

# Building Rapport

## BTA dealers discuss their customer events

by: Brent Hoskins, Office Technology Magazine

**H**ave you hosted an open house, lunch-and-learn or other customer event lately? If not, perhaps such an event should be added to your 2025 calendar. After all, when done right, customer events can lead to a surge in closed deals while building valuable rapport with your current and prospective customers. Why not strive to further set yourself apart from the competition?

Following are profiles of three BTA member dealerships focused on their most recent sizeable customer events — on-site and otherwise. Perhaps the insight and details they share will provide you with some welcome guidance, inspiring you to start planning your next customer event.

### Abadan

It was founded in 1953 in Spokane, Washington, by a former member of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers who, having helped build a highway from the Middle East to Europe after World War II, decided to name the dealership after a city in Iran. It also helped that the name would land his company near the top of the list in the Yellow Pages. Today, Tyler and Lindsay Best own Abadan. They fully acquired the dealership from his father Bob in 2017, who purchased the company's Tri-Cities office from its second owner in 1987.

Best began working at Abadan, now located in Richland, Washington, about six months after graduating college. During those six months, "I pretty much refused to work here, but I gave in and took a job that was supposed to be temporary, which led from one job to another," he says. "After a couple of years, I fell in love with the company and married Lindsay. At that point, we made the decision to start acquiring the dealership."

Abadan covers most of eastern Washington, except for Spokane, and part of northeast Oregon, primarily selling Konica Minolta imaging products and KM Voice unified communication systems, but also Epson products and managed



IT. It also has a local print shop. "Since 2011, we have doubled in size," Best says. "We currently have 45 employees."

In part to further connect with those customers who have contributed to that growth, Abadan is dedicated to hosting customer events. Best is especially pleased with the dealership's largest event, held annually. "We find it to be a great way to celebrate our customers and get to know them," he says. "Most recently [for the past three years in a row], we have hosted an annual Printer Smash event, in part to raise funds for and promote a local nonprofit charity."

The event's name literally says it all. With a donation to the chosen nonprofit, attendees receive the opportunity to smash decommissioned printers with a sledgehammer, baseball bat or golf club for about 30 to 60 seconds — outdoors on large tarps, with safety glasses on, toner and glass removed, and at a safe distance from other attendees, Best says. "They get pretty exhausted at the end of 60 seconds, especially if they use our huge sledgehammer," he says. "It's around 30 pounds."

In promoting the event, Abadan asks prospective attendees if they "want some stress relief" or "if they would love to hit something they 'wouldn't hit in real life,'" Best says. "It's such a fun event; we have a blast doing it," he says. "Our customers enjoy it. Our employees enjoy it. And we get to help support a local nonprofit. We have had some people who have attended all of our Printer Smash events, and they can't wait for the next one."

For each event, a local radio personality serves as emcee, Best says, noting that a few weeks prior to the event, that person interviews him and a representative of the nonprofit, and later broadcasts the interview on air. "We pay for it, but the nonprofit receives some advertising for their cause," he says. "Plus, we are advertising for our event at the same time."

The past nonprofit charities have been current customers of Abadan, including a free health-care clinic, a local

hospice, and an organization that provides a therapeutic horse-riding service to improve the quality of life for children and adults, including veterans, first responders, health-care workers and anyone with special needs. “For the last couple of Printer Smash events, the nonprofits asked if they could decorate some of the printers, spray-painting them and putting other stuff on them,” Best

says. “For example, one charity uses purple in its branding, so they had fun spray-painting printers purple and labeling them with words like ‘anxiety,’ ‘depression,’ ‘fear’ and ‘anger.’ When participants smashed these machines, they were symbolically destroying the things holding them back.”

The Printer Smash event, usually scheduled for September, draws 50 to 100 people, trending higher when the event is hosted alongside the local chamber of commerce, Best says. Promoting the event gives Abadan sales reps “another reason to talk to customers about something other than selling a product,” he says. “That’s always a great thing — getting to know customers and building a better relationship with them.”

## United Business Systems

In 1983, United Business Systems (UBS) opened its doors with three original owners; one of them Wayne Kerling. Soon after, Kerling bought out his two partners. In the 1990s, his four adult children came on board, each now managing a different aspect of the dealership, today owned by their mother, Cheryl Kerling.

The primary imaging brands offered by UBS are Canon and Ricoh, but it also offers Brother and Lexmark products, as well as software products such as PaperCut and DocuWare. The company is headquartered in Buffalo, New York, with a second location in Rochester, New York. UBS currently employs just under 50 people. A separate UBS company, Pure Water of Western and Central New York, operates out of the two locations, as well as out of a location in Syracuse, New York.

Six years ago, Zach Bouley joined UBS. He serves as director of sales and marketing at the dealership. Each year since joining UBS, he has spearheaded the planning and execution of the dealership’s annual open house, always held at the Buffalo headquarters. “We have a great location in Buffalo; it’s downtown,” he says. “It’s central in the city on a great street that is well known by the locals and it’s right

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— Tyler Best Abadan

across the street from the most well-known restaurant in the city.”

