A Reason to Throw a Party

On cold, rainy Tuesday evenings in January, many DC residents feel like staying in. But those who knew Brad Nierenberg in the late 1980s knew there was always a reason to throw a party, and that there was a good chance that party was happening at Champions. The Georgetown hotspot owned by Michael O’Harrow, the founding figure of the sports bar world, and Brad was challenged by his no-nonsense commitment to success through bringing people together. “He taught me that everyone has a reason to throw a party—you just have to figure out why,” Brad remembers today. “He taught me there are no bad nights, just bad promotions. And most importantly, he taught me that there’s something special about everyone, and if I engage them, I’ll find it.”

Working at Champions through his early twenties, Brad mastered the art of designing optimal consumer experiences. He learned how to predict consumer preference and behavior based on his promotions. Remembering his father’s outgoing, dynamic disposition and the way he would engage guests at fundraisers at their home, Brad developed his own method for orchestrating engagement. Through setting the specials and features of the bar each night, he learned what marketing and branding techniques worked best and ultimately sold more product.

But most importantly, the experience affirmed the importance of celebration—not just as a pastime, or as a recognition of important achievement, but as a crucial part of the community building process Brad had been drawn to all his life. When he was young, he would often wake up to the sound of pots and pans clanking in the kitchen directly underneath his bedroom. Sleepiness would give way to excitement as he slipped downstairs to find his grandfather, who would come over early to make breakfast and surprise the family. “I took great delight in the surprise of what he decided to bring each day, and in joining him to make breakfast for everyone else,” Brad remembers. “As a family, we tried to exceed each other’s expectations all the time and find reason to celebrate on a daily basis.”

Brad took the creative process a step further when he began working for a baker when he was only fifteen. He would arrive at 4:00 AM each Saturday, and he’d leave at the end of the day with a new cake or pie he had concocted—sometimes throwing on an extra layer to wow people. Now the founder and CEO of RedPeg Marketing, Inc., one of the largest independent experiential marketing firms in the country, Brad’s business is all about wowing. “I love making something out of nothing and creating great experiences for people,” he says. “Through a collaborative process of creation, I love to exceed the expectations of clients, employees, and consumers alike.”

Launched in 1995, RedPeg excels at creating branding experiences that appeal to their clients’ target customers. After identifying the best about a brand and the most likely source of business, they figure out how to bring the brand to life in a nontraditional way, which might include sampling, touching, tasting, or some other form of personal experience. Their intercept program, for example, positions a product along the path of target consumers, like the placement of a Chevy Cruze vehicle in front of a Starbucks. RedPeg’s Chevrolet team offers to buy coffee for people who spend five minutes sitting in the car before going into the Starbucks, and most visitors are then willing to give their information for future communication. Through direct personal experience, people realize that the vehicles are much better than they thought, which creates consideration of the product.
Through these types of programs, RedPeg is able to build modeling for its clients to reveal how many people they interact with and how many of those people actually end up buying the product. These predictive analytics allow clients to determine a relatively precise return on investment, allowing them to make the best decisions to reach their goals. “I love that experiential marketing has evolved to analyze the smart behind the creative,” Brad explains. “As a marketer, I’m very driven by the creation of business solutions for our clients. Beyond simply reaching people, as you do with a TV ad, we’re about interacting with people, and brands are finally getting to the place where they realize that one-on-one interaction is key. As traditional media becomes more white noise, RedPeg specializes in the experiences that drive social conversation, trial, and consideration.”

Today, RedPeg is a team of 60 employees doing around $26 million in business annually. They operate a production facility and a fleet of vehicles that can open up into interactive experiences for demonstrations. They also have an in-house staffing agency, a creative department that designs their websites and materials, and a venues and sponsorship department that handles all the contracting for client events. Finally, they have a team responsible for ensuring that all creative ideas are in line with brand strategy. With these various pieces working in tandem, Brad has his eye to the future in building out experiential marketing programs for online brands like gaming companies that need to engage consumers offline too.

RedPeg is named for the red pegs that signify a strategic, targeted hit in the game Battleship. It’s about getting the right message out in the right place and at the right time, as opposed to the more blanket approach symbolized by the traditional media white pegs in the game. “What makes great experiences? Everything must be in line to achieve the business purpose, and everything has to be creative and engaging. We also create environments that people can walk into for a brand experience, with a client service team to manage all the pieces and parts. We’re specialists in creating brand personas and scripting the right people to ensure the vision comes alive.”

