and publishes a quarterly newsletter announcing new additions and helpful suggestions. This helps to keep his store fresh in the minds of his faithful followers. Joe Doyle also accepts invitations to speak about teas and share some of his favorites. His knowledge, sophistication and flair would be an ideal addition for any "Red Hat" society gathering.

In the role of business consultant, I offer just a few recommendations for improving Tea Merchant 101. As a customer, I am disappointed with the limited hours of operation. I would like to see Tea Merchant 101 open at least one evening each week. Another recommendation would be to put this business online. The artistry and décor of the store can be closely approximated by well-designed Web pages featuring close-ups of the various teas. These, and carefully crafted descriptions of each tea, would be almost as enticing as the aromas one would experience in person. While Doyle attracts customers from a 5-county area (and beyond), Central Pennsylvania is not known for large concentrations of gourmet tea enthusiasts. By selling online, Tea Merchant 101 would reach a much wider market and greatly increase their bottom line.

If your idea of a gourmet tea is a cellophane-wrapped box of Celestial Seasons, I suggest broadening your horizons by taking a trip to Tea Merchant 101 to try one of their many loose teas. If you are a struggling retailer, I suggest taking a page out of the marketing book of Joe Doyle, and find ways to connect with your customers. His marketing efforts are as tasteful as his teas. Tea Merchant 101 can be reached at (814) 696-9504, or by email: teamerchant101@aol.com.

Love Consulting
600 Oakmont Place
Roaring Spring, PA 16673
814-224-2651

articles@loveconsulting.com

© 2005 Love Consulting