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COMEDY with a straight face

by Joe Pine & Jim Gilmore

The second EXPY award winner uses theatre to turn an ordinary service into an engaging consumer and B2B experience.

Our favorite business-to-business experience-stager is The Geek Squad, based in Minneapolis. Back in 1994, its founder and Chief Geek, Robert Stephens, wanted to get into the business of installing and supporting computers, but decided against merely delivering mundane services. Instead, he launched an *experience* business. He asked himself, who better to work on computers than a squad of geeks?

So instead of interviewing prospective employees, Robert *auditions* them. Instead of polo-shirt uniforms, he *costumes* with white shirts, thin black ties, and black pants with devices hanging off the belt (and the pants are just a little too short, know what we mean?). Robert paints new VW Beetles as black-and-white squad cars, dubbing them Geekmobiles. And he imbues his workers with *performance* routines. For example, when a geek goes to a customer's premises, he pulls out his identification badge and says, "Hi! I'm Special Agent Smith from The Geek Squad. Please step away from your computer, ma'am. . . ." Then he charms his host with a unique blend of street theatre that is the Geek Squad experience. Robert tells us his goal is to make each performance so engaging that customers can't wait until their computers break down!

The Geek Squad provides many

lessons for aspiring experience stagers, not only for B2B companies but for consumer-based businesses as well. Let's highlight just a few.

Subtle theming. It may seem that – like most every theme restaurant out there – the Geek Squad's theme is right there in its name, and therefore right in your face. Not so. The company's name is not its theme; rather, the organizing principle that Robert strives to fulfill is *comedy with a straight face*. Use of this theme allows special agents to maintain a straight-laced demeanor (just as if they'd walked off the screen of some modern-day episode of *Dragnet*), yet entertain the clients with Geek-based humor – all the while performing the necessary installation or support activities.

Apt auditioning. Robert's employment requirements are tough. His Geeks have to know (and strut) their stuff. He auditions prospective employees for the role of Delivery Agent by setting appointments to meet at an obscure address on some dirt road outside of town. Unbeknownst to these prospects, if they can't be on time at that location, they disqualify themselves from consideration. For Special Agent candidates, he schedules a rendezvous at high noon at a busy downtown location. On cue, two Geekmobiles arrive and park fifty feet apart; Special Agents jump out to secure the perimeter. Then a restored '66 Lincoln Continental limousine pulls up. A costumed chauffeur steps out, opens the

suicide doors, and invites the candidate in for a backseat interrogation. Inside, The Hire Power (the Geek Squad's head of recruiting) talks to the prospect while the chauffeur drives them around town. Why doesn't Robert conduct the session himself? Because he's playing the role of the chauffeur, gaining candid insight into the willingness of the auditioning candidate to fulfill his role and embrace The Geek Squad experience.

Street performing. Every place The Geek Squad calls upon provides the prototypical "found environment" of a street performer, so each Special Agent maintains a set of routines, or bits, to both entertain his audience and fix their computers. Of course, The Geek Squad isn't just a performance troupe; it's a high-quality performing company. So it also equips agents with a portfolio of well-scripted installation and repair routines. When it comes to repairing and installing computers, the company flat out gets the job done.

(That's why it's expanded beyond the Minneapolis-St. Paul marketplace and into Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, Phoenix, and Washington, DC, as well as – for at least one think-About provocateur! – Cleveland.) And for the finale, each Special Agent cleans the customer's cables and organizes them with specially made plastic strips bearing The Geek Squad's logo, then leaves behind a Geek Squad T-shirt – a most treasured item of memorabilia for each experience call, on which every step is a scripted bit.

Now you can understand why The Geek Squad won our 2000 Experience Stager of the Year Award. And you can further understand why, in late 2002, Best Buy bought the consumer side of the business. (The B2B side of the business is now staging computer experiences under the name Techies Network Task Force.) Look for engaging performances coming soon to a Best Buy near you.