The company’s excellence stems from Brad’s passion for the creative process and innate ability to engage people on both a rational and emotional level—a skill set that developed little by little through his childhood and beyond. Born in New York City, Brad grew up in a small town in Westchester with two sisters, one older and one younger. They often got together with their eight cousins, all girls, and as the only young man in the family, Brad was showered with attention and developed a close, special bond with his grandfather—especially on those early mornings making breakfast together. These relationships proved especially important through his parents’ divorce when he was in seventh grade.

Brad lived with his mother, a homemaker turned secretary, until he was in seventh grade. Through that time, he cultivated his athletic abilities and got a paper route. His lifestyle changed markedly, however, when he moved in with his father, a specialist in organizational development, pensions, and retirement planning. “As a seventh grader, I was home often alone, left to fend for myself. I learned early on how to take care of myself, but my grades suffered and I began to think of myself as a bad student.”

Young Brad sought solace in his work as a baker’s assistant, which provided the cornerstone of his understanding of business. “I always wanted to stand on my own two feet—I never wanted to ask for money,” he recalls. While he was dedicated to work, however, Brad did the bare minimum to get by in school. His teachers recommended boarding school in the summer to help him get caught up, so Brad’s father took him to look at schools. Brad agreed to enroll at a prep school in Massachusetts, and he enjoyed being away from his stepmother so much that he decided to complete his last two years of high school there.

At the time, Brad was just coming into his own at his high school, and prep school turned out to be no walk in the park. He went from being well-known in town to not quite fitting in. He went from captain of his high school JV football team to playing third string at the prep school due to the caliber of the athletes. Still, it was better than being at home. “I learned a lot about myself through those years and became even more independent.”

Brad still hadn’t found his path when he enrolled at Ithaca College and opted to pursue a course of study in Economics—a difficult series of classes that didn’t click for him. Fortunately, during his sophomore year, Brad crossed paths with Marty Brownstein, a political science
professor who urged him to take just one class with him. Brad, on the verge of failing out of school, agreed—a pivotal moment that afforded him a brand new lens for understanding the world. “In that class, I learned that everyone has a different point of view, and that that’s okay—it’s what makes this country great,” he says. “I switched my major to Political Science, and everything turned around. I loved the debate, the ideas, the conversation. My passion for the subject helped my performance and focus in all my classes, and my grades picked up. I participated in Model UN and got a job at a bar downtown, turning it into a Sunday night hot spot. Life was improving dramatically.”

Brad had always dreamed of the chance to be a college athlete, but Division III football was an echelon above his prep school experiences, and he broke his collarbone twice early on. When he realized college football wasn’t in the cards for him, his self-concept changed and he accepted a new path forward. He decided to join the Rugby Club, a group of 30 players that had no idea their paltry team was about to be infused with unparalleled energy. Brad quickly recruited others, building the club to 80 players organized into teams that took great road trips to play other teams. “I made the team feel that they were part of something special,” he recounts. “I relished that process of creating those bonds—something that was more than just a sport. We became a powerful group of individuals, and I made some of my best friends in my life in the process. It was about creating community.”

In early spring of his graduation year, Brad took a pivotal rugby road trip to Washington, DC, to play Georgetown University. It seemed like it was 50 degrees warmer than Ithaca, and he and his friends took Sunday to tour around the monuments. “We read the walls of the Jefferson Memorial and saw the Constitution,” he recounts. “It was so incredibly inspiring, and I felt that I had found my calling. It all hit me right there. I had to move to DC.”

As planned, Brad made the move to Washington and got a job with Michael Dukakis’s campaign for President, speaking at college campuses and asking students to contribute their time by making phone calls and knocking on doors. He excelled at inspiring college students to get engaged in the political process, mobilizing the DC metropolitan area so well that he was tapped to get volunteers up to the Philadelphia region. “I went to every college campus and asked the students to meet me at the Democratic National Committee at 6:00 AM on Saturday because I was going to figure out a way to get them up to Philly,” he recounts. “I was expecting 50 people to come, so when 600 people showed up, I had to make additional arrangements on the fly.”

Brad asked the bus company to donate a few more vehicles, and urged people to carpool, printing out directions and handing over $20 bills for gas money. “It became this massive movement, and I called Philadelphia to say, ‘We’re coming!’” he remembers. “There was such a rush of excitement and energy to move it forward. When I got to Philly, I rushed around getting more donated goods and had pizza, subs, and beer kegs ready for the volunteers at the end of the day. I remembered how inspired I was walking around the monuments of DC, so I took them to the Liberty Bell and spoke about how we were making a difference, and how that’s what this country is all about.”

