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**Sleepless in Texas 5-11-05**  
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Last night I got the best sleep I have had in weeks!

Part of that was because I went to bed about three hours before I usually tuck in. The other reason is that I was finally able to turn off my mind that has been running at an incredibly high speed lately.

Have you ever had a night where there was so much on your mind that you couldn't sleep? How about a whole week of nights like that? Or even a month?

That's kinda where I've been lately – doing a lot of thinking about the Toy House. Oh, sure, you're probably saying to yourself that every businessperson spends an enormous amount of time thinking about their business, and in many ways you are absolutely right.

Very few days go by that we don't worry about whether sales are going to increase or decrease, whether our staff will be up to the challenge, whether we can pay our vendors, and whether we have made the right decisions that will keep us in business another year.

But that's not what has kept me up late the last few nights.

You see, I attended a workshop last week in Buda, Texas that really opened my eyes.

Okay, wait, stop right there. Buda, Texas? What in the world would anyone be doing in Buda, Texas? And where is Buda, anyway? Eating great BBQ would be a good answer to the first question. But that's not all.

First, a little background on Buda (pronounced b-yoo'-da). Buda is a town just outside of Austin, Texas (the state capitol). There are three "mountains" at the edge of Buda (they're more like plateaus, but I digress) called Friday Mountain, Thursday Mountain, and Wednesday Mountain. (I'm not joking. You can't make up stuff like this.) In years past when wars and fighting happened on the plains of Texas, these mountains were a safe place. When General Santa Anna and his army from Mexico overran the Alamo and most of Texas, these mountains were a refuge. In fact, if you were on one of these mountains, you were not only in a place where you couldn't be harmed, your mortal enemy had to help you out. Treaties were negotiated and signed on these mountains. Friends were made out of enemies on these mountains. I guess you could say there was an energy, an electricity found up there, almost a spiritual kind of place.

And it was here in Buda that I found myself attending an advertising workshop.

Advertising workshop? Three whole days of "unique selling propositions", "reaching the right people", and "how to fool the masses"? This is what has kept Phil up at night?

I know some of you are saying, "Okay, Phil's gone off his rocker. He's left this planet in search of the purple wooba wooba." But stay with me just a moment. This is an interesting journey.

This workshop was not about any of that old, boring stuff mentioned above that every other advertising guru tries to sell, the custom one-size-fits-all advertising plan "guaranteed to draw a crowd" type stuff.

No, the premise was much more simple. Be who you are.

Four short words that have kept my mind racing at MIS speeds.

Be who you are.

Could it be that simple? Yes it could.

But the next question is this. Who are we?

Who is Toy House? Who do people think we are when they hear that name, and is it a true reflection of who we really are?

I know the answer of “what” we are. We are the largest independent toy store in the USA with the largest selection of toys of any single store in the country. We are a locally owned, family-run, Jackson tradition that has been here since 1949. We offer one of the most comprehensive list of services including free giftwrapping, six-month layaway, delivery, assembly, car seat installations, gift registry, UPS shipping, product information classes, etc. We have one of the most knowledgeable staffs of any toy retailer with an average of almost eleven years of employment.

I also know the answer of “what” we are not. We are not the store that carries electronic game systems like Nintendo or Play Station. We are not the store that sells every single licensed movie product to come down the pike. We are not the store who advertises a sale on stuff that we don't have in stock. We are not the store who advertises the biggest sale of the year every weekend. We are not the store who advertises the lowest price, period. There are plenty of stores giving you that line.

But you know all that. And none of that says “who” we are.

When we hire new staff who have worked retail at other locations, the first thing we tell them is that we are going to “untrain” them of what they have learned because we have a different way of doing things around here. I've often called that the Toy House Way.

When you work at the Toy House you are not just hired to do one thing, but to do many. You don't just work as a cashier, you also answer phones, giftwrap packages, tie up layaways, stock shelves, and, most of all, help customers.

Our employees are asked to not only know what products we carry, but also know something about them so that we can help you out when you have a question.

The path that got me from “what” we are to “who” we are came from asking “why”.

Why do we voluntarily crawl into someone's backseat to make sure that the car seat they bought from somewhere else is installed correctly? Why do we lead a customer from one side of the store to the other to show her all the possible toys that might be perfect for her four-year-old niece? Why do we buy miles of giftwrap and take on the extra expense of hiring employees at Christmas just to giftwrap packages at no charge to you? Why do we give you up to six months to hide your packages (or change your mind) with our layaway program? In a day when most everyone either has or knows someone with an SUV, why do we even offer free delivery services?

We do it to help you out.

I guess it only makes sense that I had to travel all the way to Buda, Texas, a place where helping others is deeply entrenched in their history, to discover that the Toy House is just here to help.

That's who we are.

And coming to understand who we are and learning how to tell others about us has me so excited that I just haven't been able to sleep.

What made the difference last night? I could rest at ease when it dawned on me just how cool it is to run a store whose mission is to help others.

That, my friends, is the Toy House Way.

Sweet Dreams!

-Phil Wrzesinski