



Take It to the River

Client Events at Fishing Lodges Make Great Memories—and Good Business Sense

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BY CHRIS SANTELLA

he phrases “client event” or “corporate outing” conjure up several scenarios—a shotgun golf tourney at a private or decent daily-fee course with door prizes in the clubhouse afterwards; or, perhaps, a bustling hospitality suite at a Red Sox or 49ers game where it’s easier to watch the contest on closed circuit TV than on the field of play below.

Paul Frey, senior vice president and industry manager of the Waste & Recycling Industry Specialty Group at Wells Fargo (NYSE:WFC) has seen his share of such outings over the years. “I’ve worked in the banking industry since the late 1970s, and I’ve had the opportunity to attend and host all kinds of events: from private museum openings, theater performances, to sporting events and ski trips. Back in the 1980s, everyone wanted to go out to California and play Pebble Beach and Spyglass. They are great courses, but the number of guests at the typical golf outing makes building relationships with all of them challenging, if not impossible. After one or two top-notch golf events, many CEOs enjoy experiencing something different.”

In this age of “perfect markets” that the Internet has spawned, many companies increasingly compete on price and delivery time. There’s little human touch. But in some fields of endeavor, it is relationships—real, human relationships—that still win and retain clients.

The kind of relationships that can be forged over eight one-on-one hours in a drift boat.

“It was in 1996 or ’97, and I was looking for something different for a client outing,” Frey continued. “I wanted to cultivate the kind of experience where our bankers could really get to know the invited clients and prospects, and the clients and prospects would also have a chance to spend time with each other, as well as to get to know the bank. Another executive at the bank had been to Henry’s Fork Lodge in Idaho, and he suggested that I try an event there. I put a small group together—10 clients and prospects and three or four bankers. Even though some of the CEO attendees had never held a rod of any kind in their hands, they had a blast. My relationships with them jumped up the scale significantly. I had the opportunity to better understand the strategies that were driving their companies’ businesses, because we could talk about more in-depth subjects. There was a certain camaraderie that the lodge environment provides—the time on the river, being on the lodge deck with wine and appetizers in the evening. We’re all close together, and there’s a tremendous ability to network. I’ve never had interactions like this in any other setting.”

The objective is straightforward: A hosting entity wants to get out in front of prospects—like putting a fly on the water in front of a trout. They want the prospect to be interested—to rise to the fly. And they want to convert the prospect into a client—that is, get them all the way to the boat, overcoming various obstacles on the way (competitive firms/weeds, existing relationships/light tippet, etc.).

Mike Dreisbach, who owns and operates Savage River Lodge in western Maryland with his wife Jan, hosts more than 20 corporate outings each year. Many will combine a few different outdoor activities with fly fishing—rafting, geocaching, biking, hiking and snowshoeing. The common denominator is that all of these activities

get people out in nature. “I have clients say again and again, ‘We’ve gotten so much done because we’re outdoors.’ I’m convinced that the main reason to have a retreat or outing at a fishing lodge is the fresh air.”

A year after his first visit to Henry’s Fork Lodge, Frey booked the whole lodge, inviting 20 clients and prospects and 10 bankers and senior bank executives to visit Idaho in August. He felt the event went well, and the sense that he was onto a winner was confirmed when he had a call from one of the CEOs who had been in attendance. “This fellow was from Chicago, and had never fly fished before,” Frey said, recalling the trip. “He absolutely enjoyed himself—the first class service, fine food and wine and attention to detail at the lodge, and his time on the river. When he called in December, he said ‘I don’t know if you’re going to do this event again next year, or if I’ll be invited. But if you are doing it and I am invited, can you tell me when it will happen, so my family vacation doesn’t conflict with the trip?’”

Anyone who’s fished the sacred waters of the Henry’s Fork and has experienced the rustic elegance of Henry’s Fork Lodge understands the appeal of an outing to such a place... especially if someone else is footing the not-inconsequential bill. (An all-inclusive three-night trip to Henry’s Fork Lodge with two days of guided fishing for 20 attendees costs in the mid-five figures; guests are expected to cover the cost of their travel to Idaho Falls.) Can such

pointing out that the outings actually can be more economical than some traditional corporate events. “Prospects hear from current clients how Wells Fargo takes care of its customers. Our time at Henry’s Fork often yields more business with existing clients and has turned prospects into new customers.”

Frey has now held more than 20 events at Henry’s Fork Lodge. Other regular visitors include Arco, Mass Mutual, Sentry Insurance, Foss Maritime, the Stanford Alumni Association, the California Academy of Sciences and TU. The lodge hosts board meetings, sales force incentive trips and executive group training or team-building gatherings as well.

There are a handful of considerations for planning a successful fly-fishing outing. It begins with your invite list. Frey feels that it’s important to have a mix of clients and prospects, and to make sure that attendees are at comparable level in their organizations—the higher the better. “CEOs like to network and share ideas with other CEOs,” he reasons. “At these events, clients get to know each other, and as a result, many are doing business together.” Timing is also a consideration. You’ll want to make sure that the event is not in conflict with key business timeframes that impact private or public companies. You’ll also want to issue invitations far in advance, to avoid conflicts with family vacations and other popular seasons for corporate events.

It’s also important to select a lodge that can comfortably accommodate both

places like golf or ski resorts, so fishing lodges have to meet that higher level of expectations. At the beginning of each season, we bring in a trainer from Four Seasons to train our staff on customer service. This gives our people a high level of professionalism that puts us in good stead with our clients.”

Little touches like prepping staff to memorize the names of guests and having licenses ready when they arrive can make a memorable impression. So can going the extra distance. “One of our guests mentioned at dinner that he wanted to hear elk bugle,” recalled Bianca Gruetter, from Thomas Weisel Venture Partners, which has taken groups to Henry’s Fork six times. “The following morning, one of the lodge staff took a group on an elk bugle hike at sunrise.”

It goes without saying that any lodge you consider should offer good fishing. (As much as we say catching fish doesn’t matter all that much in our enjoyment of an outing, it certainly can elevate one’s mood to have a productive day!) Equally important is a venue that offers a variety of fishing experiences, and guides that understand the needs of different anglers. Ideally, there will be spots where you can put beginners on some fish and more technical waters where the experienced angler can be challenged.

Fly-fishing outings not only can convert prospects into clients. It can bring new anglers to the sport. “I have seen a number of executives turn into

“I have seen a number of executives turn into fans of the sport after the outing.”

— PAUL FREY, SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT AND INDUSTRY MANAGER, WASTE & RECYCLING INDUSTRY SPECIALTY GROUP, WELLS FARGO

expenditures – especially in a business climate that’s increasingly sensitive to the scent of boondoggles—be justified? Does the trip merely generate the treacle intangible of good feelings or does business get written?

Paul Frey would say both.

“Every year, the event yields significant business activity,” he shared,

the number of attendees in your outing and the level of service that C-level guests are accustomed to. “Guest expectations for a fishing lodge used to be a bit lower than for those at a luxury hotel,” said Nelson Ishiyama, the owner of Henry’s Fork Lodge. “But corporate guests are accustomed to the highest quality when they travel for business or on vacation to

fans of the sport after the outing,” Frey added. “Before they leave, they go down to one of the fly shops in Island Park and they’ll drop \$4,000 or \$5,000 on a whole fly-fishing outfit and all of the gear.”

For the long-term well-being of our rivers, fostering new recruits is certainly something worth investing in. 



TIM ROMANO