

Thinking outside the box

*Commentary by
Alison Schneider*

As soon as the reservoir was filled and Lake of the Ozarks was born it has been a place of wonder and enticement. Its wide expanses and miles of waterway was just too tempting to be left alone and soon began drawing leisure seekers to the area in droves. Over the decades since it has flourished from a small self-sustained rural community to an eclectic mix of "hillbillies and millionaires" as one local has pretty accurately

described it.

The Lake community always manages to land on its proverbial feet. After all, worker bees will always need a break, an escape from the daily grind and the Lake of the Ozarks with its proximity to major cities, natural beauty, and clean air and water fits the bill. The area history of self preservation and honest hard work always seems to keep the Lake area solvent, ready to rise above the turmoil and re-

claim those visitor and local dollars alike.

Most people would be shocked to find out how often our country has faced recession since the dam was constructed. At least once in each decade the economy has dealt with some level of economic crisis. Of course the early 80's, 90's and 2000's are the ones most of us felt in our pocketbooks, but it seems like this last year has been the worst. Businesses are

hanging on by their fingernails and consumers are guarding their money with iron fists. It's been a long year.

Nonetheless, regardless of the price of gas, the going interest rates or increasing cost of living, the Lake area has continued to do business. Nothing seems to really slow us down. Housing at the Lake in the past decade has taken on the look of mansions more than the simple lakefront cabins of decades past. Everyone always seems to be driving a new car, piloting a fine boat, purchasing numerous water toys and generally enjoying the good life with little apparent concern for the future.

Well...Until last winter.

The crash that was heard around the world. Even in idyllic Lake of the Ozarks. It seemed like the hard economic times had really hit home for maybe the first time since the Great Depression. Business has been slow for everyone - no one seems to be spending money they don't have to. New home construction has slowed to a painful crawl and resale of existing homes is virtually non-existent.

The trickledown effect has definitely trickled down. Consumers are cautious with their dollars - thinking carefully before purchasing their morning Starbucks and slowing down on the evening socializing at local venues. Everyone has felt the crunch.

Tourism still flourishes, but the dollars aren't as easy to come by as in decades past. In a normal Lake economy, the business focus is on the transient, tourist dollar. After all, the locals are all out there working, too. There's no real need to cater to the local consumers, right? Well, it's become apparent that perhaps the locals need to be treated with a little TLC as well. Their dollars spend just as well as the visitors, it turns out.

Take for example the City Grill and Blue Room in Osage Beach. Owned by the local Homm family, longtime area restaurateurs, Joey Homm thought about an event that locals would look forward to each and every month. An ongoing series of events that not only welcomed locals and tourists alike but also gave them a

reason to get out and go somewhere without breaking into the piggy bank.

Homm noticed that a lot of ladies in the area are in the workforce and they needed some TLC especially for them. He thought up the idea of the City Grill Ladies Night and determined that it would be held the first Thursday of every month. Only female patrons are allowed into the Blue Room adjacent to the restaurant and are treated to pampering and focused attention just for them each month. Food and drink specials are just the beginning, as Homm invites manicurists, massage therapists, estheticians, and vendors of purses and jewelry and shoes. The women are welcomed and catered to the entire evening.

It started out kind of slow, but as Homm was able to hone in on what the ladies were looking for, he was also able to increase the traffic flow. It's become an event that women all over the Lake area look forward to. They plan to meet and enjoy a little "me" time, whether business owners, workers, teachers or plain old mommies, the ladies of the area have answered YES to Homm's invitation. It's been quite successful.

When the staff at the Lake of the Ozarks Business Journal approached 939's manager Michael Ismael to develop the Thursday Business Social he was ready to try something different. The concept of opening the doors to those in the community looking for a great spot to gather and share war stories was enticing. Drink specials were of course part of the offering, but Ismael went a giant step further by offering an extravagant complimentary hor-deourves table with everything from trademark succulent roast beef sandwiches to jumbo shrimp, and follow it up with fantastic desserts.

The first night was such a huge success they decided to make it a weekly event. While no invitation is necessary Ismael and the Lake of the Ozarks Business Journal began to send out hundreds of e-vites every week to remind folks where they needed to be. They invited Mix 92.7 radio to cover the event,

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