

## **STAR-GAZING YOUR WAY TO GROWTH AND BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT**

I always knew Texas was a big state, but I never really understand just how big until I logged 2400 car miles plus another 20 in hiking boots, traveling from Houston to Austin to Dallas, to the desert and back, on my summer vacation this year.

Western Texas—places like Fort Davis, Marfa, Marathon, and Big Bend National Park, abutting the U.S.-Mexican boundary, formed by the Rio Grande—is amazingly beautiful. And you have to want to go there. The closest airports are at least 3-hour drives away, and even there, you're definitely off the beaten track. Besides the natural beauty of the place and the decided change in culture, you're truly away. Expect little to no cell phone service, intermittent Internet access, uneven retail hours—even a hotel hair dryer can be a rare modern luxury.

I tell you this so you understand my curiosity about the lackadaisical approach to serving visitors we encountered at some of the places we visited. I couldn't help but wonder about several opportunities that seemed ripe for product expansion and revenue growth.

If you visit McDonald Observatory in the mountains of Fort Davis, for example, you'll want to take part in one of its "Star Parties." Starting at 9:30 p.m. in July, or whenever nightfall occurs year-round, astronomers there open up several high-powered telescopes so visitors can take a look at the cosmos. We saw the storm clouds of Jupiter, the craggy surface and craters of the moon, and a set of binary stars comprising one point of the Big Dipper. Scientists there willingly share as much detail as you care to hear.

It's an event unto itself. Couples young and old, families with kids and puppies, and single science lovers make the evening journey into the mountains to the beautiful grounds of University of Texas' observatory to be guests of the party.

What confused me is that the observatory's public spaces—a visitors center, exhibition, media center, café, and of course gift shop—close at 5 p.m. When we arrived at 8 p.m., hoping to grab a quick dinner before the star gazing, the doors were locked, the gates to the exhibition areas drawn, and no less than 30 people stood around with nothing to do. Worse, a staff member there to sell tickets to early arrivals *shouted* at antsy customers, keeping them out.

When the building finally opened at 8:30 p.m., hungry star-gazers inundated the café's two staff members. Customers made mad dashes to the gift shop—imagine all those children imploring mommy and daddy to buy them this or that—through the exhibit area, to the restrooms, and anywhere else they could go.

I wondered if McDonald Observatory's marketing or executive staff understands how popular—and fabulous—these Star Parties are. Why not remain open after 5 p.m., and expand the programming between then and 9:30 p.m. for the benefit of families with young children. Why not utilize the café and lovely patio areas in more interesting ways? Yes, these are opportunities to expand revenue, and more importantly, these ideas would serve the needs of customers while also fulfilling important public educational aspects of the Observatory's mission.

The marketing function of any organization—non-profit or for-profit—is to discover what customers and audiences need, develop products and services to meet those needs, and then to promote them. How do you know what your

constituents need? Ask them. Observe. Notice where your staff struggles to fulfill services; is it time for expansion or for assessing fees for services?

Imagine ways your organization might fulfill its mission in bolder or more innovative ways. What assets or resources do you already have that might make such a transition smoother? Can you envision revenue from these opportunities? How well will they serve your mission?

These are just a handful of the questions you will need to ask. But for now, just take a look. Notice. Observe. Then do a little star-gazing.

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