



BY AMANDA FRETHEIM GATES
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See Things Differently

WHAT MAKES A BIG IDEA?
IS IT UNIQUE? OR NEW?

A good idea makes you think twice. It can open your eyes to new possibilities, encourage you to approach problems from a unique perspective, and even drive change in the way you do business. We set out to find local hospitality professionals who seek out new ideas or embrace the proven ones. What do they all have in common? They break free from the status quo. One restaurant owner uses tried-and-true philosophies to inspire his employees; an event planner moves out of her comfort zone to develop groundbreaking technology. We profile a chamber of commerce that doesn't take itself too seriously, while we speak with an executive who takes the seriously complicated subject of revenue optimization and makes it digestible for hotel managers. Another organization takes the business minded on worldwide adventures to expand their way of thinking, while, through collaboration and innovation, an advertising company gets successful results for its clients. A new idea has the power to change your world. >

BRUCE BILDSTEN & MICHELLE FITZGERALD

Buzz Builders

Brew Creative seeks smarter ways to connect clients with their consumers. Case in point: D'Amico Kitchen's culinary voyeurism experience.

It happened in a matter of weeks. Early last summer, the long-time favorite D'Amico Cucina closed, but it didn't take long for D'Amico to reemerge within the Chambers Hotel for its revamped dining venture, D'Amico Kitchen. When it came to marketing their new restaurant, the brothers behind the D'Amico empire, Richard and Larry, hired local agency Brew Creative, which is known for its highly collaborative style of working with clients.

"There's a lot of questioning the way things were done in the past," says Bruce Bildsten, creative director and co-partner of Brew with Michelle Fitzgerald, connection planner. "It's so rare that clients come to us and our first answer is doing a TV commercial or a magazine ad. That's still an important part of our mix, but we also look at other ways to reach people."

When it came to marketing a new fine dining restaurant in the Twin Cities, Bildsten and Fitzgerald wanted to create buzz by reaching the right influencers—those true foodies who read blogs and watch culinary programming, which has become such a huge part of popular culture during the past several years. The duo latched on to the talent base D'Amico had working in the kitchen, particularly Chef John Occhiato.

"The chef is becoming the star in the show," Fitzgerald says. "We live in a community where chef-driven talent is a draw for many diners. It's our curiosity into what they're doing and how they're doing it."

Banking on this idea, the team, with the help of Edina-based Alpha Video, set up three lipstick cameras in the belly of the new restaurant, broadcasting nightly (at www.damico-kitchen.com) the chefs prepping, chopping, cooking and plating the meals. In tandem with the online component, they wanted to broadcast the video onto a billboard D'Amico owns at Hennepin Avenue and 22nd, making the statement of a serious restaurant that's allowing a peek inside.

"Doing ideas like this is hard work," Bildsten says. "You're inventing it as you go along and it's not the usual going-through-the-motions. Technically there was quite a bit to figure out, trying to get the cameras

in the right place, making sure they functioned every night and making sure the stream was reliable." The billboard idea never received approval from the city, however they were able to broadcast the live feed in the Chambers' courtyard.



The "culinary voyeurism" campaign was successful. The site had nearly 10,000 visits in its first month alone, but more impressive was the fact that people were spending, on average, nearly two minutes watching the footage. "If you think about time spent as a measure of how engaged consumers are

with the content, it's much more than you would expect in other media," Fitzgerald says. She compares the two minutes on the D'Amico Web site to the time spent watching a 30-second TV commercial or flipping past a newspaper ad. There's quite a difference.

For any client, once the initial setup and campaign are launched, Brew then takes a step back. The idea becomes self-supporting and the client can run with it, let it be or come back to it and turn up the heat again. "We help get some of the pieces put together, but the idea is that in the climate of constantly tight budgets, clients can take these ideas and own them," Fitzgerald says. D'Amico Kitchen has kept the site

up and running and has taken advantage of Occhiato's talent and poise by filming a series of video blogs where he talks about and demonstrates everything from hiring a great wait staff to making ricotta cheese.

With all their campaigns, the Brew team looks for ways to incorporate popular culture to create a product people will talk about. That's what really generates buzz. Because dining, and hospitality in general, has become "social currency," Fitzgerald says, those shared experiences are of great value to clients. And it's up to Brew to figure out how to market that. "With media, we can share so much more in so many formats to really fuel our own currency," she says.

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RAVI MEHROTRA

Speaking the Universal Language

Can a company called "IDeaS" live up to its name? By taking a scientific approach to ROI, it just may.

