

Win a Lunch Date with...Theo Epstein?

Company: Home for Little Wanderers
Timeframe: December 1-19, 2005

Unless you follow baseball, the name of Theo Epstein may not ring the proverbial bell. If you live in Boston, however, his name rings bells of decibel-splitting levels. Epstein made baseball history on two occasions: in 2002 when he was hired at age of 28 to become the general manager of the **Boston Red Sox** (making him the youngest general manager in the history of **Major League Baseball**), and again in 2004 when he was credited with

leading the Red Sox to their first World Series victory in 86 years.

It is no exaggeration to state that many Bostonians would eagerly treat Epstein to a meal as a way of saying thanks for this work on behalf of their long-suffering (and long-losing) team. But for one local nonprofit, Epstein was literally on the menu: As a grand prize in a contest where the winner would receive the chance have lunch with the man who created a miracle in Fenway Park.

Ironically, this all occurred at what might have been the worst possible moment for

Epstein: Right after he resigned from the Red Sox in October 2005 amid a contract dispute.

THEO AT THE TABLE

Epstein was a long-time supporter of the **Home for Little Wanderers**, New England's oldest (founded in 1799) and largest private child welfare agency. Epstein's twin brother Paul, a social worker, was previously on the Home's staff (Paul's wife is currently on the staff). The Epstein brothers, through their foundation (facetiously named **A Foundation to Be Named Later**) had provided generous donations to the agency in the past.

To help raise additional funds for the Home's annual year-end fundraiser last year, Epstein donated himself as a grand prize in a contest. People would be asked to bid on the chance to have lunch with Epstein.

For Lisa Rowan-Gillis, vice president of communications for the agency, the idea of a bidding contest with Epstein as the grand prize was too good to believe. "He is like royalty around here – like a Kennedy," she says.

In putting the auction online, the Home decided to play up the local angle further by using the Cambridge-based **cMarket.com**, an online auction service specializing in charitable fundraisers.

"Everything was just kismet for us," recalls Kathleen Goodman, vice president of marketing at cMarket.com. "The Home came to us at the right time: Theo had just



Theo Epstein, general manager of the Boston Red Sox. Would you pay \$16,100 to have lunch with this man?

LESSONS LEARNED: WINNING TIPS FOR RUNNING A CONTEST

Everyone loves contests – the thrill of elbowing out the rest of the world to secure a special grand prize. And PR professionals love contests, too, since they offer a fun way to promote a product or service while simultaneously offering a generous harvest of new contacts for future B2B or B2C inquiries. However, there are a few basic ground rules to consider for any contest coordination. These include the following:

- **A truly grand prize.** The idea of a contest is for the winner to receive something that is special and distinctive. Avoid prizes that anyone can pick up on their own with too much ease (such as an iPod or a leather briefcase). Try to aim for something with a degree of exclusivity and a bit of expense (yes, contests are not for the cheapo set). Instead of an iPod, think about concert tickets. Instead of a briefcase, how about a free weekend trip to a posh resort?
- **No Rice-A-Roni prizes, please!** Second place should not mean second rate, so if the contest has runner-up prizes, show a bit of class. Avoid the example of the TV game shows of the 1970s that handed out boxes of Rice-A-Roni to the second place finishers. Gift certificates or gift cards are both tasteful and practical in conveying the "nice try" message (think of prizes worth around \$100 or higher – anything less is tacky, anything more is a bit too much).
- **And the winner is...** It should go without saying, but we'll say it anyway: Promote the heck out of the contest winner. If you can get the winner to accept the prize in person, have a camera on hand to photograph the occasion. This works both for B2B contests (think of photo stories for trade publications) and B2C (especially for the local media where the prize winner lives). **PRN**

resigned and in Boston there was a lot of "Wow, what is this?" It was really a great opportunity."

The Home posted its Theo Epstein auction on December 1. The starting bid was a fairly low \$150, but over the next two weeks the levels rose to a few thousand. The bidding slowed down, but then an unexpected slice of gossip helped fuel the auction anew.

THEO 2?

"There came a leak from somewhere that Theo might be coming back to the Red Sox," says Rowan-Gillis. (Epstein subsequently rejoined the team as general manager in January 2006 with a better contract and the additional title of executive vice president). "Then the auction jumped dramatically."

Indeed, all digital hell broke loose – albeit in a positive way. On December 13, a pair of Boston-area philanthropists with a love for the Red Sox opened their wallets and their Web browsers. Each began to drive up bids in increments of \$1,000 per entry. Within two days, the auction rose to an astonishing \$15,600. This auction transfixed the city and even the *Boston Globe* covered the bidding war as if it was a spectator sport; it became such a hot topic that the Home actually extended it for an additional two days.

