

The Morning Newsbeat Interview With Brian Woolf

From the 'Interviews with Business Thought Leaders' Series

by Morning Newsbeat & Brian Woolf (July 2013)

In July 2013, *Morning Newsbeat* conducted an interview with Brian Woolf, due to his prominence in the business world, for its *Series Of Interviews with Business Thought Leaders*.

As the interviewer said, "The MNB Interview series was designed to engage with business thought leaders who I like and respect, and who have something to say. It has a simple format. I posed to each of the interviewees the same questions, and I told them their answers could be as short or long as they wished, and as serious or irreverent as they liked. What I was looking for was a window into how they think and feel."

Here, then, is the interview with *Brian Woolf, Author And Loyalty Marketing Pioneer*.

What's the most important thing you've learned in your career?

Today's peacock is tomorrow's feather duster. Business can be the noblest quest we ever undertake, creating something better than before. Yet as soon as it is created, the heel-nipping begins, and we slowly realize that all competitive advantage is eventually neutralized. A bigger lesson is that every business has a shelf life and that our challenge as business executives is to elongate its sell-by date by refreshing and reinventing it, all the while adhering to its core values. The average US company has a lifespan of about 30 years. Even the best are not exempt from the scythe: in the latest Fortune 500 listing, released last month, only about 10% of the proud names that populated the original 1955 list remain. It is also sobering to consider the research by John Sexton, the president of NYU, showing that fewer than 30 businesses in history have been in

continuous operation for more than 500 years. Sustaining a business for the long-term is not easy.

What is the most significant thing you do each week, and why?

When the tools change, the rules change was sage advice about Loyalty Marketing received from Daniel Burrus many years ago. For the past two years the most significant thing I've been focusing on is the next evolution of retail loyalty marketing programs. Why? I love to be at the cutting edge of finding ways to help retailers use their programs to better serve their customers and, in turn, reward themselves. And I do see new opportunities coming, especially for the non-giants.

What's the most irreplaceable or essential piece of technology you own, and why?

The technology that I love the most is the screen saver on various computers throughout our home. My wife and I have traveled (and photographed) extensively over many years; seeing snippets of our past appear continuously in random sequence has created an amazing reminder of so much of our lives that would otherwise be lost in the mist of lapsed memory. I feel our lives are so much richer now because the past has become a real-time part of the present ... all because of the random juxtaposition of little colorful pieces of life's jigsaw puzzle.

What's your favorite movie (and is there a business lesson in it)?

The In-Laws (1979) follows the hilarious adventures of the fathers of the bride and groom prior to the upcoming wedding. Peter Falk (a CIA agent) and Alan Arkin (a dentist) always have me rolling on the floor throughout their escapades. Some of the great lines include: "The benefits (of the CIA) are terrific. The trick is not to get killed;" "I was in the jungle for 9 months ... I saw things ... they have tsetse flies down there the size of eagles!" and (before the firing squad) "We have no blindfolds, senor, we are a poor country."

What's your favorite book?

My favorite book is "The Lessons of History," by Will and Ariel Durant. [And only \$12.16 at Amazon.] This is a brilliant, exceedingly readable, short 100-page book distilling the lessons this wonderful couple learned from their 40+ years researching and writing their 11-volume masterpiece (also extremely readable), "The Story of Civilization." Their 12 lessons range from Morals, Religion, and Character to Biology, Race, and Socialism. They explain, for example, how politics and Governments move

like a big pendulum from left to right and back again. They show us that man is still essentially the same in nature and character as 2500 (and many more) years ago. They explain how moral codes adjust, yet still are essential to mankind. It's a read worth experiencing.

Who has been the most influential person in your business life, and why? And if you had to define the most important aspect of leadership, what would it be?