For many of us, when we hear terms like "price elasticity" or see equations like $(\Delta R/R) / (\Delta P/P)$, it makes our heads hurt. We studied math and science in college because we had to, but now that we're in our careers we don't expect to actually have to use them, right? However, with the economy forcing their hands, hotel owners and their revenue managers have discovered that math and science do come into play.

When times are good, the concepts of supply and demand are fairly straightforward. But current economic conditions aren't good, especially for hotels. Determining new price points for rooms and event spaces

studies a particular hotel's room rates, does some fancy math that's best left up to the experts, and then offers up a solution that should help revenue.

"People think revenue management only works in good times," Mehrotra says. "Revenue management is infinitely more important when demand does not exceed capacity. Then you have to say yes to everyone and the only thing you have in your hand that you can control is price. If you get this wrong, it will cost you in a huge way."

In tough times, Mehrotra says hotels don't fully focus on their brand. Instead, they worry most about putting heads in beds and filling meeting space, which means they drop their prices. And, this affects the industry as a whole. Mehrotra uses math to demonstrate the fine line between dropping price the right way versus a way that's detrimental. In the simplest of terms, he says if a hotel drops its room rate from \$100 a night to \$50 a night, that's 50 percent off. However,

A basic illustration that demonstrates the concept of price optimization:

EXAMPLE 1

Room Rate: \$40
Rooms Sold: 60
 $40 \times 60 = \$2,400$

EXAMPLE 2

Room Rate: \$60
Rooms Sold: 40
 $60 \times 40 = \$2,400$

OPTIMAL SOLUTION

Room Rate: \$50
Rooms Sold: 50
 $50 \times 50 = \$2,500$

that still increase the bottom line becomes quite complicated. If only one had a scientist on his side to help figure it all out. Ravi Mehrotra is just the guy. A Ph.D. of electrical and computer engineering, Mehrotra is the president and founder of IDeaS Revenue Optimization, a Bloomington-headquartered provider of revenue management solutions and services. The company began in the '80s and today has systems installed in 1,800 properties worldwide, from five-star hotels to roadside inns.

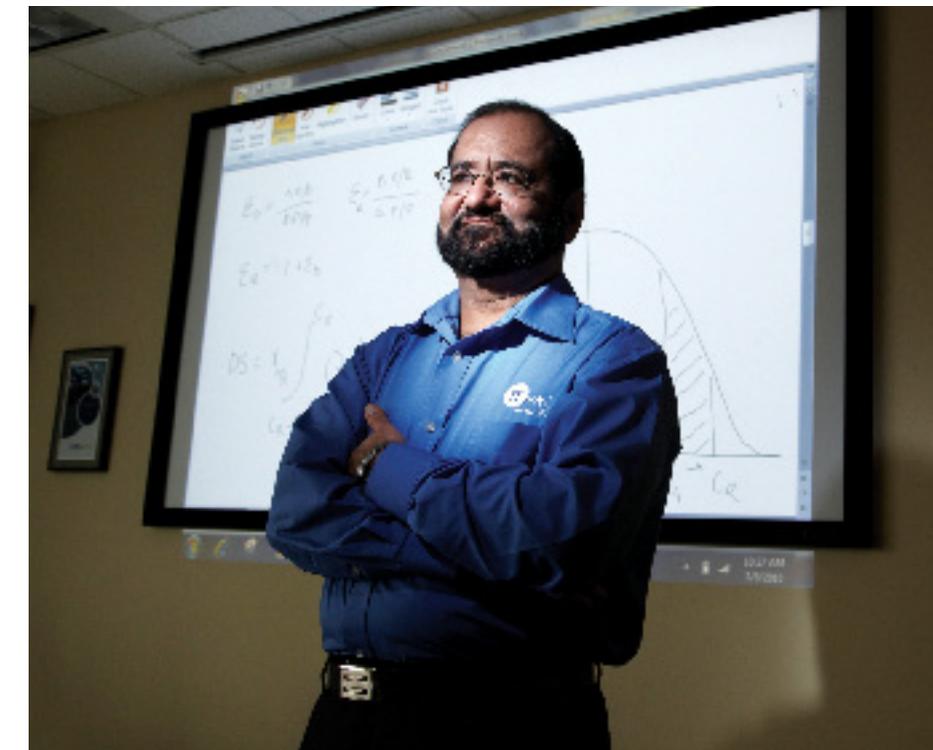
For Mehrotra, when a hotel is working to determine its best room rate, it's all about math and science—making decisions in a reasonable manner for different time frames or calculating risk during an uncertain marketplace. Mehrotra created an optimization system to which hotels can subscribe. IDeaS

when the economy starts turning around, and that same hotel wants to once again charge \$100 a night, that's a 200 percent increase.

