

Close Up

■ "Close up" is a weekly Oakland Business Review Q&A focusing on area newsmakers. Contact Ron Leuty at info@mbizreview.com.

Lou Bitonti

president and CEO,
LD3 Event Management LLC

Rochester Hills resident Lou Bitonti is tackling another season as coach of the football team at Brother Rice High School. But he's just as passionate about event marketing.

Bitonti recently launched his own event management agency, LD3 Event Management LLC, based in Southfield. That came after 22 years as DaimlerChrysler's senior manager of Jeep advertising, managing more than 1,200 events for the Chrysler, Dodge and Jeep brands. Perhaps the best-known event he originated is Camp Jeep, a three-day ownership gathering that is one of the largest of its kind in the world.



Q.: I see you just launched your own company. How's that going?

A.: Yeah [laughing], sounds like a great idea to launch a new business in Detroit right now. But seriously, I'm tired of everyone badmouthing Detroit, saying it's a losing market. There is a wealth of experience and talented people here, and there is always opportunity if you look for it.

In my new company, I have a consortium of suppliers ... with enough experience combined to go back to the Stone Age. We have the experience level, creativity and the ability to implement an event from A to Z.

Q.: What's it like launching your own business after 20 years in corporate America?

A.: Like a friend of mine said to me, "We've been to the big dance." I can sit across the table from a client and say, "Been there, done that." I know exactly what the challenges are for them to get approval from finance, the purchasing groups, all the internal red tape they go through.

Q.: What types of activities fall under event marketing?

A.: There is a huge range, starting with the whole sports marketing area, such as sponsoring professional teams; getting involved with extreme sports events, like mountain biking; to consumer events, like food and wine programs, concerts, tours

The thing I love about event marketing is that it is one of the few areas where you can't run and you can't hide – you have to

be there. You meet the consumer whether they like your product or not, you get to really interface.

Q.: What types of industries benefit the most from event marketing? Can anybody do them?

A.: Absolutely. ... With event marketing, I am able to take the product where the consumer is enjoying themselves and show how it is relevant to them.

If you can make the event seamless and show how it supports their lifestyle, you have what I call a "cosmic spiderweb" – when all the different points to put on an event come together: staffing, activities, selected cities – to tap buying power.

Q.: How do events make the sale?

A.: An event should have clear objectives that can be reached whether it be an increased product image or supporting the sales program. Measurement is key. At the end of the day, you have got to be able to say, "I spent one million on the program but I met these objectives" – whether it be in sales, consumer name recognition, direct-mail response or non-paid media exposure.

Q.: Has anything gone terribly wrong during an event?

A.: Three or four years ago, it rained for three solid days during Camp Jeep. We had an outdoor concert with LeAnn Rimes planned, tents set up, fireworks.

But we took advantage of it. Jeep owners love to get Jeeps totally muddy so we decided to let them (drive around), just make the Jeeps totally muddy.

■ Laurie Ryba