

Simple Success: Business Lessons from Main Street

By Alan H. Cleinman

Boudreaus on Branding

In the quaint village of Laurens, nestled in the hills of upstate New York near the baseball village of Cooperstown, you'll find a spectacular lesson on branding. On a side street in this tiny community of 277 souls is an establishment that's been serving up its unique brand for over thirty years. Starting out as a tiny country store, today Boudreaus serves up breakfast. Nothing more. Just breakfast. At Boudreaus you'll find eggs, bacon, French toast and pancakes. You can enjoy home fries sizzling in gobs of real butter. There are donuts, and, of course, coffee. But while the simple food served up by Jeff and Sue Boudreau is certainly good, what makes Boudreaus a powerful brand has little to do with its fare. You can get eggs and bacon anywhere.



Step inside this living-room sized 1930s converted gas station and you'll find a cobble of exposed beams, white walls, a linoleum floor, rickety chairs and an old iron wood-burning stove. There's a counter with 7 stools, each stool top a bit different, and some hand-me down tables and built-in benches capable of holding twenty elbow-to-elbow. You'll note a small grill, blackened from years of bacon. There's a stainless steel sink and a couple of old refrigerators. While certainly warm and comfortable, you get the feeling that less than a gale-force wind might blow the place away. Let

your eyes wander and you'll catch a pile of money, bills and change, scattered on the front counter among some old magazines. You'll note the blackboard menu, with its chalk dusted bill of fare.

The prices will make you pause while you figure out whether you're caught in a "Back to the Future" episode. Note the signs above the front counter. The white board reads: "Grill closes at 10:30am, Tee Time 11:15am." And then there's the more formal, framed message...one quickly assumes that it's their Mission Statement. "Order What You Want, Eat What You Get" it states. Those messages speak volumes about Boudreaus. And there's Jeff hovering over his small grill while Sue is washing dishes...both with their backs to the Sunday morning crowd; nary a word spoken between them...or to customers, for that matter.



One's first Boudreau experience can be a bit disconcerting. On my initial venture there, I sat at the counter, waiting for service. Fifteen minutes. Ignored. But being the observer that I am, it didn't take me long to discover a special relationship between the Boudreaus and their customers. As I sat there, expecting at some point to be acknowledged, I noticed customers carrying their dirty dishes behind the counter and placing them on the sink. Out of the corner of my eye I detected a patron writing something on a slip of paper, then placing it on the clipboard near the grill. Still another walked around the joint and asked others if they wanted a coffee refill, pouring hot brew from a blue enamel camp-style coffee pot, then placing it back on the hot surface of the 1920s wood

stove which dominates the facility and provides a safe corner for Jeff's golf clubs. "There's something special going on here," I said to myself.



"What's the drill," I asked my neighbor. "Pretty simple...it's almost like you're in your momma's kitchen," he replied with a chuckle. "Write your order on the paper over there. Put it in the clip by Jeff. Clean up your dishes when you're done and give them to Sue. And make your own change when you pay on your way out." I was fascinated and hooked on Boudreaus; a customer for life.

Jeff and Sue serve up what amounts to a typical, plain American breakfast. That's it. They're not open for lunch or dinner. Never were; never will. There are only about ten items or so for sale. Except for Jeff's incredible home fries, their tangible product isn't even close to being unique. You won't find Baked Whole Grain Oatmeal or an Avocado Omelet here. But they're proof positive that, as the saying goes, "it's not the steak, it's the sizzle." They've built a powerful brand and, in so many respects, don't realize it. First, they serve up their offerings without fan-fare. Just a good, old-fashioned breakfast cooked with lots of butter and Jeff's special form of love; with smoke coming up off the grill; right before your eyes. Second, they charge what they feel they have to so they can pay their bills and make a buck...and not a dime more. My Boudreaus' breakfast consisted of a large portion of home fries, 3 pieces of French toast, 3 slices of bacon and a bottomless cup of coffee. All this for \$4.35! This same meal would have been of less quality and cost three times the amount at my local diner. Third, the Boudreaus' facility is without fancy...comfortable and quaint...rough around the edges...a step back in time. And finally, in

support of their low cost structure, they've eliminated the cost of waitresses (Okay, the place is so small it probably couldn't hold one, anyway) by relying on their customers to "get it;" placing their own orders, bussing their own tables, pouring their own coffee and making their own change. But in so doing, without overt effort, the Boudreaus have accomplished what the likes of Nike and Gap have spent billions chasing. Mega-brands only wish they had what the Boudreaus have...in terms of brand loyalty. Boudreaus' brand loyalty stems from involving their customers in their brand...in their unique experience...in a variety of subtle ways. Each and every customer feels that they're actually part of the product. And to the non-observant, one might conclude that the Boudreau's pricing strategy is an Rx for failure. But look close and you'll see that most of their customers drop a \$10 or \$20 bill on the counter and leave what amounts to 100% cash tips. Crazy like foxes those Boudreaus.

Now in their mid-seventies, Jeff and Sue continue to serve their customers daily. They say it's out of loyalty and for the fun of it. They've certainly not made it rich in the classic sense and one gets the feeling that wealth was never their goal. But their brand has certainly delivered "riches" for them and their loyal clientele. They raised 8 college graduates on the proceeds of their simple business. They've paid their bills and enjoy life...Jeff makes his 11:15am tee time 3 days a week, weather permitting. Sue enjoys her quaint home, which is right next door. They're still open 364 days a year, closing only for Christmas. "Our customers rely upon us," they say. "Besides, what else do we have to do?" Their lively, no-nonsense banter is generally reserved for their regular customers (and most customers soon become repeats) and is full of New York style candor and character. I once told Sue that I talk about their place "all the time." Her retort, like most of what comes out of her mouth, was quick, dry and to the point..."do us a favor," she said with an expression not quite a smile...don't." "We don't want any more business," she said. No, you won't find their yellow page ad and certainly there's not a website, either. But Jeff and Sue get exactly what they want from their business...having built a powerful brand.

So what's the lesson? Boudreau's define the nature of a good brand. This husband-wife team has combined the simplest high-value product imaginable in a truly unique environment with, in today's vernacular, a "customer-centric delivery system." They're virtually immune to competition because they're focused on their passion; provide remarkable value; and deliver it with a character all their own, day in-day out.

You see, the Boudreus don't sell food. They sell Boudreaus. And you simply can't get Boudreaus down the street.

Lessons From Beaudreau's

- Find Your Passion
- Do *It* for the Right Reasons
- Allow your Customers to determine what's fair
- Winning Ideas Are Often Incredibly Simple
- Involve Your Customers in Your Product
- Make *It* an experience