

SIMPLY RED

Red Balloon Days are all about the X-factor, as in 'The Experience Factor'. As CEO (that's 'Chief Experience Officer') Naomi Simson explains, it's a company that likes to give people a good time. By Claire Buckis.

To say that Red Balloon is an unusual company would be understating it somewhat. The organisation, which specialises in, er, offering people a good time (their words, not ours), offers more than 2000 'experiential gifts', ranging from helicopter lessons, to dinner in the Daintree and even bellydancing. If you want to forget the recession and live like it's early 2008 all over again, Red Balloon's your company. Its Mantra could well be: 'Come To Us: We'll Help You Forget 2008'.

"We do like to give people a good time," laughs Red Balloon's CEO Naomi Simson (whose CEO title means 'Chief Experience Officer'). "We don't have a call centre because we don't want to call it that. We have a team of people who give pleasure."

If that sounds a little salacious for a G-rated company, you wouldn't be the first to think so. Simson once received a phone call from the mother of a girl who had just been promoted to the role of "Pleasure Relations Consultant". As Simson explains, "The girl's mother called me up and said, 'What exactly is my daughter doing there?' And I said, 'She's giving our customers pleasure.' At that she said, 'What do you mean?' And I replied, 'She's on the phone with our customers making sure they

have a great experience.' So then she said, 'Well, I just want you to know I think that job title is totally inappropriate. I sent it to more than a dozen people and they all came back to me and said it could be misunderstood.' So I said, 'You've told a dozen people about Red Balloon Days?' And she said, 'Yes I have.' To which I replied, 'Thank you!'"

As is evident, Simson rarely misses an opportunity to market the company she started from scratch in 2001.

"I wanted to build a brand from nothing; do something that was relevant and interesting and bring something online that had never been done before," she says of her motivation and drive. "I wanted to change gifting in Australia forever."

What Simson didn't count on was timing. She launched the company three weeks after 9/11, and shortly after the tech bust put a spanner in the Internet works.

"It was a terrible time for doing business," she admits. "It was all doom and gloom. We didn't make our first sale for two months."

Previously, Simson had worked in marketing for Ansett and Apple. But, like all entrepreneurs, she dreamed of doing something on her own, and so, after much thought, Red Balloon Days (named after → one of Simson's favourite films) was born.



“

Six months ago I found my first marketing plan. I looked at it and thought, 'Oh my god, that's so embarrassing!'



"The first marketing plan was dated April 1, 2001. I found it six months ago and I looked at it and thought, 'Oh my god that's so embarrassing!'" laughs Simson. "I didn't know anything about online marketing – not many people did then. So it was a lot of trial and error – and lots and lots of error."

Initially the website was red with black writing and was based on images, so it couldn't be indexed by Google. "When we had our first customer I called him and said, 'Hi, I'm the Chief Experience Officer, what did you think?' And he said it was terrible. One of the most important things is knowing how your customers experience your business. So one of the first things I did was to create a 'How was it for you?' survey. It gives us a really good idea about what customers love, hate, and what we need to work on."

In the first year the company had 300 customers. Last year there were almost 175,000. The company began to grow rapidly in 2003 as the website improved and word spread, but there were still mistakes along

the way.

"In 2004 we decided to do a postcard campaign for Christmas. We worked on it for a long time, printed a million postcards and sent them out. We waited and waited and there was no blip on the website. I thought, 'Gosh, I've just spent \$300,000 and I didn't get one hit on my website.' That was painful."

Simson learned from the experience. "It was too early. Now we have a 52 per cent brand recognition in metro areas so it would work better. The greatest role in advertising is to reinforce what people already know about brands, not to create a relationship."

The company also offers 'Experiences in a Box', such as an olive oil tasting kit that can be delivered, aimed at rural customers or people who can't travel for their experience.

"We've extended the concept of experience by asking, what is an experience? An experience, we decided, was to touch one of the senses."

Ideas for Red Balloon experiences came – and still come – from customer's suggestions, suppliers, and even Red Balloon's own staff. "We'll sit around and say, What did you want to do when you were a kid? You wanted to be a clown? Okay, how can we make that happen? Who does clown training, circus training?" Each experience then goes through a rigorous approval process.

Simson partly attributes the success of Red Balloon to her employees. "We advertised for an 'Experience Assistant' recently and we got 400 applicants," she says. "We have some

fantastic people here, and we celebrate when we get a new employee, because we know they had to go through a rigorous process to get here."

The positive vibe of Red Balloon's culture seems to come straight from the CEO herself. She isn't worried about the global financial crisis and indeed seems quite cheery about the year ahead. "Worry isn't something I do," she says. "Our Christmas numbers were very good. In fact, they were actually above what we'd forecast."

The company also has a corporate website, where companies can join an incentive program to give their employees Red Balloon experiences instead of financial rewards.

"Now more than ever, employee engagement is important. Giving an experiential gift to an employee is worth more than any money, because you're appealing to them on an emotional level."

Simson recently won the National Telstra Business Women's Award for 2008 in the Nokia Innovation Category, and has written a book about the ups and downs of business called *I Want What She's Having*.

"We have a goal that by 2015 we want two million people to have had an experience with us," she says, as motivated as ever.

She's also keen to share advice about business and marketing on her blog www.naomiSimson.com. "Marketing is a journey it's not an activity. You just have to keep trying, trying, trying, until you can see what works for you." **W**

Learn how to **take advantage** of the "financial crisis" and **discover** property strategies that work in this market!

In this 90 minute DVD you will hear from Australia's most sought after property development educator. Carly Crutchfield and CCORP teach thousands of everyday people how they can build massive wealth through property development.

This DVD is an introduction to this subject and will show you strategies which can give you the type of freedom and opportunities that you may have thought were never possible.

You can access this information for FREE by ordering this DVD which will change the way you view property and make you a better investor than you ever thought possible.

Go to WWW.THEPROPERTYGAME.COM.AU for your free dvd!



TWO FREE TICKETS

learn the secrets of property development that will blow you away and have you making bigger profits sooner

In this 2 hour presentation property developer Carly Crutchfield will take you into a world of property that you will absolutely love. Carly is Australia's number one property development educator, she has been involved in over 180 million worth of property projects and she walks the talk - She is currently involved in several developments through out Australia. Come and learn from the pro in this high-energy and education packed evening where you will learn:

- how to find a good deal
- how to make profit without spending money
- how to own a property debt free in 12 months
- the complete development process
- what joint ventures are and why they are magic
- and much more



Seats are limited so please call now or go to the website to book your tickets today.

PLUS receive a FREE DVD and property report when you attend on the night

VALUED AT \$197	<p>- SYDNEY - 28th April 6.30 registration, 7.00 start - 8.30pm Masonic Centre Sydney (02) 9371 4799 www.developmentseminar.com.au</p>	VALUED AT \$197
	<p>- BRISBANE - 29th April 6.30 registration, 7.00 start - 8.30pm (02) 9371 4799 www.developmentseminar.com.au</p>	