

The answer came when I was thinking about a very interesting “Team Draft House” presentation. A bright young intern named Monica had highlighted the latest changes to Danish tax and labor law and how it applied to manufactures such as matches. The intern had pointed out that the legal definition of “consultant” or “trainee” had been considerably relaxed to encompass a much broader class of employees (to include children, the disabled, anyone working part time or seasonally, and anyone under qualified or over qualified for the position). The advantages to employers were that the standard tax and labor law protections for regular employees did not apply to these “consultants” or “trainees”.

Basically, Monica’s idea had been to hire a series of “consultants” who, posing as housing inspectors, would enter houses and bore “test holes” close to heating or lighting fixtures. Thus by the strategic placement of drafts, “domestic relights” would increase by a predictable percentage. Despite the innovative use of the “consultant” statutes, her suggestion, while creative, was deemed not quite legal enough and would probably result with some liability to our company. I did mark her as an up and comer however.

But back to my insight. Now as a curious legal wrinkle to the Danish manufacturing sector, and for reasons rooted in our medieval heritage, Danish manufactures were prohibited from selling direct to consumers. The distribution network was highly codified from manufacturers, to distributors, to sub-distributors, to transfer agents, to retailers, and finally to consumers.

And imposed quite frankly a series of costs paid for by the consumer.

And almost none of which went to us at Danish Match Company DMC.

And it occurred to me that if “consultants” were not the same as “employees” per se, then perhaps these “consultants” could sell our matches directly to the consumer.

Like all great ideas, it was so simple.

Legally since they were not employees, they were not attached to us in any way. We could pay them what we want. We could pay them just for the work they did. We would get almost all the money that was now going to this vast distribution network.

It also offered many marketing advantages as well. As a large, long established business we had a certain level of “market fatigue”. Frankly we were seen as part of the establishment.

Now some might say that was because of all our recent marketing relying on traditional Danish values and history even when we had to make it up, but that is beside the point.

But here was a chance to reach out and contact the consumer directly and reintroduce ourselves to Mr. and Mrs. Dane and all the little Danes.

My mind raced with the notion in a variety of directions. New. Innovative. Reaching out. Reach out. Stores cost money and we sell matches that way already. But reach out. Where people are.

But where are people? People are in homes. But people in homes already have matches. Jammed in all kinds of places, drawers and cast iron pine cones. No one is going to get out of a chair, a nice warm comfy chair to open a door to a door-to-door salesperson selling matches. No. We need to be next to them when they need a match outside! NEED a match outside. NEED a match. Need a light, bud? NEED a cigarette! NEED to light a light a cigarette outside on a street corner!

Where people are, yes that's it, sell then where people are, on the street!

But who would want to work on a street corner? More precisely, who would want to work on a street corner who was not a prostitute? Who would want to sell matches on the street corner? I felt the answer tugging at my brain. I was so close. Who would want to go out and sell on the street? Who would want to go out? Go out? The people who were already there! Yes that it! The poor. The homeless. They are ALREADY out on the street; it is their natural habitat! What if we used people, poor people as as as the on-street sales consultants? And each interaction would be up close and personal, making them PERSONAL on street sales consultants. Hell, we could pay them next to nothing (which would be a big step up for them), there would be no fixed cost of a store and and and, We Would Be Empowering Them And Giving Them A Sense Of Self Respect That Comes From Gainful Employment.

Yes, that was it! Use poor people! Give them the tools to help themselves! Publicity like that you cannot buy!

Well you can, actually, but it costs a lot.

But it's much better when you can get it for free.

And people (meaning people with money) would feel good about using our product and even be willing to pay a bit more because it was an Easy Way To Help The Less Fortunate While Saving A Penny Or So For Me.

And Actually Provide Me With Something I Can Use.

With Very Little Extra Effort on My Part Because I am Already Out on The Street Anyways So I Do Not Have To Get My Butt Out of The Comfy Chair Or Sofa.

It's sorta like the piken speideren selling their piken speideren koke around the office every year only without the piken speideren. Or koke

(Oh, do I have to mention that *piken speideren* is girl scouts *and piken speideren koke* is Girl Scout cookies? I didn't think so.)

And yes, by doing good for our company, we would be would be Helping Society And Our Nation.

Huh, "consultant" or "trainee"? Consultant sounds classy. Trainee sounds like some kid who will get your order wrong. Go with "consultant."

Seldom does marketing offer such rewards.

But when it does, the high is like no other.

I quickly assembled my team and pitched them the idea. Some liked it. Some did not.

The first comment came from the market analysis people.