Held each year in June, the UBS open house, scheduled from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., is largely outdoors, features two food trucks (one of them a UBS customer), a number of prize drawings and the opportunity for attendees to see product demos inside the dealership, as well as meet UBS team members and ven-

dor partners. “We used to have the restaurant across the street cater the event, but switched to the food trucks three to four years ago, once that craze became so huge,” Bouley says, noting that at check-in, attendees receive tickets for the food trucks and can dine under a large tent that UBS rents for the occasion. “That has worked out well, because it is less work for us and people like being able to order their own food.”

Once inside, attendees can sit in on various technology demos, based on the selections they made when registering for the event. “We know what each attendee is interested in, allowing us to place a colored dot on his or her name tag so that we know where to lead the person,” Bouley says. “For example, if we know that an attendee has an interest in interactive whiteboards or DocuWare, we make sure he sees those demos.”

In addition, “we try to alert each of our sales reps when one of his or her customers or prospects has arrived; it’s the rep’s responsibility to hand the attendee our swag bag, which has a coffee mug, pens and notepads — that sort of thing,” Bouley says. “For the lunch wave at the beginning, our reps are usually juggling trying to talk to five to 10 of their customers or prospects who are in the building at the same time.”

Generally, the lunch-wave attendees “stay for about an hour, grab lunch and see a couple of technology demos,” Bouley says, adding that the second wave comes at about 3 p.m. He also notes that the open house always takes place on a Thursday. “We stay away from Mondays and Fridays, because of people taking long weekends. We like Thursday because it is later in the week and, so, is a more relaxed day for people.”

Bouley has been pleased with the growth of the event in recent years. “Last year, we had more than 150 attendees; six years ago, it was a little over 100 attendees,” he says. “So, that 50% increase has been awesome. We’re hoping that it keeps growing.”

While there are sizeable expenses involved, largely offset by support from the dealership's vendor partners, the ROI is significant, Bouley says. "Every year, we can expect a three-month bump in sales after the event," he says. "We host the type of open house that we do because we expect to close a good amount of business from it ... Our goals are to show customer appreciation, create stickiness, cross-sell and get net-new prospects through the door."

### Waltz Business Solutions

Founded in 1892, Waltz Business Solutions is thought to be the second oldest office technology dealership in North America. Based in northern Kentucky, with a second location in Columbus, Ohio, the dealership's recent history has been characterized, in part, by acquisitions — recently completing its third acquisition in the past three-and-a-half years — helping to drive a new level of growth. "Outside of acquisitions, we achieved approximately 33% in organic growth this past year," says Brady Bosse, vice president of sales.

In 1892, it was all about typewriter sales and service at Waltz. Today, the dealership offers imaging products primarily from Kyocera, but also from Epson and KIP. "Plus, we've partnered with Xerox to handle our production needs," Bosse says. "The production units have contributed to our recent growth."

Brian Durrett, director of operations, joined Waltz 12 years ago. Among his many responsibilities: assisting in the organization of the dealership's annual open house. For the past 10 years or so, the event was held at the dealership, he says, noting that prior to that, some of the dealership's customer events were held at the home of the Cincinnati Reds, Great American Ball Park. For Waltz's most recent open house, the dealership made its return to a sports venue, this time hosting an event for the first time at the home of the Cincinnati Bengals, Paycor Stadium.

For dealers hosting open houses, "you're always trying to find creative ways to get clients to attend," Bosse says. "We felt that the draw of the stadium would be intriguing enough to entice people to make the trip to be in the club atmosphere or to experience a behind-the-scenes look at the stadium." The attendance was "in the hundreds," he says, emphasizing the draw of the new venue. "In fact, we noticed

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United Business Systems

it was not just the decision-maker attending alone [from a customer or prospect company], but the decision-maker and, in many cases, someone else from the company who wanted to attend as well when learning about the venue. I think that resulted in more of a commitment to attend."

"For the turnout we were expecting, the stadium venue was more accommodat-

ing for the event," Durrett says. "We had a much larger area for the event, so clients didn't feel rushed when visiting exhibitors' booths."

The Paycor Stadium event allowed Waltz to host 10 booths that were 15 to 20 feet apart, "so you were not trying to talk over multiple conversations," Bosse says. "We instructed all of our vendors to give a quick 10-minute, high-level overview and, if an attendee had more questions, he or she was welcome to stay longer."

Among the vendors exhibiting at the Waltz open house: Kyocera, eGoldFax, Epson, Kyocera, LightTouch, MyQ, Square 9, Verkada and Xerox production. While the vendors all sent personnel to attend the event, Waltz had two booths hosted by internal personnel — one focused on Pitney Bowes and another focused on the dealership's document destruction business.

The event also featured a buffet lunch, Waltz swag bag, prize drawings (for such gifts as a Joe Burrow signed jersey and helmet), appearances by the Bengals team mascot and cheerleaders, and a brief presentation and Q&A with the "voice of the Bengals," Dan Hoard, and Dave Lapham, a commentator and a former Bengals player.

Durrett says there was a notable contrast when comparing the customer orders resulting from the open houses hosted at Waltz and the event held at the stadium, perhaps driven by the excitement of the stadium venue, more exhibiting vendors and a larger turnout. "The open houses held at Waltz would drum up business opportunities, but the deals sometimes would result in longer sales cycles," he says. "After the event at Paycor Stadium, within a week, we had a significant increase in signed new business." ■

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