

Marketing

The Barefoot Marketer: Why ex-P&G exec and Eureka! Ranch founder Doug Hall is putting his substantial credentials to work helping P.E.I. artisans buff up their marketing skills

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Doug Hall has been dubbed a sort of Robin Hood of business and marketing. Others quip that he's "the barefoot enthusiast." Whatever his moniker, Hall is bringing practical marketing cheer free of charge to a host of small arts and craft businesses and cultural organizations in Prince Edward Island.

Not bad for somebody who actually lives near Cincinnati, Ohio. Hall, an American who is applying for Canadian citizenship as well, makes big bucks as founder and CEO of the Eureka! Ranch, a 12-year-old inventing and market-research firm that advises Fortune 500 corporations like American Express, Nike and Pepsi-Cola on new product and service ideas. At US\$150,000 (C\$238,000) a crack, he holds three-day motivational seminars on his 80-acre ranch and gets pinstriped executives to do such things as play with water pistols in a rumpus room, all in an attempt to jump-start their creativity. Hall admits to making a "ridiculous" sum of money for this work, "but (corporations) make a thousand times back what they pay me."

The Eureka! man comes to the motivational game with solid credentials: For years he worked in the advertising department at Procter & Gamble, where he gained the unique title of "master marketing inventor." In just one year during his P&G stint, he put nine new products on the market—mostly line extensions and flankers for things like Folger's Coffee, Hawaiian Punch, Duncan Hines, Pampers, Spic & Span and Coast.

On P.E.I., where his family has summered since 1969 in a Springbrook farmhouse, he gives back some of his earnings by helping small P.E.I. businesses improve their marketing skills, free of charge. Hall says the Island is full of talented people, but they're just too modest and rate a definite thumbs-down at marketing themselves.

In fact, he extends that definition to Canadians as a whole. "Charming humbleness I call it—and, to be fair, I like it. But it doesn't pay the bills," says Hall, whose mother was Canadian. There's a tendency for Canadians to undersell themselves, he says, and "while remarkable as a personality trait, it does not help one compete on the world economy." (Hall is quick to add that there's no need for Canadians to become as brash as so-called "ugly Americans.")

Hall started giving back some of his marketing know-how after having a proverbial near-death experience: In 1999, he almost drowned during an expedition to the North Pole, then came close to succumbing to hypothermia after being rescued from freezing waters. Four weeks later, his mother died of cancer.

“You start to ask yourself, ‘What’s your purpose in this life?’” he says. “I came to grips with the fact that what I uniquely knew how to do was to help people increase their odds of business success.”

Hall contacted the P.E.I. government with his plan to translate his strategies from the corporate world to everyday folks. To his surprise, he was met with enthusiasm by bureaucrats who smoothed the way for him. He decided to help out craft businesses and cultural groups as a kind of “torture test, figuring if I could get artistes out there to buy in, it would be that much more remarkable for them.”

Along with a few staffers (what he calls “trained brains”)-including a writer who could create marketing materials for small businesses and Merwyn, a software program that Eureka! Ranch has developed to help predict businesses’ odds of success-Hall toured the Island.

The entrepreneurs started to see results with small changes. He convinced Cavendish Figurines to change its “Factory Tours” sign to “Free Tours” and to highlight its expensive figurines, which were hidden away among cheap souvenirs. Traffic and business grew immediately.

Taking Hall’s advice, wind chimes maker Peter Baker of Island Winds went back to making high-end wood chimes in his converted barn, after a fruitless attempt to compete with low-end competitors. He’s since been written about in the Wall Street Journal.

Cars whizzed by a gourmet restaurant that plunked the highfalutin sign “Epicurean Fare” outside. Business improved remarkably after Hall suggested the plain old word “restaurant” might work better. (Unfortunately, the restaurant later went belly up after expanding too quickly-proof positive that simple marketing changes are not the only things that matter in business.)