"That increase will be seen by the guests much more than the drop will," he says. "Then when you look at the reality that this is cyclical, what is the best way to manage your prices so you are maximizing revenues for a much longer period of time, as opposed to reacting in ways that can hurt you later?"

It's not necessarily about filling up the hotel, Mehrotra says. It's not necessarily about charging the maximum amount of money. It's about balancing the two sides to optimize revenues. And, with the Internet, and Web sites like Expedia, a hotel's competitors and costumers now have all the information, too. To Mehrotra, this means the job of revenue management has changed; they now have to study distribution, pricing, packaging, contracts, profits and even statistics. "Revenue management is more about how to maximize the profitability of the business as a whole as opposed to only one aspect of the business," he says. "There is a point that if you drop the price below that amount, you may increase demand but only at the expense of revenue." IDeaS helps hotels pinpoint that price.

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GERI WOLF

Tracking Trends

The Style Laboratory's Geri Wolf combines new technology with a smattering of local talent and puts power in the hands of event planners.

Many people claim their best ideas come to them in the shower. They're more relaxed, their mind is wandering and—bam!—inspiration. Last fall, The Style Laboratory's Geri Wolf decided it was time to get out of wedding planning. However, with corporate events still struggling, she wasn't sure she could make her living doing only that. Already an innovative thinker, blogger and planner, it was time for her next great idea. And it came to her in the shower.

When you're planning an event of any caliber, what's the first thing you do? You surf the Web. Brides head to TheKnot.com. Planners head to Google. You search "photographers," "event venues," or "caterers." Even if you specify your location, thousands of results come up, some relevant but most not. Or, perhaps you know exactly what kind of flowers (or chairs or linens) you want to use, but the only way to find a local vendor who can deliver on that wish is to start calling around. You could be wasting your time. Enter The Style Laboratory's Style Stations.

"People know what they like when they see it," Wolf says. "They figure out their sense

of style visually, but to articulate it is very difficult. The idea was not only to help people identify their sense of style, but this is also a way for them to reach specific vendors."

Planners walk into The Style Laboratory's space in Gaviidae Common and sit down in front of a 42-inch computer screen. Through infrared technology (similar to touch-screen technology), they can search by the tip of their finger tens of thousands of images from local vendors—venues, cake designers, florists, etc.—to create a virtual inspirational board of their dream event. For free.

Every single image in the database is tagged accordingly for easy searching. For example, a picture of a floral arrangement may be tagged with the name of the event, the florist, the event designer and the venue. It is even tagged with each type of flower found in the arrangement. Planners can use the Style Station to search for "roses" and several images of local florist arrangements containing roses pop up. Then, using their finger a planner can enlarge those images (up to 42 inches, even) to see the finer details and pick a favorite, save that photo to an inspiration board and move on to the next element. You can't do that on the Web.



After her inspiring shower last September, Wolf had no idea where to begin. At first she pictured large, magnetic boards with magnetic images that people could sift through and move around on a wall in front of them. But cataloguing thousands of physical images was unreasonable. When a friend mentioned the screens CNN talking heads use to enlarge images and maps, Wolf looked into the technology. She eventually found a young tech company out of Canada that understood her vision—and didn't balk at her extremely short timeline—and used Microsoft technology to write the software code for such a complicated venture.

Simultaneously, Wolf traveled around the Twin Cities looking for vendors who could share her vision—a vision for which she had no physical entity to show them. "What was amazing to me were the vendors who said, 'I don't entirely know what you're talking about, but we want to associate with whatever you're doing,'" Wolf says. "As other vendors saw who signed on, they didn't want to be left behind. It helped us understand who the early adopters are, so if we ever have another crazy idea, we know exactly where to go."

To maintain a high talent level of vendors and to keep a wide variety of options categorized on the database, vendor participation is by invitation only. Chosen vendors then pay a flat annual fee to be included. In return, Wolf puts out The Laboratory Report, which shows her participants the top keyword, color and venue searches, as well as information on the average budget of the user. Using this information, Wolf can track current trends and pass these on to the vendors. The hope is vendors will use this information to modify what they're doing on Facebook, on Twitter or on their Web sites. "We're just another marketing and advertising vehicle, truly," she says. "And I think [trend reports are] one piece of the ad/marketing side they've been missing."