It was a monumental feat that Brad replicated four weekends in a row, busing 500 or 600 kids up to Philadelphia to help mobilize the region. He was then sent to Los Angeles to do the same thing for the next three months. “I had no formal presentation, speaking, or writing training, so it was a big confidence-building experience for me, to realize I could move and motivate people,” Brad reflects. “I thought I might return home to Westchester one day and run for Congress.”

Afterward, Brad tried his hand as a Junior Legislative Assistant and was hired to push a pension and actuarial reform agenda—not the most riveting issue for a 23-year-old kid. He had come to DC to make a difference but saw no opportunity to push change in that position, so he decided to quit and instead took a job as a promotional manager for Champions, where he was heavily influenced by Mike O’Harro’s marketing philosophy. “Mike would tell me it was my job to find out something special or unique about each person that walked into our bar,” says Brad. “Did they have an upcoming birthday, anniversary, alumni club meeting, or something else? Every person you meet has a reason to throw a party, so my goal was to book that party at Champions.”

Working to achieve Mike’s goal of booking three parties for each day of the week, Brad built
up an iron-clad foundation in marketing basics. He began working with liquor and beer companies, honing his knowledge of branding and marketing. He developed a good relationship with the Bud Light sales team and became one of their top accounts in the city, so valuable that they sent him to the Super Bowl in 1991.

Brad was then offered a job by Miller Lite to manage fifty accounts across the DC area. He received an expense account, ten promotional models, and tickets to give away in his pursuit to convert Bud Light drinkers into Miller Lite drinkers. He worked out of the local beer wholesaler, Premium Distributors, which granted insight into the operations of a small independent business. “I learned the three-tiered system in that industry, which is really important to understand,” he recalls. “I also learned the mechanics of a brand personality. I was Miller Lite Brad, unleashed to build my brand in the city as I built the Miller Lite brand. I had my crew of friends, and they would call their friends, and we brought this network of energy to any bar we decided to visit. It was a great time.”

During his 18-month stint at Premium/Miller, Brad was promoted to On Premise Manager of the wholesaler and brought new account managers onboard to manage 750 accounts across the city. Then, when an agency called GMR Marketing decided to launch an East Coast office, Brad’s reputation as a go-getter at Miller landed him the role of Marketing Director with GMR. In that role, he helped Miller roll out a massive new product initiative, hiring a team of 25 people across the country and equipping them with a specially-designed toolkit to make the initiative a success. “It was a great experience for me to identify those people and bring them onboard, and many are still my best friends today,” he says. “Five of them became General Managers of Miller Brewing Company. I’m very proud to have played a part in bringing on so many rock stars.”

While Brad enjoyed the dynamic challenges of working at GMR, its culture didn’t align with his fundamental belief that success should be celebrated to build community. The man who had spent his life building great experiences was ready to test his hand at building the ultimate great experience—a company. He wanted to build the kind of company he wanted to work for, where he always felt like they were growing. With that, in 1995, Brad set off with a colleague from Miller to launch Momentum Marketing, the agency that would evolve into RedPeg.

Aiming to create a manpower agency specializing in the launch of the creative brand solutions, Brad started the company with a $60 thousand investment from a t-shirt company he had done work with in the past. After doing $600 thousand worth of business in their first year, they bought out their investors and were off to the races, bringing in $850 thousand in their second year. But when Brad got a call from Miller the following year, that upward trajectory took a sudden turn. “They decided to consolidate their agencies and could no longer work with us,” Brad recounts. “At that time, they were 98 percent of our business, so I had to figure out how to diversify incredibly quickly. What did I know and how could I utilize it with other businesses? Failure was not an option, and I decided to focus on Fortune 500 brands—companies could do business with us and spend a million dollars or more over time.”

It was a defining moment for Brad, leading him to resolve to never again allow one client to make up more than thirty percent of his business. He also decided to move the business outside of DC to a building in Old Town Alexandria, which the company purchased in 2002. “In the beginning, I thought we needed a DC address because that meant something,” he remarks. “But with time I realized that it didn’t matter. Most of our staff live in Northern Virginia anyway, so it’s more convenient for everyone.”

Another big transformation came in 2003, when Brad and his partner decided to part ways. Brad continued to hustle, growing the business from $10 million to $19 million. With an additional $7 million expected, Brad hired an additional 30 employees and rented a floor in a building across the street, only to see a sudden drop in revenues that more than eliminated the projected increase. “It was the worst year ever,” Brad recalls. “We went into huge debt, and I was on the brink. In the end, it cost me twice as much as I thought it would to get back to solid ground, and took twice as long. But I have this block sitting on my desk that my Dad gave me, which reads, ‘When you get to the end of your rope, tie a knot and hang on.’ Everybody goes through tough times, but it is how you respond that defines you.”

