



**WHAT IS THE
PUBLIC'S IMAGE OF
YOUR BUSINESS?
IT MAY BE DERIVED
NOT ONLY FROM
WHAT HAPPENS IN
YOUR STORES, BUT
ALSO HOW YOU
INTERACT WITH
YOUR COMMUNITY.**



branding

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Ever since former Congressman Joe Kennedy Jr. pulled aside APRO Executive Director Bill Keese in the halls of Congress and told him that the rent-to-own industry had “an image problem,” industry leaders have been grappling with the monumental task of addressing the public picture of rent-to-own. Kennedy’s remark came after a four-hour congressional hearing that culminated in a federal bill designed to legislate the rent-to-own industry out of business. While Kennedy candidly remarked that it was an image problem, in reality, the industry’s image was the cause of the potential extinction. Whether the image has merit or not, the consequences of the image were gravely real.

BY RICHARD MAY

Since that time, APRO leaders have been on a quest to improve the industry's image through a series of public relations initiatives and campaigns. While the industry has had success in overhauling pricing and collection tactics, Americans still know very little about the rent-to-own transaction. And what they *do* know is negative.

With the customer count remaining stagnant or dropping over the past 10 years, the image of the rent-to-own industry has become even more crucial for the industry's growth. Therein lies the continued conversation regarding the image of rent-to-own. At nearly every committee meeting, board of directors' discussion or casual conversation regarding the industry's image, the discussion almost always ends up in a branding discussion or, more accurately, a branding debate.

In marketing terms, branding is the symbolic embodiment of information connected with a product or service. Typically, a brand includes a name, logo and other visual elements, but most importantly, the brand also encompasses the set of expectations associated with a product or service. Such expectations are held by employees of the brand owner, people involved with distribution, sale or supply of the product or service and, ultimately, the consumers.

The argument goes that a national branding campaign for the rent-to-own industry—such as was successful for the milk and beef industries—is what the industry needs. However, unless the entire industry comes together to invest the millions of dollars necessary for such a campaign, the effort is futile. If the trade association cannot change the industry's image through a national branding campaign, then can rent-to-own improve its image one store or company at a time?

Each company attempting to brand itself faces two challenges: tackling the image of the entire rent-to-own industry while also creating a unique brand and image for itself. The following APRO member companies are two working examples of unique branding in their communities and how each of their branding campaigns have transcended into better prof-

its, a more positive image for the industry overall and an edge over the competition.

BUDDY'S HAS A FINGER(PRINT) ON BRANDING

In 2002, Buddy's Home Furnishings employee Jody Katz was visiting the Florida Aquarium in Tampa when he was approached by a stranger wanting to fingerprint his daughter. As a father, Katz was naturally protective and defensive at such a request but when Child Protection Education of America (CPEA) Programs Specialist Hilary Sessions explained that fingerprinting and DNA sampling of children are key to finding and rescuing missing and abducted children, Katz not only agreed, but his marketing light bulb turned on as well.

At the time, Katz was looking for something to make his mark as he began a new marketing position for Buddy's. Buddy's President Joe Gazzo was looking for a promotion that wasn't the same "get two weeks free when you come in" campaign and the CPEA, a non-prof-

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it organization dedicated to educating the public on child safety issues, was struggling to get its message out. The fingerprint campaign offered a unique promotional opportunity for Buddy's, and one that was beneficial to the community as well. The timing for all parties was just right. The next day, Katz called Sessions and offered a Buddy's Home Furnishings store as a venue for a fingerprinting event for the CPEA. Sessions took him up on the offer and, ever since, CPEA and Buddy's have created a partnership and branding coup.

"Our first event at Buddy's had one table, a fingerprint machine and one computer. Seventy-five people showed up. We were ecstatic," says Sessions. "But little did we know that four years later we would host events at Buddy's that featured helicopters, professional athletes, police horses and dogs and 17 separate law enforcement and safety agencies to an audience of 2,200 people."

Since the partnership began, there's almost always something going on at a Buddy's store. The company holds one-day fingerprinting and safety events at many of its stores throughout Florida 40 weeks out of the year. The safety events have catapulted Buddy's as a community-driven business concerned with community safety and welfare.

A successful branding campaign of this magnitude does not happen overnight. Buddy's success has taken four years to take hold and the effort struggled in the beginning. "I had to wrestle with the managers to get them involved and law enforcement wouldn't show up in the beginning," says Katz. "Now police have to block off roads to accommodate the crowds."

Recently, Buddy's undertook its third sponsorship of Florida's



MORE THAN 2,200 ATTENDED BUDDY'S MISSING CHILDREN'S WEEK FINGERPRINTING EVENT IN TAMPA

Missing Children's Week. The week-long event began at Buddy's Home Furnishings in its hometown of Tampa, where more than 2,200 people attended fingerprinting events and child safety demonstrations. The various gatherings featured members of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, World Wrestling Entertainment and demonstrations regarding child safety and abduction prevention provided by more than 15 law enforcement agencies. The week's events culminated in a walk to the governor's mansion in Tallahassee.

"People who normally don't rent-to-own come to our stores for these events and are surprised at the name-brand quality and affordability of rent-to-own," says Gazzo. "Once in our stores, it gets the negative stigma out of their minds. We not only improve the image of rent-to-own but we end up boosting business. We see a significant spike in business for the following month after each of these events."

