

# Aussie rules

by Krista Fleet, K Coaching

Krista Fleet, president of K Coaching, has been in the OP industry for more than 20 years and is now a respected consultant. Here she lifts the lid on Australia's largest independent dealer and advises US dealers to learn from Aussie rules



**C**omplete Office Supply (COS) in Sydney, Australia, is the country's largest independent dealer, and in February 2006 celebrated A\$65 million (\$47.39 million) in revenue and 30 years in business. I had the pleasure of working with the leadership team and sales executives of COS during its recent four-day sales conference in Sydney.

With more than 20 years in the office products industry, I'm no stranger to the many changes and struggles faced by independent dealers. During my time, I have worked for a progressive independent as well as for the power channel. Today, as an executive coach, professional speaker and trainer, working primarily in the industry, I am fortunate to work with some of the most successful independents and gain daily exposure to many OP companies throughout the US.

It's an exciting time and the right time for independents to flourish and continue to

grow. I will say, however, that there is a major difference between independents that are energised, successful and talented, and those that are tired, complacent and confused. The major difference? The latter feel defeated and are much easier prey for the competition to beat down.

COS knows about competition, operating on a diverse island country with the population of Los Angeles, where many aggressive independents and power channel players are vying for its business. After getting to know COS, I learned a greater appreciation for what it really takes to win at this game. COS showed me that it knows "what to do" and "how to do it" in order to be successful in a competitive market.

As if the prospect of leaving the US in the dead of winter for a bit of summer in Sydney wasn't encouragement enough, the offer to attend the conference gave me an opportunity to experience a culturally unique set of best practices - fresh knowledge that I could share with independents back here in the US. They clearly taught me more than I could ever have taught them. We can only learn from COS and the Aussie attitude.

Following an 8am arrival after a 20-hour flight, a quick shower and a taxi to Rydalmere, I joined COS' leadership team in its new building and conference room for the first meeting of the conference. There was no time to spare in the schedule of events. We started our session with an overview of the strategies, tactics and programmes the power channel is using in the US. What is happening with national contracts, pricing programmes and the mid-market focus? COS maintained that industry activity in the US would arrive in its country within six to nine months: it wanted to get ahead of the curve.

We shared ideas, successes and best practices for competing and sustaining profitable business growth. We ended the day with a 'Motivating Others' seminar, which COS

took very seriously - some of the ideas were executed immediately. What I saw in the first five hours was great leadership, and fun-loving, hard-working, enthusiastic people with a clear vision and direction for their company. The Aussie attitude and team camaraderie was plainly evident. It was work hard and play hard at its finest.

Whatever the cultural differences, there were nevertheless some truly universal characteristics of COS's competitive approach; it embodied success factors that I found especially relevant to many of my US independent customers: strategic thinking, an aggressive sales culture, customer orientation and "gutsy" leadership.

### Strategic thinking

In 2003, COS generated A\$33 million in sales, with the aspiration of growing to A\$100 million by 2010. Currently sitting at a steady A\$65 million, it's well on its way to achieve this goal. COS demonstrated to me that you don't just get there by wanting it; you need to have a plan and work it.

COS wants to be the best at what it does, and it strives for that daily. Strategic thinking starts with the company vision, and then aligning the people to that vision with clearly defined expectations and job designs to make it happen. Other independents are doing the same things they have always done: staying on the defence or trying to be like the power channel. COS clearly understood the need for constant change and the CPR business model - conversion, penetration and retention activities and tactics for profitable business growth.

When I teach this model, some independents struggle with the concept and many have difficulty with the execution. The growth strategy was clear to COS and because of that, the sales team was able to create the tactics and the measurable activities needed to achieve its goals.

Before my return flight had even touched down back in the US, COS had already conducted follow-up meetings and started its strategy execution. It didn't base its strategic approach on mimicking the power channel, but rather on doing things the power channel was not doing, and doing them better. This approach means understanding your competition, the strengths of your company and playing from a position of strength. This requires aligning your resources - people - and vision appropriately, and then executing the plan through great leadership and talented people.

COS owner/president Dominique Lyone said several times during the course of my visit: "Just because they are doing it doesn't

mean we need to. We need to do something different and better."

When it comes to its aggressive sales culture, 'PUC' says it all. This was a new word for me, but I learned it early and heard it often throughout the conference; it was COS's acronym for passion, urgency and commitment. And its salesforce has plenty of it!