“So you want to utilize “The Urban Dregs.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Market Segment 001. The Urban Dregs. A highly differentiated and stable market segment characterized by low income, housing, social and spatial mobility. Located primarily in dense urban cores, Urban Dregs are concentrated in business districts and in city parks, libraries, bridges and transit stations and benches. Urban dreggers tend to be well represented in all age groups.”

God I hated listening to the marketing number people, but they always had to have their say so it was easiest to just let them have their time to talk.

“They tend to be single or single parent families but also can form fairly stable non-traditional family arrangements. As the name ‘Dreggers’ implies, Dreggers subsist on very low, variable income streams (less than 20 kronen a month). Their interests include observing police patrol activity, chess, monologues and reading.

Oh my god they had multiplied and now there were two of them. How had that happened?

“For exercise they push heavily laden shopping carts or drag trash bags, and hop into Dumpsters. They enjoy discussions, often loud, with real and imaginary friends. Politically they can be characterized as ‘incoherent but occasionally correct.’ They spend little on vacations. Discretionary income is spent sporadically on recreational substances of a non-traditional market nature or cat food. We usually don’t study them much.”

“Why not?” I said.

“Well once they have a fire lit in a trash can or something they tend to keep it going by just adding more fuel.”

“So they don’t consume a lot of matches?”

“Yes, that is correct. They can go months without lighting a new one.”

Shudders ran through the room.

It was time to regain the focus here.

“OK, yeah so the “Urban Dregs” are not our usual focus, but remember people we’re not planning to sell to them but use them to sell something. So people, what is there in this profile we can use?”

That clarified, the discussion continued.

“Well spatially they are perfect. They are where we want to sell and less able to leave.”

“And with income levels this low we can easily double it and look good with little or no effect on our bottom line.”

“ And there are sure a lot of them.”

“Which will also keep whatever we pay them depressed.”

“Which also means we can pretty much pick and choose among them.”

“Yes, Denmark’s Best and Brightest.”

That brought a round of chuckles.

“OK people let’s settle down. Actually that’s a good point, How DO we go about selecting a particular Urban Dreg to use?”

“We could do a contest.”

“Like, ‘Who is the Dreggiest Dane?’”

“No, ‘Who WAS the Dreggiest Dane!’”

“Like a personal makeover show dealing with class issues. In each community in Denmark we select 10 families and teach them middle class, grooming, manners, and vocabulary.”

“Then give them a series of tests.”

“Family that does the worst each week cast back into the urban dregsland.”

“See ya!”

“Wouldn’t wanna be ya!”

“Last family standing is the lucky winner and gets the local rights to sell matches on the street.”

“And we call it...”

“Bourgeoisie Bingo.”

“Petit bourgeoisie party.”

“Middle class a go go to.”

“Mean Street to Easy Street.”

“And what if we like add a talent portion!”

“You know,” this came from Alan our resident academic who was always quoting Hegel and dialectics, “This always glorifying the pathetic poor is getting rather tiresome. I am getting so sick that every time there is some kinda competition, it seems that each contestant has overcome more tragedy and made more sacrifices than the last. Over came cancer. Gave kidneys to strangers. Gave kidneys to strangers babies. Oh and the always beloved yet inspirational grandparents who have just died. The grandparent who told them told them to never give up. No matter the lack of talent. Always follow your dream. No matter how implausible. And then died. Leaving the grandchild with nothing. No talent. No training. Nothing but a dream.

“And then they SING as their ‘talent.’ They sing about their ‘dream’ as their talent. Sing about hopes and

dreams that have to come true. Because it is their hope and dream. So it HAS to come true. And then at the end of the song their voice goes up and down about 3 octaves as they dramatically raise their arm up. And then they make a fist, which they then clutch to their chest. If they are male, then they make a punching gesture as they go to one knee. As the audience goes nuts, obediently”

“And then they cry. And thank God. And then wish that those who were dead could have been there, because this song was for them. And then they cry AGAIN because they have worked SO HARD. And they are so thankful (to God, mostly) they have worked SO HARD. So they cry, again.”

“I say,” he continued, “lets cut through the ‘deserving poor’ crap and lets have a real ‘reality’ campaign where we have some guy come out and say, ‘Things are pretty good for me. I don’t cheat on my taxes, much, and I take two newspapers from the vending machine when I have only paid for one. I make an OK living and we go to Spain every other year on vacation. My body parts are pretty much for me and as far as I know all the grandparents are doing fine thanks, but I really haven’t spoken to them for a couple of years. I think one of them is the Bahamas someplace. I woke up late today and just ate some chips, but if I gotta sing a song, here it goes. I want to dedicate this song to, errrrr, Earl. I owe him 20 kronen so maybe this will make us square.”