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JEFF PROUTY

Stretch Expeditions

Once a year, the Prouty Project pulls people out of their comfort zones and takes them on mind-bending adventures around the world.

For 50 weeks out of the year, the folks at The Prouty Project in Eden Prairie assist companies in strategic planning, organizational development and board and team development. Those other two weeks? They embody those same consulting skills and put them to work in the most unusual of places: the base camp of Mount Everest, along the path of the Paris Marathon or in Vietnam teaching English. For more than a decade, the Prouty Project has invited clients, friends and the general public to participate in Stretch Expeditions.

"We're asking our clients to stretch every day," says Jeff Prouty, founder and chairman. "I thought we should do something to stretch us. This would be the one time of year that we do something that's open to the public and it would be a stretch mentally, physically, spiritually and emotionally."

From young students to retired grandparents—executives, entrepreneurs and everyone in between—attendees in groups from eight to 25 people have traveled the globe to take part in the organization's trips.

"When you start to weave in people from all walks of life, you get that diversity of thinking," Prouty says. "The way an 11-year-old looks at an issue may be different than the way a 75-year-old looks at it, but the power of blending all that thinking is the magic. If you think about it, the board of directors of an organization is usually a group of 10 to 15 people who are individuals from different places and different organizations. In some respects, it's a metaphor for life."

With a specific focus each year, the group heads to a different, oftentimes developing, country. Every other year the team completes a physical challenge. They have biked hundreds of miles around South Africa and climbed Mount Kilimanjaro. Other years they have put their skills to volunteer projects, such as rebuilding areas touched by the tsunami in Sri Lanka or working at Chinese orphanages. This June, the group heads to the Peruvian Amazon to help build a medical clinic.



Before embarking on each Stretch Expedition team members meet to prepare themselves for the country and culture they are about to encounter. Prior to the group's trip to Vietnam, the Prouty Project brought in members from each branch of the military to speak about their experiences during the Vietnam War. In prepara-

tion for the Paris marathon, the group met weekly for long Saturday morning runs.

The learning doesn't stop once the team lands at their destination. Each day starts or ends with a debrief meeting, to check in with how people feel about their experiences. The group also keeps a journal, which Prouty says is the most powerful element of the entire process. Each day a different member of the team shares their perspectives in the journal and then passes it on to the next person. At the end of the trip, these words, along with photos, are bound, printed and given to each member.

Prouty knows anyone can go to an outdoors adventure retailer, a local church or a non-profit organization and look into booking a trip similar to Stretch Expeditions. But something would be missing, he says. People won't be encouraged to internalize, and journal about, how they can apply to their lives, their businesses or the world, what they're learning. And that's from where the "stretch" really derives. "There aren't many business executives coming together to do this kind of thing," Prouty says. "There's a custom-made element to it, with a truly high-caliber talent of people."

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PATAGONIA PHOTO COURTESY OF PROUTY PROJECT

KIERAN FOLLIARD

Irish Hospitality

While it may not sound like a novel concept, a large part of Kieran Folliard's success rests on a simple, but all too rare, philosophy: Treat people well.

It's been a busy 12 months for our local Irishman, Kieran Folliard. He opened the brand-new Cooper Irish Pub in St. Louis Park last fall, adding one more spot to his line of restaurants, which includes Minneapolis' The Local and St. Paul's The Liffey. If that wasn't enough, he couldn't pass up the opportunity to move his namesake, Kieran's Irish Pub, from its home on Second Avenue to the former Bellanotte space in Block E, opening hard and fast to reap the benefits of the venue's proximity to the new Target Field. So, how does he do it all? By surrounding himself with partners and employees with whom he shares a mutual respect.

Some employees have worked with Folliard for all 16 years he's been in the restaurant business. And as of Jan. 1, seven employees who demonstrated a strong track record of commitment and

"Employees have got to be getting things out that are satisfying their needs, whether they are a long-term employee and this is a career for them or they're paying off student loans."

contribution became part owners. To find these loyal employees, Folliard takes his time when hiring, even putting them through multiple interviews to make sure they are a good fit. They have to actually like people, he says. Everything else you can train. And once they are onboard, eligible employees receive a benefits package and a 401k match. That's practically unheard of in an industry with lower-than-



minimum-wage pay and more turnover than perhaps any other industry.

"It's not rocket science, but we've discovered the culture of hospitality in our pubs is so critical to who we are, that's really what we've got to establish when we hire people," Folliard says. "And we decided if we go into that amount of effort to hire people, we might as well take care of them, too. They've got to be getting things out that are satisfying their needs, whether they are a long-term employee and this is a career for them or they're paying off student loans."

