

*"Why join the navy
when you can be
a pirate?"
- Steve Jobs*

boxfire marketing

Success begins with a single spark

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Sometimes, thinking 'outside the box' just isn't good enough

The name 'boxfire marketing' harkens back to the early 1990s when founder R. Michael Johnson was asked to take over editorial operations for a struggling, stagnant daily newspaper in Central Ohio.

The staff was unmotivated. The readers were disengaged. The product was bland at best. There was a war between advertising and editorial. Revenues were in the dumps.

At the time, the *Coshocton Tribune* was a member of the Thomson Newspaper empire, and the company's president had a habit of using the cliché 'thinking outside the box' ad nauseam.

After spending about a week at the helm of the news, composing and tech departments, Johnson decided something drastic needed to be done, or this ship was going to sink.

Johnson spent the next few days listening. He didn't comment or offer solutions, he simply listened to the moaning, complaining and excuses for why success was out of reach.

On a Friday afternoon, he sent out a memo alerting all creative staff members to an 8 a.m. meeting on Monday. The staff meeting was to be held in the newspaper's parking lot on a chilly February morning.

In the meantime, Johnson also designed salmon-colored pieces of paper and placed them in sealed envelopes. Each employee got an envelope with specific instructions that no one was to open the envelopes until the Monday morning meeting.

(Johnson later smiled when recalling that the new boss giving out sealed envelopes containing 'pink slips' on a Friday afternoon was probably a misstep in management and motivation techniques. But, it all worked out in the end.)

The slips of paper each contained an individual excuse or complaint he had heard over the last few days.

On Monday morning, as 30-plus employees all huddled together in the parking lot, clutching their envelopes, the man appeared with a box. The box was covered in Sunday's edition of the newspaper, and had 'The Box' stenciled on the sides.

It was then Johnson asked each employee individually to open their envelopes and read their particular excuse or complaint aloud for everyone to hear.

"The computer system is old and slow," read one employee.

"We are understaffed," read another.

"Advertising doesn't respect our deadlines," was another's complaint.

Upon reading the slips of paper, each employee was asked to place their particular concern into 'The Box'.

Unbeknownst to the employees, Johnson had saturated 'The Box' in a flammable material the night before the meeting.

His plan was to briefly discuss the concerns - such as noting that the staff was being realigned to work more efficiently and relieve some of the stress; and that a new computer system was on its way - and then light a cigar.

With the still-lighted match, he would set the box ablaze.

Only, the box was a little over-saturated with gasoline and when the match hit, it literally exploded. Car alarms were going off, the radio station across the street called in a report of 'shots fired' to the local police.

But, the demonstration showed the staff that no matter what their concerns were, there was always a work-around. 'The box' they were supposed to be thinking outside of was now gone.

There was no more box. The box was now a glowing pile of embers - over which the staff garnered warmth and satisfaction.

Johnson then told each and every one of the employees that since the box was gone, the only barriers to success were now the barriers they, themselves put upon themselves.

If they wanted something done differently, all they had to do was think in a different direction. He immediately told them he didn't want to hear problems, he wanted to hear solutions. From that point, there were no mistakes, he said. From that time forward, there were only learning experiences.

After 18 months of hard work and dedication by the entire staff, the newspaper swept the state's press awards, converted from an afternoon to a morning publication, showed a 146 percent profit margin increase year-over-year, and increased its average daily readership by 23 percent.

All thanks to a box fire.