Never did Brad see this idea tested more

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Profiles in Success: Inspiration from Executive Leaders in the Washington D.C. Area
severely than when he received a phone call from his best friend in 2004. His 2-year-old daughter, Brad’s goddaughter, had been diagnosed with a very rare form of spinal cord cancer that she will be fighting for the rest of her life. Brad decided to put together an experiential fundraising event to show support for the family—a poker tournament with a wine tasting and after party. Brad continues to throw the event every year. Chance for Life now attracts almost a thousand participants and has raised almost $2 million for children’s cancer research. “I’m just in absolute awe of my friend, who is so committed that there’s nothing he won’t do to overcome,” Brad says. “And his daughter, Kennedy, is this beautiful young lady who has the most positive outlook on life. They just blow me away. Kennedy has overcome odds and shown the resolve and maturity of a person much older than she is.”

Now, as a leader, Brad sees himself as responsible for creating optimism and motivation in the office, and for showing his team that anything is possible. “It’s my job to motivate our employees to buy into our why and be passionate about our brand and purpose,” he affirms. “Part of our business is about being creative and coming up with things that have never been done before, and to achieve that kind of thinking, you need to give people a safe environment where there’s a lot of trust and recognition. I’m a big believer in that. It’s also my job to listen. Oftentimes, the best ideas come from the ground floor. If you give people a chance to talk and share their thinking, it’s good for them and also good for the company as a whole. You have to gather the insight from the ground floor and engage everyone in being part of the solution process that makes for a stronger organization.”

Brad also makes a point to go above and beyond for his employees, just as he expects them to go above and beyond for their clients. He sets goals for the company, and when those goals are met, the whole team closes down the office for a four-day Caribbean vacation, all expenses paid. One year, the company met its goal in June, so Brad decided to prank his team by calling a meeting to go over expense reports, process, and procedure. He told everyone to arrive by 7:00 AM, and to plan on being in the office until 8:00 PM. Early that morning, he put the Power point agenda upon the TV screen, but as the second slide came up, the Hawaii 5-0 theme started playing. Instead of a day of grueling work, Brad had planned a day at Ocean City, complete with jet skis and barbeque. On another occasion when the goal was reached, he walked in with a James Bond-type briefcase that had stacks of $1000, with each employee’s name to make the experience more exciting and more real.

“I always want to surprise my staff—to create experiences that are real and tangible and special for them,” he says. “We’re an experiential agency, so why not create those experiences internally as well? And why not create them for the community? I encourage my staff to think outside the box and come up with great ideas for us to act on, and someone came up with the idea of letting Alexandria know we care about it through random acts of kindness. We broke into teams, and each team got $500 to do good in the community and capture it digitally. One team bought buckets of flowers to hand out at a stoplight; another went to a homeless shelter and bought everyone lunch. In all aspects of our work, we want to go above and beyond for people.” Thanks in part to this philosophy, Brad was honored with a Fortune Small Business Best Boss Award in 2005.

Despite these many successes, Brad’s journey would have remained woefully incomplete if he hadn’t met Callie, the woman he married in 2010. After receiving a phone call from a friend, he had shown up at a black tie event in plaid shorts and flip flops, just to meet her. It took four months to get a date with her, and several more for him to figure out how to show her he was serious. “It is harder to trust when your parents’ marriage ends in divorce,” he says. “She showed me what commitment was. There was a calmness and patience about her that just took all the air out of my fear and gave me such confidence in what’s important in life. My life and my business can be all over the place with a million things going on, but she brings me peace. She makes me a better person.” Callie and Brad welcomed their fourth child into the world in early 2016.

In advising young people entering the working world today, Brad underscores the importance of experiencing different paths early on. “When you’re young, it’s not a race up the ladder yet,” he says. “It’s about finding what ladder you want to climb. I started off pursuing economics, and then switched to politics, and then settled on marketing and business. I didn’t take one marketing class in college. The key is sampling different things to find what you really enjoy and
then leveraging your personal relationships to help create opportunity.”

Beyond that, true success comes from celebrating life’s precious moments, big and small. When Brad goes to work each day to create innovative experiences for his clients, he often wears collar stays with important words or dates engraved on them—gifts that Callie has begun giving him to honor their most important memories. Their children’s names. Their wedding date. A sailing trip they took together or a beautiful sunrise they saw. “I carry them around with me every day,” says Brad. “When you take care to remember how lucky you are and how far you’ve come, you see that there really is always a reason to throw a party.”

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