

DOWNTIME



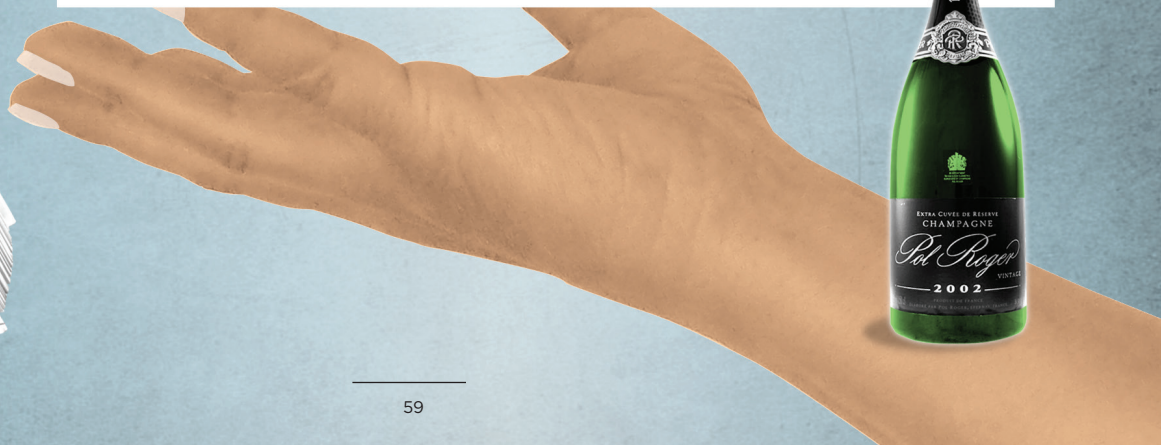
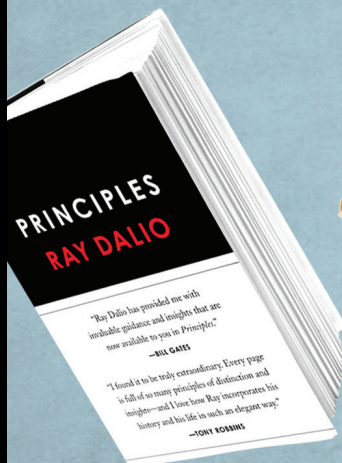
THE NEW DEAL-CLOSING PERKS

Sports gifts and
fancy boat trips cement
business today.



BY CHRIS TAYLOR

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ISABEL ESPANOL



Time for a little thought experiment. Let's say you have a big deal to close, with someone you really want to impress. Where do you go, or what do you give, to accomplish that mission? Here's a hint: The traditional methods just don't stand out anymore. Take someone to lunch? Been there, done that. Send a decent bottle of red? You can do better. You need to up your game.

You might think—in this hyperconnected world with every possible product and service at our fingertips—that we have all become better at giving gifts and creating memorable moments. But you would be very wrong.

"People still are very bad at this," says John Ruhlin, the author of the book

"Giftology" and head of St. Louis-based Ruhlin Group, which is in the business of gift-giving for big-name clients—among them 25 pro sports teams. "If you learn to do it well, you stand so far above your competition that they won't even know what hit them."

With that in mind, we talked to a few company founders and presidents to find out what places and products are really moving the needle these days. What we found: Creating a moment that will be remembered for a lifetime, or a thoughtful gift that will be treasured instead of tossed, doesn't have to break the bank. But it does require you to be strategic and thoughtful, and to know exactly what makes a person tick. Here are a few unique ideas to make you stand out and get that deal done.

Create a historic artifact.

When the Chicago Cubs wanted to reward their most valuable fans—suite owners and sponsors collectively worth many millions of dollars to the club—the baseball team wanted to give gifts so special that they could strengthen relationships and get everyone to re-up their lucrative deals.

So Ruhlin, who works with the team, stepped in. When the Cubs were remodeling Wrigley Field, their century-old ballpark, builders had to remove all the old lumber, which was destined for the dumpster. "Send it to me," Ruhlin said.

He tapped his in-house design studio, relaminated the old Wrigley Field wood, and fashioned



it into 400 Bluetooth speakers—individually numbered and never to be replicated. The reaction from diehard Cubs fans? "They flipped out—even the [team-owning] Ricketts family, who are worth billions of dollars. That's because it was an antique artifact, with real history to it, and something people would actually use every day."



