

by Michael Rosman

How 100 tastings in 100 days saved my company

September 2008: Otherwise remembered as Armageddon, the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression. Almost overnight, one-third of our catering business disappeared. Poof—just like that. At least we were not alone. The entire industry had been turned upside-down.

On Thursday, September 25, my partner, Frank, poked his head into my office. “You available for a meeting tomorrow with Ellen and I?” (Ellen was our other partner; she ran the full-service catering division.)

“Ahh, sure.”

“OK, let’s meet in my office at 2:00 p.m.”

“I’ll be there.” My stomach clamped up.

Eight-plus years earlier, I’d joined the senior-partner team of an independent neighborhood institution in suburban Boston. My job was to create and build a corporate drop-off catering division from our existing restaurant. During this time, Frank

had called a partners’ meeting a total of...once.

Frank ran our restaurant, originally a cramped, hole-in-the-wall, take-out joint. Three renovations and 15 years later, it had evolved into a thriving, 98-seat full-service restaurant and bar. It was considered top-notch destination dining, and the bar scene was hopping on the weekends. Frank was a visionary. He also had a master’s degree in economics.

Friday’s meeting

Frank opened, “What’s going on with the economy is not good, and it’s going to get worse before it gets better. This is not a blip on the screen that will straighten itself out with a market correction in a few weeks. My prediction is we have a long, bumpy road ahead. We need to make some hard decisions now, so we can weather this storm.”

Ellen and I looked at each other, perplexed. “I realize we had a lousy summer and a disappointing September,” she acknowledged. “But why do you think it’s going to continue?”

“I don’t think it’s going to continue; I *know* it is,” Frank said. He outlined the mortgage crisis and how systematic breaches of accountability and ethics at all levels would compromise an economy. “The restaurant is going to suffer, but catering is going to take the biggest hit, especially corporate.”

He let us know that corporate was down almost 35% that September, and the summer was down about 25%. “We cannot stick our heads in the sand,” he said. “You and I have

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Michael Rosman will teach, “The Game-Changing 60 Second Sales Script” boiling down the magic words that lead to new corporate catering business, and will follow his session that same day with “A Candid Conversation” in which you can ask your own questions pertaining to his area of expertise.

When: Sunday, February 18

Time: 2:00 to 3:00 p.m.

had conversations about how quickly things can go south in this business.”

He was right. We had. But business would soon return to normal. Right? Or was I in denial about the severity of our economy?

Terms I was very uncomfortable with, such as “significant cost-cutting” and “staff reductions” were being tossed about. I had built a non-existent corporate catering division into an operation generating millions of dollars a year. I had no interest in reversing course. As the meeting progressed, I sensed Ellen was getting on board with the strategy of tightening our belts and watching every penny.

“I need to take the weekend to process this and suggest we reconvene on Monday,” I said.

Monday afternoon, 2:00 p.m., Frank’s office

Ellen and Frank were now unified that immediate, aggressive, across-the-board, cost-cutting was the most responsible business decision.

I firmly countered, “I have a different plan in mind for the corporate division.”

They shifted uneasily in their chairs.

“I want to lead my team on a guerrilla sales assault, and I have a name for it: Operation 100 Tastings in 100 Days.

“The corporate drop-off catering operation will schedule and execute 100 tastings in 100 days. In the end, if we are not back on track to last years’ pace; in other words, if we don’t make up the lost business with new business, I agree to reverse gears and join the cost-cutting, staff-reduction, penny-watching ship—a ship I have zero desire to board. If your predictions are right, I want a shot at fighting our way out of this.”



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Frank shook his head and sighed. “I admire your fight. OK. You have 100 days to turn it around. And for the record, I think you have a screw loose, but I am pulling for you.”

The timeline: I had drawn up the game plan over the weekend:

- It was Monday, September 29, 2008
- Tastings would begin in two days, on Wednesday, October 1.
- We had two people who could execute the tastings. Rochel (my salesperson) and myself. Maria, our office administrator, would help schedule the tastings.

I would offer tastings every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, and Rochel would handle Tuesday and Thursday. One hundred tastings is a lot to schedule, especially in such a short period. Maria would schedule as many as she could, with Rochel and myself helping when we had pockets of time. It was all hands on deck.

