

PERSEVERANCE

by Laura O'Donnell

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The ability to strive, to persevere and attain your dreams has always been an idyllic goal. From a young age that seed was planted in our minds with the retelling of stories such as "The Little Engine That Could" and "The Tortoise and the Hare." Through adolescence, visions of Scarlet O'Hara and Rocky Balboa deepened the roots. As adults, we look to our parents, teachers, colleagues and, for many, our leaders, as role models to achieving what we dream.

When Lou Competielle left his job as an exhibit designer and salesman at a major exhibit firm in 1992, he knew his thirty years of experience in the industry would provide a solid foundation for his dream of owning his own business. With himself, a carpenter, and a bookkeeper, the exhibit design and fabrication company Loran Associates Inc opened its doors.

In those early years, it was not unusual for Competielle to leave a sales meeting, return to his shop, and begin construction of the exhibit himself. He knew he needed to generate business based on providing quality products in a timely manner with genuine personalized service, even if it meant building panels with his own hands. The risk of his reputation far outweighed his ego. He knew that with a continuous focus on quality and a little sweat equity, his business and dream would evolve.

During its first five years, a steady flow of work provided Competielle with the opportunity to take the next step. Loran created innovative exhibit designs to effectively communicate its client's message. To transfer those images into a three dimensional structure, however, was Loran's secret ingredient. Competielle built a team of skilled craftsmen, and armed them with the latest in fabrication technology to shape every Loran exhibit with focus on detail. The end result is an exhibit which transcends the idea.

Loran grew to become a fixture in the industry, achieving its reputation through creative design, quality fabrication and cost effectiveness. During these years the company also gained a reputation for successfully interweaving business and personal relationships, forming a high level of trust and communication. In the years that followed, Loran's consistent growth allowed the business to expand in many ways. On paper, the business was a success. It employed over thirty people, almost ten times more than when it started. Its client list had more than tripled. More and more of its exhibits were being noticed on the show floors, and Loran's name was becoming more recognized. There was one thing that loomed over its success, however. While Loran was seen as a competitor in the industry, it was seen only as such, not as a major force. Will Rogers once stated, "Even if you're on the right track, you'll get run over if you just sit there." Loran was on the right track, but needed to keep growing in order to survive and become a major player in the industry.

Anyone involved in the exhibit industry understands its temperamental nature. The industry is an enigma. It is constantly changing. Every show creates a new benchmark. Something to try and outdo the next time around. To keep from being overrun, Loran needed to keep evolving and stay apace of the ever-changing industry trends. For this, Loran turned to its clients, the exhibitors. Although often overlooked, the simple, natural art of listening is one of the purest forms of gaining valuable information. Who better to gauge the client's ideas, their outlook on the industry, their problems, and their goals for the future? With this information in hand, Loran now had the ammunition necessary to provide solutions to their exhibitor's problems and concerns within the industry.

One of the first issues was the growing presence of dynamic graphic images as a key to building booth traffic. With vinyl-die cut graphics becoming a distant memory, the recognition of the emergence of four-color graphics was of utmost importance. While this meant big business for independent graphic houses, exhibitor concerns were a loss of quality control, and rapidly increasing costs. These concerns prompted Loran to initiate its own in-house graphic service department. Now, five years since its inception, Loran's graphic department is thriving, with state of the art equipment, and a full time graphic design team producing everything from preshow mailers to twelve foot banners. Providing this service in house has been an asset to Loran and the exhibitor's bottom line.

The graphic department's success resulted in other changes at Loran, as well. Still in keeping with exhibit suggestions, Loran forced itself to think even farther outside the box. While still emphasizing its original foundation of exhibit design and fabrication, the company became more involved in growing as a full service exhibit firm.

Through the business process, Loran had acquired a great deal of inventory, including props, furniture and custom exhibits. With this inventory as a base, Loran added a complete line of exhibit rentals to its services. This was an outlet for current clients to utilize, as well as an opportunity to reach a yet untouched audience. Loran also sought avenues to persistently maintain and surpass its successful service methods. Utilizing the Internet, Loran provided a portal for exhibitors to access information regarding their show schedule, graphics, floor plans, storage information, and photos of their booth, all personalized for each company. Dramatic steps were also taken to update its inventory system by incorporating a custom inventory management system to track exhibit storage by piece, as well as by crate, allowing exhibitors immediate answers on storage and shipping questions, whether a one show shipment or for trans-shipment to a series of shows.

The latest innovation from Loran is the option of a web-based booth camera. Understanding the hectic schedules of exhibitors, attendance at every show is not always possible. When exhibitors can't attend a show, a booth camera can be built into the booth to allow a live feed. This feed can be viewed in real time over the web, or can be recorded and viewed at a later date.

With each new service, and with each new year, Loran exceeds its original goals of merely existing in the exhibit industry. Although he may no longer carry a hammer, Lou Competielle is still involved daily in every aspect of his company, ensuring that his original standards are stringently adhered to. As motivation speaker and best selling author Napoleon Hill one stated, "Effort only fully releases its reward after a person refuses to quit." Lou Competielle is still hard at work, daily, on his dream.