“And then he sings a song that has no dramatic half-octave change for the last chorus and he doesn’t freaking cry not once. And as near as we can tell God has not expressed an opinion on his performance nor has even bestowed any talent to the singer. God doesn’t even seem to care who wins the freaking contest. The guy just sorta mumbles, ‘thank you very much’ and ambles offstage. Now that would be a REAL reality campaign. Let’s do something like that!”

A moment of silence considered that notion.

“OK,” I said, “No contest. What else people?”

There was another moment of silence. Then Monica, the new girl, she of the “housing inspector consultant” idea mentioned above, said in a quiet voice,

“The problem with this idea is that you haven’t gone far enough with it.”

“Oh?”

“I mean, who are the Urban Dregs, exactly and why should people suddenly care about them?”

“Well, they are poor. And if they are working then they are the working poor. And hence worthy of attention and respect from society.”

“Yes, but as a practical matter, Urban Dregs are nasty people who the match buying public has never expressed a desire to interact with. What we need to do is re-brand the poor, the Urban Dregs. Now Alan has pointed out the pathetic/pity thing has been way over done, but let’s go in a different direction with an image that can be seen as positive, or at least approachable and non-threatening.

“Go on.”

“Well I think ‘Urban Dreg’ is too broad a category for any one single ad campaign to move public perception in any meaningful way. It’s just too big. No one is ever going to approach an old lady mumbling to her cats in her shopping cart to buy a match, no matter how we market them, but there is a segment of the ‘The Dregs’ that we could use.”

“And what would that be?”

“So I think, I mean what is the most non-threatening part of the Urban Dregger population AND the most photogenic?”

There was a slight pause as she actually waited for an answer.

I, I record with some bit of pride, was the first one who saw her point, or at least part of it.

“Their kids?”

“Close, their daughters. I mean who could resist a big-eyed waif selling a simple match? We already know waifs are effective street money magnets. Dreg people already use their kids to solicit simple cash handouts. This is just taking that idea to the next logical level.”

“But isn’t that, um exploitive?” This was from Alan.

A mixed chorus of groans and laughter greeted that remark.

“Well, duh.”

“Earth to Alan – that’s the whole point of using Dreggers.”

Everyone started passing 5 kronen bills to Ingrid.

“Five minutes before he said ‘exploitive’ just like I had it. Pass it over boys and girls. Pass it over.”

“OK people settle down. Monica, please continue.”

“Well Alan, it’s not any more exploitive than being used by their own parents. And besides what lessons does a girl street urchin learn just trading on her winsome appeal for cash and then turning her income over to her parents? Dependency and reliance on looks on one hand; a fostered sense of dependency on the other. She learns about generating minimal income from minimal effort with minimal results. Now what do we offer? A chance to learn the self-confidence that comes from offering a quality product and profiting from one’s own efforts. Learning there is a positive correlation between effort and income. Breaking through the culture of dependency at an early age while the lesson can still resonate.”

I looked around the table. What had started with indulgent and indeed somewhat mocking smiles at the start of her comments had faded from the faces of the team as they began to seriously consider her idea.

“Remember we are not hiring anyone, we are utilizing their boulevard based experience as on-street sales consultants. So this is one area, perhaps the only area, where their unique social skill set may predispose them to actual success. And the larger point is that we will target girls, who usually are at the bottom of ANY social welfare scheme and place them right smack dab in the forefront.”

Her eyes shone with the zeal of someone who was rediscovering something she thought she would never see again: the notion that what she did at work could actually make a positive difference for someone else. And it was happening to her. At work. In marketing. At the Danish Match Company DMC. And looking around the table I could see that she was not the only one feeling it.

There was silence as we considered the idea. Some might talk about helping the poor, but damn it this was actually doing something. I felt a rising tide of excitement. After years in marketing, I felt like something that was about to come out of my mouth would actually make for a better world.

“And I think I have the name. Danish matches are hot. And selling them are Danish ICE Girls. ICE: Innovative. Creative Entrepreneurial.”

There was a respectful pause. Then a babble of voices arose in excitement as we realized this was actually an original idea that could be profitable, marketable and socially a good thing.

Suddenly it felt good to part of the marketing team at the Danish Match Company DMC.

One potential hurdle remained unspoken until it was spoken.

“What will other departments think and will management go for it?”

“Ladies and gentlemen, if we cannot sell ICE Girls to the management of this company, then we have no right to work in marketing at all”

Excerpt from ICE Girls by Dan McLaughlin © 2006
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