I was 21 when I joined Tom Ah Chee's 3-store company. It was New Zealand's first supermarket company that later grew to be one of the country's premier retailers. Foodtown was created without Tom even seeing a US supermarket. But he had studied every aspect of this new form of retailing and built an organization we were all proud to be part of. His philosophy was embedded in the plaque cemented in the first store on opening day: Constantly striving to serve you better. Tom set a clear level of high expectations that all understood. He seldom raised his voice in anger but we did learn when we deviated from the best of standards. His drive for continued excellence was seen in his openness to new ideas, and his willingness to experiment with new approaches and parallel businesses. His leadership and example created a very profitable company. His attention to detail was remarkable; from the weekly ad and competitors' prices to no burnt-out store ceiling lights. He wanted a first-class company without unnecessary costs: thus, his attention to detail also embraced the minutiae of labor productivity and department and store Profit and Loss statements. He was a man with the common touch. No one felt like a stranger. He related so easily with his warmth and sense of humor. He cared about people throughout the whole company. Every one was important. I saw him unobtrusively attend funerals of associates from the top to the bottom of the organization. He and his partner spent a significant part of their time talking of individual associates and their development. My Harvard Business School MBA was something they, not I, initiated (and paid for!) Tom heavily influenced my business framework, from ethics to excellence. But, in addition, I learned and enjoyed his depth as a human being. He was one of the very few Renaissance men I have ever met. He was a man of many diverse talents-Entrepreneur. Marketing genius. Business builder. Leader. Artist. Architect. Cook. Gardener. Fisherman. World traveler. Just a few of these would provide a rich life. As time passed we became close friends. Cancer claimed him way too soon. It is said that we are part of all we meet. I hope that a large part of Tom has somehow become part of me.

What's your keenest insight (so far) from your life and/or career?

Man is an economic animal in search of self-importance. Both when managing a store and structuring a loyalty program I observed this human duality: our underlying motivations are a blend of economics and ego. The blend varies from person to person, and from time to time within each person, but we must recognize and address them, whether dealing with customers or associates.

What was your most memorable meal? Where was it, what was it, and what was the occasion?

Sunday, October 30, 2011, at The Bowl ryokan (Japanese inn) near Kofu, Yamanashi, about 100 km north of Tokyo. I love Japanese food, especially when prepared and served at a ryokan. What was so special about this meal was that it followed a day of walking in a National Park with Mt Fuji as background. Prior to dinner, my three hosts and I luxuriated in the Japanese bathing ritual where we washed ourselves thoroughly before gently soaking our way through three pools of increasingly hot temperatures. Then, dressed in traditional Japanese clothing (yukata, etc), and seated at a low table in a subtly decorated, spotless room, we spend the evening enjoying a meal prepared at our table by a demure kimono-adorned woman. There were so many different servings, from well-known sukiyaki and udon noodles to delectable dishes I wish I could pronounce. But what heightened the specialness of our dinner were the sights and sounds. The presentation of the dinner table was stunning. It was pure artistry: from the selection of a few harmoniously colored vegetables sitting in a glass on an autumn leaf on our plates to the final serving of fragrant fresh fruit on lightly-crushed ice and seasonal leaves. Outside, the delicate Japanese lanterns threw reflections off the carp-filled rock pools while Nature provided some background music with soft sounds tinkling from small waterfalls. Then, to make the evening complete, we slept in futons in our tatami-matted rooms. A truly magical memory!

What's your favorite place to go to eat/drink, that's not your home?

There's a nearby low-key Italian restaurant my wife and I frequently visit, where my order is always the same: their garlic-laced warm spinach and scallops salad accompanied by a glass of chianti. Simple. Healthy. Tasty. Relaxing. Repeatable.

What is the thing that you haven't yet done that you would most like to do?

In the coming year, learn to grill the perfect steak. Then, sometime in the coming 10 years, live 4-6 months on a small Greek island (perhaps Ios or Paros), for so many different reasons: the weather, the sparkling Mediterranean, the white-walled homes

with their blue doors and trim, the simple food, the Greek warmth, and to re-study and reflect in situ on how a small, rock-strewn land in a short period of history gave mankind so much ... medicine, logic, mathematics, art, sculpture, democracy, philosophy, theater, and the Olympics ... just for starters.

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About the author...

Brian Woolf is a global leader in loyalty marketing and has written three definitive works on the subject, *Measured Marketing: A Tool to Shape Food Store Strategy*, *Customer Specific Marketing*, and *Loyalty Marketing: The Second Act*. He devotes his time to helping retailers develop, critique and strengthen their loyalty programs.

The techniques and metrics Brian Woolf has developed have become guiding principles for those operating some of the world's most successful programs. He is the President of the Retail Strategy Center, and has consulted, and spoken at conferences, in the US, Europe, Japan, and Australasia.

Prior to his total commitment to loyalty marketing, his corporate roles included Deputy Managing Director of Progressive Enterprises, a major New Zealand retailer; and Chief Financial Officer of Food Lion, a leading US food retailer. He has an M.Com. (Economics) from the University of Auckland, New Zealand, and an MBA from the Harvard Business School.

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www.brianwoolf.com

Email: brian@brianwoolf.com

Tel: +1 864 458-8277

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