

A bunch of Miller wholesalers and brewery salespeople recently went at it with paint-ball guns in the Illinois wilderness. Is this any way to promote teamwork?

Basic training

BY ERIC SFILIGOJ

Military metaphors are as prevalent in the beverage business as multi-packs. Soft drink strategists have openly waged the "cola wars" for years. Brewing tacticians continually devise new ways to "keep the enemy on the defensive."

Given the ongoing battle for consumer attention and market share, the idea of providing basic beverage training in the field rather than a boardroom seems to make perfect sense. But with army fatigues and paint-ball guns instead of business suits and pencils?

Ask Dean Matthews, co-founder of the Freeport, IL-based Leading Concepts Team Leadership Institute (LCTLI), which has developed an outdoor-based experiential training (OBET) program to turn beverage trainees into lean, mean, fighting machines.

"This is a real culture-shock program for distributors and corporate personnel who are used to going to some nice, warm hotel conference room," says longtime Miller wholesaler Matthews. "It's not comfortable, but this helps portray reality in the workplace. Work isn't always pleasant, and this fact is brought home much more clearly if the training doesn't take place in a cozy, safe environment."

It all started one day back in 1990, when he began thinking about the effective leadership training programs he'd previously attended. "The actual seminars in the conference room of the Holiday Inn never seemed to motivate people as much as the dinner, the social hour or the golf game which followed," Matthews recalls. "I wanted my people to learn by doing, because experience is something you never forget. Unfortunately, no such training program existed."

Fate reared its head as Dean Hohl, a

former employee of Matthews' turned army ranger, returned from the US invasion of Panama. In discussing what it took to become an army ranger, Hohl told Matthews that much of his training involved building effective leadership and teamwork skills.

"That's when the lights came on," Matthews remembers. He dutifully researched the experiential leadership development training that Ranger Hohl had received to determine if it would be transferable into the civilian workplace. The result was LCTLI, with Matthews and Hohl sharing co-founder roles.

Miller Time in the trenches

Tied into Miller Brewing's "Service 2000" initiative to breed wholesaler/brewer interdependence, a group of heartland-market wholesalers and corporate sales executives experienced the OBET program firsthand last November.

"This was kind of a test run to work at the Service 2000 objectives," Matthews notes, "namely, to create a world-class distribution system. Now that Miller's decentralization has taken place, distributors have a lot more say-so on the direction of their business. These same distributors are now working on closing the trust gap between themselves and the brewer. So there's a definite need for more team-building."

OBET participants convened for a five-day session at LCTLI's Camp Lead, which sits on 200 wooded acres in the northwest corner of Illinois. The camp consists of a camouflaged bunkhouse and an old farmhouse that's been converted into office and classroom space.

Miller wholesalers and corporate salespeople were divided into two sub-groups, designated "Alpha" and "Bravo." Each participant then was issued his own camouflaged uniform, pre-packaged



"We gave up beer and a week of our career just for the fun of kicking your rear. Your time is up; it's Miller Time!"

food rations and a paint-ball gun. Once their mission objectives were determined, the two groups went about battling one another and the elements.

"This type of program is foreign to everyone involved, so no one has the upper hand over anyone else," Matthews relates. "The only way to achieve these objectives is through teamwork and developing leadership, and that's exactly what happens."

Take it from OBET participant Gordon Kaylor, president of Heartland Beverages (Manhattan, KS). "I was in Vietnam," he says, "and this was the most grueling training I'd had since then. You definitely got a grounding in everything by playing so many different roles within the group. By the time you were done, you couldn't help but know how a team was supposed to work because you had been in every position."

In addition to improving his paint-ball aim, Kaylor allows, "The most important thing I got out of the training was communications skills. If people weren't listening and didn't know what the platoon leader was doing, the whole team was in real trouble."

That's what it's all about. Says Matthews: "If OBET helps build trust and working relationships, our wars in the market will go much more smoothly. This should really help when you consider the big picture of surviving in today's beverage market." **BW**

For more information on the OBET program from LCTLI, contact Dean Matthews. Tel: 815-235-5323. Fax: 815-235-1498.