We would:

- Complete five tastings a week, one per day, Monday thru Friday
- No tastings were to be scheduled during the Thanksgiving and Christmas/New Year holidays (a total of 12 days surrounding the actual holidays)
- Allow 10 extra/open days for tastings that needed to be rescheduled due to a client scheduling conflict and/or snowstorms

D-day: In fact, we would need more than 100 days to execute 100 tastings. Factoring in holidays and a reschedule buffer, March 18, 2009, was established as the end date for Operation 100 Tastings in 100 Days.

Tastings

By definition, tastings are complimentary lunch samples we deliver to companies who order catering regularly. The goal is to

become one of their caterers and in some cases, we would become their primary caterer. Now and then we would hit pay dirt, and a company that ordered a lot of catering (five and six figures annually) would sign a contract, and we would be their exclusive caterer. For those tastings, we would bring food for the administrators who placed the orders, with extra to share—perhaps with their bosses. For presentation purposes, we generally brought lunch for five or six people.

Regarding the process of “tastings,” the steps involved were:

- 1) Amass lists of companies to call, including those in our database that hadn’t ordered in the last six months
 - 2) Call and qualify
 - 3) Document contact information and typical catering needs
 - 4) Schedule a tasting for companies that qualified. (It takes between 10 and 20 calls to schedule one qualified tasting.)
 - 5) Send an email confirming the date of tasting and link to our corporate catering menu
 - 6) Execute the tasting (we used a 15-minute script) and try to spend as much time as possible with the client. (We suggested they book a conference room for an hour.)
 - 7) Check that we have the “Five things to bring to a tasting list” (in addition to the food)
 - 8) Follow-up, follow-up, follow-up
 - 9) Deliver first order (it better be perfect, and it better be on time)
 - 10) Deliver four more “perfect orders”
- Result...we have a new client!

At this point, I had been in the catering/restaurant business for 25 years. I had built million dollars a year corporate drop-off divisions from the ground up, twice. I knew the drill. I had created a proven formula. It was a numbers game. It was all about “more.”

More Cold Calls =

More Qualified Leads =

More Tastings =

More New Clients =

More Revenue = More Profit

Time to dig-In

And so it began. On September 30, I called an all-staff meeting and shared the game plan, emphasizing this is the only way we could keep everyone employed full-time. I stressed this would mean a lot of work for everyone. Success would be defined as, “a lot of new business coming in.” At times, everyone would be asked to come in earlier, stay later, work together, and do whatever was necessary to get the job done.

When we were delivering to a new company for the first time, we only had one shot to get it right. If it began to feel like we were taking on more business than we could handle, that was a good thing. A lot of new business was the measuring stick for success. We would figure out the logistics as the process moved along. I planned to come in early and stay late every day until March 18. I felt it was important my staff witness the boss was with them, in the battlefield.

Details begin to emerge

By the middle of October—after about 15 tastings—two things were clear.

- 1) Frank was right. October was always our busiest month of the year—except this year. Sales were down 25%. The economic climate did not appear to be a short-term bump in the road.
- 2) The tastings, as they always did, were bringing in new business. I knew we had a steep hill to climb, but if we kept pushing the boulder up the hill, we had a shot at beating

back the forces against us.

It was a very stressful, very intense, very hard, “100” days.


It was also wildly successful. As the weeks and months passed, our new client list was building. A few of our new accounts ordered every day. It was vital and challenging that we did a great job with all of the new business.

Days, companies, and new contacts began to blur into each other. We had to stay extremely focused to keep the now-growing business running smoothly. Not every day was perfect, but in totality, we were rising to the challenge.

As we approached 70 tastings, the kitchen was begging me to take a break. Even Frank chimed in that the numbers were looking good, and we could pull back the reins if we wanted to. I told him, “Thanks—but no thanks. We’re seeing this through.”

Results

By March 18, not only had we had made up all of the lost business from the year before, we were 25% ahead of pace from 2007. It was time to step back, take a breath, and take the staff out for a night on the town. Although they did not know it at the time, I planned to resume the rigorous tastings schedule in the summer, which we did.

2009 ended up being our best year ever (to that point). We continued to work hard and smart. Fortunately, we never had to look back. 

Michael Rosman is founder of TheCorporateCaterer.com, a pioneering membership website that provides a roadmap for food service operators who want to launch or grow an existing corporate drop-off catering division. Michael is also a Senior Consultant with Certified Catering Consultants.com. You can reach him directly at michael@thecorporatecaterer.com.

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