Buddy's Home Furnishings is doing such a good job that not only is it improving the image of the rent-to-own industry in Florida, but it is also helping improve the image of law enforcement as well, presenting it as being more accessible and more human, says Katz. The relationship between Buddy's and law enforcement has also helped with the recovery of skipped and stolen merchandise. Buddy's is also the only retail business with an employee sitting on the Tampa Children's Protection Task Force. Katz says city and civic leaders are amazed that the only business sitting on the task force is their local rent-to-own business.

Consider these results from APRO's potential customer survey and focus group study: 41 percent of Americans would consider rent-to-own if they knew rent-to-own businesses were involved in a charitable cause. Taking that into consideration, a sponsorship campaign such as Buddy's and CPEA not only creates a brand but also helps recruit new



customers and improve the image of the industry. Charitable marketing campaigns dubbed as "cause marketing" can be very effective in creating a mutually profitable relationship for both the company and the charity, according to On-point Marketing.com. Cause marketing helps brand the goodwill image of the charity onto the company. This strategy has been highly successful with companies such as McDonald's and American Express.

The elusive trophy of successful branding, according to Buddy's, may be as simple as a fingerprint. Katz is now the president of CPEA's board of directors and is a registered fingerprint technician.

"The image of rent-to-own is a thousand times better and it's been great for business," says Katz. "If you can become part of the community and show that you really care, then the community will take care of you."

A FAMILY BRAND

Since there are scores of family-owned business in the rental-purchase industry, the idea that a business might successfully brand itself as a family-owned rent-to-own business is sometimes taken for granted. But not by John Cleek of Cleek's Rent To Own in Columbia, Missouri.

"People know us for who we are—a family-owned business. They saw my father, myself, my children and now our grandchildren representing our stores in the community for more than 40 years," says Cleek. "We don't try to fake it. People love us and we have a lot of fun at this."

Cleek, known to the community as "Tiger," carries on one of his most prevalent advertising and branding components begun by his father in 1962. Every week during the University of Missouri's football season, Cleek spends several hours working with local media and writing his winning predictions for the Mizzou Tigers. These predictions are then displayed on Cleek's storefront, a visible sign of the business' community pride. These campaigns have not only become a significant part of the company's brand, but a community tradition.

"I remember as a kid asking my parents to

"Tiger" John Says:
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CLEEK'S FEATURES STOREFRONT PREDICTIONS FOR EACH WEEK'S UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI FOOTBALL GAME.

drive by Cleek's store so I could see what their prediction of the upcoming Missouri game was," says Randy Wright, a Columbia resident. "Cleek's has a competitive edge in the market through its branding. When you think of rent-to-own, you think of Cleek's."

According to APRO's recent potential customer survey and focus group study, many Americans are distrustful of rent-to-own because they view it as a fly-by-night business—here one day, gone the next. Cleek's emphasis on family-owned branding and longtime community history directly addresses that perception. And as a result, Cleek has established his company as a positive part of the community and runs a successful and profitable rent-to-own business.

When Cleek is not predicting winning scores for the Mizzou Tigers, he maintains his branding consistency with a high-pitch "no need" audio tagline that has been a part of his television commercials for 15 years. Because of the uniqueness of the high-pitched delivery and its consistency through television advertising over the years, the tagline has been successfully branded while also promoting the most valuable aspect of the RTO transaction where there is "no need" for credit to get your home furnishing from Cleek's.

"I'll be sitting eating a burger and someone will see me and come up to me to repeat my 'no need' tagline and I'll just laugh right along with them as if it was the first time I've ever heard it," says Cleek. "It's become so ingrained in our community that we've even had other merchants play off on the tagline in their advertisements."

The "no need" tagline and Cleek's local sports predictions are effective ornaments to Cleek's branding tree—or shall we say family tree—because the Cleek family has been the consistent icon successfully selling rent-to-own for more than 40 years in the Columbia area. Each television advertisement has featured the family and the entire community has seen the Cleek children grow up through the campaign. The consistency of the Cleek family through their advertising makes Cleek's other tagline real, effective and the brand that the entire Columbia community understands and appreciates: "Cleek's Rent To Own—our family serving your family since 1956."

"Tiger and the Cleek family are a foundation to the community," says Wright. "They have a very successful RTO company and are a classic example on how to brand your business. Cleek's connects with the community and the target market. It makes all the difference." ■

Richard May is APRO's public affairs director. His e-mail address is rmay@aprovision.org.

Tips for successful branding

- **Be real.** If your branding deals with a charity, make sure you are sincere about your charitable involvement and that you believe in the charity. If your branding is through marketing, try to make the marketing campaign reflect a part of your personality or your personal interests.
- **Be consistent.**
- **Be unique.**
- **Know your market—research it.** The more you connect to your market, the more successful you will be.
- **Branding must be well thought out.** Do the necessary research.
- **Advertising is your branding tool.** Pay close attention to your advertising message, medium and placement.
- **Research your media.**
- **Find a media partner who works well with you and is responsive to your needs.** Your media partner must feel as responsible to your business and its success as you do.
- **Be prepared to commit to your branding long term.**

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