The bidding closed on December 19 at \$16,100 – edging out the second place bidder by \$100.

“How do you like them apples?” asks Rowan-Gillis. “Those are some apples!”

(Blogger William Bragg, writing on his AlmostBoston.com site, noted the extraordinary generosity of the winning bid with a fun run of Red Sox stats. “The purchase price is more than it would have cost

the buyer for a field-side view for two all summer long at Fenway,” wrote Bragg. “Two field box seats for the 2006 campaign cost \$180 per game, or \$14,580. In fact, the lunch is worth more than the team’s 2004 World Series ring, which has an appraised value of \$14,100.”

If anyone was caught off-guard by the drama generated in the auction, it was Theo Epstein himself. “There was such a ferocity between the bidders that

he wound up donating a second lunch,” says Goodman. Thus, both the winning bidder and the runner-up enjoyed quality time with their local hero (who enjoyed a spot of media attention for himself, of course) while the Home enjoyed the proceeds from the combined top two bids of \$32,100 raised from the auction.

“We’re just thrilled with the results,” says Rowan-Gillias. “You can bet we’ll be doing

another online auction next holiday season.”

But whether Epstein will be back on the menu remains to be seen! [PRN](#)

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“How do you like them apples? Those are some apples!” —Lisa Rowan-Gillis

► PR Scorecard

Good PR / Bad PR: Financial Services Messaging

The level of competition within the financial services industry has never been stronger, with a variety of institutions elbowing each other for a greater slice of market share. Too often, though, it is uncertain whether these companies are properly targeting their PR focus. This week, we’ll examine the PR strategies behind a trio of financial services players: A somewhat oversized newcomer seeking admission to the industry, an old-time veteran openly muttering about its image problems, and a feisty independent seeking out new customers with innovative generosity. Is this Good PR that you can bank on or Bad PR that crashes like a bounced check? [PRN](#)

The PR Focus	Good PR or Bad PR?
<p>Wal-Mart is banking on...banking. The retailer wants to charter an industrial bank in Utah that will be run by Jane Thompson, former chair of Sears National Bank. Due to a strong level of public comment (most of it negative), Wal-Mart agreed to an unprecedented pair of public hearings before the Federal Deposit Insurance Corp. The hearings may determine whether laws pertaining to industrial banks need rewriting (Utah is one of three states that allows such institutions to be chartered).</p>	<p>GOOD PR: The retailer is playing this PR game properly. Thompson is a highly respected banking and retail veteran, which strengthens Wal-Mart’s case. Opponents claim Wal-Mart is eyeing an expansion to retail banking, which is unlikely since the proposed industrial bank will process the 140 million annual credit, debit and check transactions at its stores – it is cheaper to do that in-house versus outsourcing. The retailer’s low-keyed PR approach makes its loud opponents appear shrill and strident.</p>
<p>Piedmont Aviation Credit Union, a major North Carolina financial services institution, is experiencing a bit of a crisis. <i>The Business Journal of the Greater Triad Area</i> reports the 57-year-old credit union is considering a new name: Only 40% of its membership comes from the local aviation industry. Despite recent mergers with two smaller credit unions that expanded its membership base, total deposits and assets were down somewhat in 2005.</p>	<p>BAD PR: There is not much transparency here, but then again the credit union has no one to blame but itself. A competitive local banking environment coupled by a lazy marketing push did little to build the credit union’s message with its market (as witnessed by the 2005 deposit and asset figures). The credit union is smart enough to realize that it needs to get its PR and marketing message into better focus – but maybe it should’ve pondered those facts privately!</p>
<p>Old Merchants Mortgage Bankers in Lake Success, NY, announced a new program offering free home appraisals for those seeking to refinance their mortgages or borrow against the equity in their homes. Says president Scott Cooper in a news release: “No one should have to pay to have their home appraised when Old Merchants deducts the appraisal cost from the closing costs at close of escrow. Deducting appraisal costs is an innovative way to lessen the burden of refinancing for a growing cross section of homeowners.”</p>	<p>GOOD PR: At a time when the overheated housing market is finally cooling down, Old Merchants Mortgage Bankers is wisely seeking innovative ways to bring new clients to its fold. And what better audience to tap into than those who already own homes? The bank’s press release also stresses how it is independently owned and operated and how it provides personalized service – a nice reminder that it is an essential part of a neighborhood and not a branch of a distant corporate monolith. It appears Old Merchants can teach bankers new tricks!</p>