For the Indian River Festival, he helped turn a plain old evening of classical music into a romantic outing with the simple slogan “Music you can hear with your heart.”

Says Katy Baker, executive director of the seven-year-old Festival, held every July and August in the 100-year-old St. Mary’s Church: “He said to us, ‘You know, classical music can be romantic, so why don’t you talk about an evening of romance? Theme it.’”

Before Hall came along, the festival had gotten caught in the trap of bringing its message to the converted-the small percentage of people who actually know classical music, Baker says. Now couples-a mix of tourists, summer residents and locals-help fill the church and attendance has “literally doubled,” Hall says.

He also helped bring in government funding by helping the Festival do research to prove it’s a niche product that brings in money. “We’re (now) a little louder on how wonderful the concert experience is,” Baker says.

Hall didn’t stop there. His marketing strategies have helped turn the College of Piping and Celtic Performing Arts of Canada into the number one tourist destination in Summerside, says director Scott MacAuley. Positioning itself as “100% Authentic-Heartfelt Celtic,” Hall helped the college focus on branding-from the gift-shop level to internationally, by encouraging the school to get into distance learning. As a result, people from as far away as Hong Kong and Kuwait are learning Celtic arts. (Hall and his wife, Debbie, have also kicked in a sponsorship program allowing Island children

ages 8 to 18 to take bagpiping or drumming at the school gratis. Hundreds have taken advantage of the offer.)

Not surprisingly, Hall is also adept at branding himself. He sells his own Brain Brew brand of coffee at his Cincinnati seminars (he's a big advocate of caffeine, saying it boosts creativity), and has become known for always speaking in bare feet. The barefoot schtick, a product of Hall's early days as a musician-juggler, has a decidedly practical bent. "When I speak, I sometimes get very emotional and carried away," he explains. Several times Hall's been saved from a wicked fall by being able to feel the edge of the stage with his bare

feet before tumbling off. It also sets the tone for his big-buck U.S. seminars. "When you're here, you're on Island time," he tells big-name executives at his ranch. "So chill out."

Not everybody is enamoured with Hall. He readily admits to meeting "big-time skepticism" from some small entrepreneurs on the Island. And a group of freelance writers mostly "from away" who heard Hall give a free presentation in P.E.I. last spring during the annual general meeting of the Periodical Writers Association of Canada came away with a wide gamut of reviews.

"This fellow is a born preacher, probably as good as any I've heard in church, even if he's preaching a different gospel," says Bob Bettson, a journalist and ordained priest from Didsbury, Alta. But Barbara Florio Graham of Gatineau, Que. thought Hall was terrible: "His presentation resembled an infomercial, and it was clear it had been designed to motivate salespeople."

Hall's rah-rah evangelical style is a bit much at first, says Christine Fischer Guy of Toronto, but she adds that he seems the genuine article and is well worth the time. Julie Watson of Charlottetown adds that Hall made her think out of the box and look at markets she'd been missing.

Hall's marketing mantra is now extending far beyond big-name corporations and small-name P.E.I. craft makers. His best-selling book, *Jump Start Your Business Brain* (Betterway, 2002), came out in paperback in September. He jump-starts business brains by hosting a syndicated National Public Radio show in the Cincinnati area. And after already being featured on the CBC-TV business show *Venture*, Hall is in discussions with the show to do three *Venture* specials, in which he'll expand his P.E.I. experiment to the whole country.

P.E.I. residents will also likely be seeing more of Hall than his vacations on the Island. He's now negotiating with the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, the P.E.I. government and the University of P.E.I. to create a permanent two-day program for small businesses on the island. It would be based on a two-day program that Eureka! Ranch already runs around the world for smaller businesses, but with a twist: It would be offered either for free or at minimal cost.

"We will always be from away, no matter what happens," Hall says of his second home in P.E.I. "When you're from away, there's a responsibility to give back. This is my way to give back."

Says Hall: "I can't sing and I can't dance and I can't play the bagpipes either. But I do know how to help people come up with ideas."