

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

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CORPORATE CURMUDGEON

Let's reward marketers who find the right time to reach the customer

Some companies have learned to make time — and most consumers' lack of it — work for them, such as Select Comfort, which put its bed in an airport for travelers to test while waiting for their flights.

*"All day long I save time;
Yet when each day
is finished,
I check my account and
My balance has
diminished."
— D.D.*

Sophocles wrote, "Time is a kindly god." What? Kindly? And he said it in the second century, before the Palm Pilot or the microwave oven, much less aerosol cheese or The Clapper. No, he lived in an era when a "timesaving device" was the Quick-Tie Toga and the EZ-Light Torch.

Still, Sophocles had a point about kindly time. If we had time for everything, we'd have no excuse to skip the Ice Capades, no excuse for not reading "Moby Dick," no excuse for avoiding sales calls.

The last of these is what got me thinking — what salesperson doesn't think, "If only the decision-makers would take the time to see what we have to offer, they'd buy." One of the great marketing challenges of our time is making time, or, more accurately finding it.

Today I'd like to hand out a pair of "Good Thinking! Awards" to marketers who have found some time for selling.

The first goes to Larry Norber, creator of AudioVu, a service that

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adds narration to Web sites. You can try it at www.audiovu.com. When you call up a Web site, you not only get the visual information, but you get a pleasant voice explaining it to you.

You might wonder why they don't just offer a video presentation. Why, time, of course — it takes time to load. This voice is instant, streaming in automatically even with a dial-up connection. (Norber reminded me that half the country is still on dial-up. His company keeps an old laptop, with an original Pentium processor and 28.8 modem, just so they can test each of the sites for which they provide audio. That old laptop reminds me of the line, "If you want to make a product fool-proof, you'd better have some fools on staff.")

By the way, you also can credit/blame Norber for popularizing advertising over the phone while you're on hold. He and a friend played racquetball and afterward stopped at Norber's house for a beer. The friend called his wife, who was at a restaurant, and waited on hold as they went to find her. As Norber, then a sales rep for cable television networks, watched his friend wait-

ing, he realized he was looking at free ear time. The two friends created a service called Sold-On-Hold. Norber's company grew, and was acquired by the Muzak folks in 2000. That gave him the time to spot the free ear time of most Internet sites.

The other Good Thinking! Award goes to the folks at Select Comfort. They're the ones who make the Sleep Number bed. (I've written about them before, and was so impressed that later I bought some of their stock, which since has tripled. I mention that not just because it's been a long time since I got to boast about a stock, but to keep up with the new fad of "disclosure.")

The company's effervescent director of sleep innovation, Pete Bills, was working on new kiosks for its retail stores, finding ways to automate bed demonstrations. He wanted to create a video program that's interactive with the bed — it adjusts its firmness, including imaging of pressure points of the customer lying on it.

Meanwhile, the senior VP of marketing, Noel Schenker, had heard of new advertising programs for revamped spaces in the Minneapolis/St. Paul airport. She wondered if the two initiatives might come together. The result is a bed in Concourse D.

As I trace ideas to their source, it

comes to a point where one person held in his or her head two ideas that didn't belong together. In this case, it was an airport concourse and a bed.

Bills tells me that the average traveler spends 41 minutes in the airport before a flight. Plus, the average income of air travelers is much higher than the general population.

Now, in Minneapolis and eventually elsewhere, you can spend a few minutes lying down, following a video sales presentation.

Bills reports that the typical customer comment is, "I always wanted to try one of these." Such potential customers undoubtedly have had the chance, as the company has stores in malls around the country, but they never took the time.

The folks at Select Comfort found some time — it was sitting around the airport. Being at the airport is far from free, I'm sure, but that's where the free time was.

Free time. Ironic, that word "free"; it's the most valuable commodity in our economy.

If you come across a cool idea worthy of a Good Thinking! Award, let me know.

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