The benefits of this way of thinking certainly outweigh the costs. Not only is turnover reduced, but happy, loyal employees make for happy, loyal customers. And busy restaurants, which the Folliard pubs definitely are, are always good for the bottom line. Folliard wants employees to feel a genuine appreciation for the customers who hand over their hard-earned money. Those customers better be getting a little more than just their five or ten bucks worth, he says.



"I like raising the bar, no pun intended," he says. "Leaving things the same, let's face it, is really not that interesting. If we really wanted to chase the mighty dollar, we would just put a chain of cookie-cutter Irish pubs out there and trot them off in a line. We're more interested in trying new things. And hopefully customers can have their beer and be on their way just a little bit happier with a little more pep in their step."

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ELY, MN

Off the Beaten Path

When it comes to marketing its city, the Ely Chamber of Commerce refuses to settle for the same-old ideas.

Last November, the world learned Brazil's Rio de Janeiro won the opportunity to host the 2016 summer Olympic Games, beating out Chicago, the United States' competitor. However, there were some of us who were pulling for another city altogether. On April 1, 2009, Ely made known its desire to host the big event. Through a series of press conferences, a blog, a Facebook page and a Twitter account, the folks in Ely let the world know their northern city of lakes, beauty and friendly people would be the perfect fit for the 2016 games. The city planned to drain Miners Lake to construct the first in-ground Olympic Stadium. When asked how they would accommodate all the visitors, they simply responded with a shrug, "We have roads." While the city eventually lost out to Rio, it gained so much more in media coverage—which, in the end, was the whole point. This purposefully designed story turned Ely into a national, if not worldwide, hook for travel news writers.

"That's the main reason for this type of advertising: to get people's attention," says Linda Fryer, administrative director for the Ely Chamber of Commerce. "We have so many people who have been to Ely over the years, and maybe they haven't been back. If nothing more, it keeps Ely in front of them. But we're also trying to reach those new people. And maybe those people think, 'Well, this sounds awful quirky, we better go up there and see what's going on.'"

This wasn't Ely's first April Fool's joke. In



2008, headlines flashed across the state that Canada was offering to purchase the city and move it across the border. The Ely Chamber put up a petition on its Web site, seeking signatures to help keep the city in the United States. Press releases begged visitors to "get up to Ely while you still can!" According to a Minnesota Public Radio story, within just a few days of the announcement, the chamber received nearly 600 calls questioning the news and more than 1,000 signatures on the petition.

It all started five years ago when members of the Ely Chamber of Commerce made a commitment to hire a marketing firm to handle the advertising efforts of the area. While it's very easy to just do what they did the year previously, Fryer says that wasn't good enough. "We decided to purposely portray ourselves as unique by doing some of this out-of-the-box-type stuff," she says. "Over the last four or five years, we've kind of retained that term out there as being 'quirky,'

And you know what? That's great. A lot of places may not like it; we love it!"

The chamber has worked with two different marketing firms over the past few years, most recently partnering with John Jarvis of Giraffe. The 2016 Olympics idea was his, and the Chamber embraced it right away. The pitch started with the Minnesota media, but by early morning on April 1, it had hit the national media as well. In fact, the *Orlando Sentinel* ran a full-page story about Ely's Olympic bid in its travel section. To Fryer, this was much more valuable than any full-page ad the city could've purchased. (The "Keep Ely in Minnesota" campaign, also an idea of Jarvis', got picked up as far away as Japan, with even people in Antarctica hearing about it and responding.)

Besides garnering the attention of people far and wide, these creative campaigns stir up pride on the local streets as well. Ely businesses eagerly await the next campaign idea, not only because it's a local thrill to gain national attention, but they can create merchandise around the idea. "Keep Ely in Minnesota" signs sold out before the 2008 summer was over. "Ely 2016" coffee mugs, t-shirts and magnets made the rounds in town last summer. For Fryer, it's exciting to see the local business community embrace and benefit from the chamber's marketing efforts. The chamber is not without recognition either; Explore Minnesota Tourism recently honored the chamber with two 2009 Travel Marketing Awards and a 2010 Marketing Award of Merit.

"We're not a pass-through community," Fryer says. "We have to work harder to get people to come here. Even if they're coming from Duluth, it's still two hours. We feel once we get them to come to Ely, we will get them back."

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PHOTOS COURTESY OF JOHN JARVIS