Supersize it.

Sometimes, a round at the local bar might be enough to seal an important deal. Other times, you have to think considerably bigger. Thomas Cornwall, the head of London-based strategy shop Behave, got a panicked phone call one morning. A museum client was struggling with a sponsor that was planning to pull out of a deal worth upwards of \$400,000 per year. What could the museum do?

"The obvious thing is beg, plead or try to explain the rationale for the deal," Cornwall says. "But emotion beats reason every time." So, he asked the client to tell him a bit more about the decision-maker and what that individual personally got from the museum. She said he loved coming to the sponsored events

and drinking a glass—or seven—of champagne.

Cornwall suggested sending the sponsor a magnum bottle of Pol Roger Reserve, the champagne the museum served at events, along with a simple note: “We hope you have happy memories of your time with us.”

Bingo. The “applied behavioral science” worked like a charm. “Hours after the champagne arrived, the man called up, apologized and agreed to the deal. More than \$400,000 per year for a cost of less than \$200, including delivery.”



Arrange a meeting with a hero.

No matter how big or successful you are, everyone has a hero whose footsteps they worship. For one CEO friend of Aaron Vidas (and for Vidas himself), it was Ray Dalio, the famed hedge-fund manager and head of Bridgewater Associates. His friend was enamored of Dalio’s “Principles,” a philosophy of business and life. “Principles” exists only in PDF form, but his friend was so in love with the work that he had copies printed up and bound.

That gave Vidas, the head of Vancouver-based marketing analysis firm StrategyBox, an idea. He happened to know a few people at Bridgewater, which led to getting the unique bound edition into the hands of Dalio himself. Dalio, who was blown away, invited the CEO to

Bridgewater’s Connecticut headquarters to hang out, and eventually published “Principles” as a bestselling book, thanking the CEO in the acknowledgments.

Vidas didn’t envision the fix-up as a business transaction, but the CEO subsequently became a client and they have done business together ever since. Says Vidas: “These days, if you genuinely want to build a relationship, you have to do something different. Everything else is noise.”

Curate an experience.

Happiness may be an elusive thing. But the latest research is in near-universal agreement: What makes people truly happier are not things but experiences.

That is why Long Island financial planner Jon Ten Haagen takes friends, clients and prospects out on his 34-foot sailboat for a cruise around Long Island Sound. With a gentle breeze, a picturesque sunset and a few beers, is anyone really going to turn down your business?

Case in point: Ten Haagen once took the staff of the local yacht club out for a spin. Among the group were a young waitress and her boyfriend. At the time, the two didn’t have much, but they subsequently married, had kids, became clients and made multiple referrals to him in ensuing years. Every referred client, in turn, got a personalized gift: a wine glass hand-etched with the financial



planner-approved wisdom, “Thou shalt not invade thy principal.”

All that business from a single evening on the boat, with the sun setting in the west and the full moon starting to rise. “Everyone still talks about that night,” Ten Haagen says. “You get out on the water, and all of a sudden everyone is best friends.”

Tap childhood memories.

There are certainly plenty of CEOs and corporate presidents who can come across as intimidating in any setting. But no matter how Type A an executive is, there is one master key to opening his or her heart: The sports team that this person followed as a child. Those ingrained memories reduce pretty much everyone to wide-eyed 7-year-olds.

That’s why, when Toronto’s Sulemaan Ahmed is closing a deal or thanking a contact, he always goes way back in time. One big client of his, an executive vice president of a bank, was a childhood fan of hockey’s Buffalo Sabres. So, Ahmed, founder of the consulting firm Servo Annex, had an idea. He ordered a special jersey with the name of Gilbert Perreault, one-third of the Sabres’ famous “French Connection” forward line, on the back, complete with Perreault’s number and “C” (Perreault was the team captain). When the client opened the gift, “his eyes just lit up,” Ahmed remembers. “Now, whenever he wears that jersey, he remembers us.”

Ahmed also wrangles clients and prospects into so-called “alumni rooms,” where retired sports greats sometimes convene during games. For instance, he got one client into a gathering before a Montreal Canadiens game, where the client got to hang out with multiple Stanley Cup winner Yvan Cournoyer.

“Grown men and women become like kids again,” says Ahmed. “They are like children in a candy store.” ●

