FINDING INSPIRATION IN A BOWL OF CORN FLAKES

Are you missing new ideas right in front of your nose?

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What's more everyday than a bowl of cereal?

Yet in the story you are about to read, Kellogg's learned something new.

One of the points about the "UNcoventional Wisdom" blog is to show banker readers how to obtain new observations from the familiar, the mundane, the everyday. The following story, on its surface, has absolutely nothing to do with banking. But it does have to do with having an opportunity to look at the "same old thing" in new ways.

If you or your bank has benefited from a similar experience, please tell us about it in the comment section below. Bankers who post a comment will be eligible for a drawing for their choice of $25 in corn flakes or a $25 Amazon gift card. Deadline is Aug. 21, midnight.

This story is excerpted from Paul Smith's Lead With A Story: A Guide to Crafting Business Narratives that Captivate, Convince, and Inspire, published by Amacom*, which is reviewed on our "Books for Bankers" page here.

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It's 6 A.M. in Queretaro, Mexico, about 130 miles north of Mexico City. Most of the residents are just waking to the sound of an alarm clock. But one woman is already dressed and has visitors in her kitchen. However, this isn't the typical time or type of guests she normally entertains. These are senior executives from the Kellogg Company visiting from their Battle Creek, Michigan, headquarters in the United States. As the world's largest cereal maker, they have a vested interest in understanding how consumers go about their breakfast routines. In-home research like this is one of the primary ways they gain that understanding in countries around the world. But this visit had several of the executives scratching their heads.

One of those executives was John Bryant, CEO of the company. He watched as the mom went about preparing the meal for her household of five. It was what John calls a "heavy" breakfast: eggs, ham, cheese, toast, juice, and some fruit. As he watched the family enjoy the meal, he noticed two boxes of Kellogg's cereal on top of the refrigerator. After they finished breakfast, he asked the mom, through an interpreter, if she ever ate cereal.

She responded, "Yes, every day."

John first looked at his interpreter-not sure he'd gotten the right translation-and then back to the mom. His look of confusion must have crossed the language barrier quite easily, because she responded unprompted, "Para la cena."

John looked back at his interpreter, sill confused, and then heard the unexpected translation: "For dinner."

UNconventional Wisdom is a periodic guest blog, where authors hold up the so-called conventional wisdom to a fresh perspective, or apply common principles in new ways. To propose a guest blog, email Steve Cocheo, executive editor & digital content manager.

The words hung in the air for a few seconds as the executives' eyes jumped from the interpreter, to the mom, and then to each other. For a breakfast cereal maker, finding out your consumer is using your product for dinner is a bit like a winter coat manufacturer finding out people are wearing its products in the summer. It just wasn't what they were expecting. On further research, Kellogg's learned that this mom wasn't unusual. Thirty percent of cereal in Mexico is consumed for the evening meal. Imagine how different the company might think about the ingredients in the cereal, or the way it communicates in its advertising, knowing a third of its consumers eat cereal at night. [Emphasis added.]

Today, John tells that story to keep managers from thinking too dogmatically about how consumers use their product. "It's too easy," he explains, "to think of cereal only being consumed for breakfast, between six and eight o'clock in the morning, at home, with milk, from a bowl, with a spoon, and so on." It could be in the afternoon, straight from the box, and dry! His lesson: "Don't force your assumptions on our consumers. Our products are more versatile than we give them credit for. And so are our consumers."

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