Sales director Mark Sookias introduced me to the word as he launched the first of two days of sales training. But I saw it demonstrated loud and clear the previous day as a guest for day two of the sales conference, a pre-planned surprise day for the high achievers - those that met or exceeded their quotas for the year.



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The tour bus was buzzing with excitement and a bit of anxiety for what was in store for the day. This day was all about achievement and the PUC it took to get there.

The day began with a one-hour speed boat ride on Sydney Harbour. The seat belts held back the high achievers as they put their hands in the air as though on a rollercoaster, while the speed boat repeatedly did 360-degree turns before slamming on its brakes after reaching record speeds.

The second adventure (which, thank goodness, I was much too seasick to join) took place at Center Point, the tallest building in Australia. High achievers were cable-strapped and led on an outdoor walk with a glass floor, 268 metres above Sydney.

Their next stop was The Rocks and the Italian Village for one of the finest meals in the city. Here is where everyone met the sales managers, relaxed, enjoyed a cocktail or two and ended their adventurous day. Or so they thought. The conclusion of the gathering was unexpectedly rocked by the thunder of 26 Harley Davidson motorcycles lined up outside for the group, who then took a motorcycle tour through Sydney, escorted by Aussie bikers, up the coast to Bondi Beach and then back to the hotel. Just in time to get showered and dressed for the formal awards dinner.

This was reward and recognition of the highest order. As the honoured guests received their



awards and gave their acceptance speeches, their quota against achievement was projected behind them, accompanied by a theme song chosen by their manager. The other sales reps in the room were in awe, no doubt wondering how they might get more PUC so they could be a part of the club next year.

In many companies, the importance of recognition is often forgotten. During his acceptance speech, one high achiever said in appreciation of the great day and his award: "Thank you, it means a lot to me. I'm sure you've heard about recognition. Babies cry for it, men die for it."

### Customer orientation

We all know the customer is king: take care of them or someone else will. COS has gone above and beyond to ensure customer satisfaction and loyalty through its 'brickwalling' concept. This approach enables the sales representative to measure customer relationship activities, the customer's reliability of logistics, and to set goals to continuously look for ways to improve. For each customer, COS established priorities and created action plans; it was clearly a proactive, customer-centric organisation.

To COS, customer orientation also meant being aware of and responding to changing customers needs. I frequently heard "What does the customer want?", "What do you think the customer would think?", and "What can we do better for the customer?" No complacency here. At COS, customer service and customer satisfaction had a sense of urgency - the 'u' in PUC.

Share the vision, hire the right people, give them the autonomy and the empowerment to execute in their markets - that takes trust and guts. I saw leadership demonstrated at all levels: from Mark Sookias, who orchestrated the conference; to the sales managers for the US, who lead their sales teams during talent night with some outrageously funny skits. I saw it



from the IT manager, a high achievers club member, and of course from Lyone himself. Without his leadership, the company would not be where it is today.

### Leadership

On the tour bus, Lyone stood in front of his high achievers, shared his vision for growth, thanked them for their hard work, and congratulated them for their contribution and achievement. At the anniversary celebration, he stood on a new fork lift with his four-year-old in his arms, addressing the sales people from across the different states, sharing his vision for the future, his hopes for the new distribution centre, and the growth opportunities for the company and for all of them.



**"Strategic thinking, an aggressive sales culture, customer orientation and leadership... COS makes it look easy"**

Later, Lyone cut the anniversary cake - a replica of a carton of COS brand paper - and discussed his vision for the next 30 years and that goal of \$100 million by 2010. He talked about how his family came to Australia when he was five, with a dream of prosperity in a new country. As he spoke, I watched the faces of his employees and felt the energy and electricity of this organisation and these people. I considered giving up my US citizenship, leaving my children and moving to Australia... just to work for him and COS. I felt the PUC; it was palpable. Now this, I thought, is leadership.

Strategic thinking, an aggressive sales culture, customer orientation and leadership... COS makes it look easy. We all know that it isn't, but we can continue to learn from each other, even from those on the other side of the world: to do things differently and to constantly strive and improve in order to grow profitably in this industry.

You don't have to be an Aussie to have that attitude, but you do have to have PUC. Nothing great in this world has ever been achieved without it. PUC, I learned, is a universal culture, and one with no boundaries, and no limits. ■



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