**South East Exhibitions: Filling Big Shoes**

Jason Kirkpatrick, president of South East Exhibitions, had a problem. He had just met with Diane Aldridge, the president of Women’s Shows (a division of South East Exhibitions). Diane was a 28 year veteran with South East and one of the firm’s best and most versatile employees. For the previous three years, Diane had been considering semi-retirement – relinquishing her position and taking on a lesser position she could work from home – but she had just given Jason a firm date in which she would step down as Women’s Shows president. Jason had been dreading this day, as he felt that none of the current show managers could step into that position and match Diane’s diverse skill set, and Jason himself didn’t have time to take on any more responsibilities. Jason was concerned that the process of replacing Diane would disrupt the peaceful work environment that his company enjoyed. He strongly desired to make the decision with minimal disruption to the smooth working group. He knew he needed to make a decision immediately.

**A Change in Management**

Kate and Michael Kirkpatrick started South East Exhibitions in 1959 in Durham, NC, before moving to Atlanta three years later. Their first show was a garden exhibition, and by 1983 they were producing 5 annual shows. Their son, Jason Kirkpatrick, finished graduate school in 1983 and joined the family business. He worked first as an assistant show manager and then a show manager for 17 years while his mother and Diane Aldridge oversaw the women’s shows. In 1999, Kate stepped down and named Jason as president of South East Exhibitions. As president, Jason began overseeing all of the shows except the women’s shows, which Diane continued to oversee. Kate Kirkpatrick stayed on as CEO of the company and Michael Kirkpatrick maintained his role as company visionary.

**The Company**

South East Exhibitions Inc., a privately held corporation, organized and produced several shows each year under a general theme, such as “Ideal Home” that provided an interface for exhibitors and consumers. From the beginning, South East sought middle and upper class women, regardless of age or ethnicity, as its target market, preferring a more affluent clientele to attract exhibitors. The business concept for South East Exhibitions was based on matching consumers with disposable income to high-quality and reputable businesses, such as landscapers, home improvers, and interior designers. The management at South East Exhibitions believed that success would come through understanding and anticipating the needs of the exhibitors and of the public by creating innovative expositions and services that met both sets of needs.

As of 2009, South East produced 18 separate shows in 11 different markets, with a combined attendance of over 600,000. The largest moneymakers were Spring Shows, Home Shows, Christmas Shows, and Women’s Shows. The company had considered producing more shows, but as Jason said, “We’ve reached a point of saturation. If we were to grow any more, we would be forced to change our entire structure.”

The company made its largest percentage of revenue from exhibitors who displayed their goods and services to the demographically appealing South East Exhibitions audiences. Exhibitors generally paid a standard rate based on square foot of exhibit space. The exhibitors were also vital to another source of revenue, as they provided an excellent outlet for ticket distribution. South East consigned tickets to exhibitors in advance who often offered them to VIP customers. Sponsors provided another source of revenue, as South East provided a large stage on which a sponsor could promote their products. Each sponsor was also encouraged to advertise its brand throughout the event site.

South East enjoyed good relationships with its employees, as evidenced by the fact that most of its show managers were veterans with more than 20 years of experience. The company prided itself on open communication between the different divisions and on everyone taking responsibility for the company as a whole. Each prospective manager was first interviewed by the person he or she would be replacing. “This way,” Kate said, “they learn the good, the bad and the ugly of the job, and determine if it would be a fit for them.” The interview process continued with the candidate meeting the people he or she would work with, senior management, and then either Jason, Diane, or Kate. The unusual process seemed to work, as Kate proudly stated, “we are incredibly fortunate with the staff we have surrounding us. Just think of it, the huge spaces, huge amounts of people, huge amounts of work, and after just a couple shows we send them off and say – ‘Go do it!’ They come back to us only when they need our help with something.”

Internally, the company ran each show like an individual business, with managers having ownership of the shows they produce. The shows were broken into two categories, Women’s Shows (overseen by Diane) and Home Shows (overseen by Jason). Within the Women’s Shows Division, Diane oversaw six different managers who each ran two shows a year. The shows were broken into fall and spring seasons, with a team of one manager and one assistant manager assigned to run each show independently. The show managers, Alice, Cari, Melissa, Jane, Jen, and Amy had almost complete control over the shows they operated. They were in charge of the overall creative concept of each show, and they worked within budgets to create a comprehensive plan for each show.

**Diane Aldridge**

Diane had been hired by Kate Kirkpatrick in 1982 when she moved to Atlanta from Canada with her husband. Diane had previously worked with Sports Shows in Canada and South East Exhibitions was the only company in Atlanta in a similar field. As the company grew, she began taking on more responsibilities with the Women’s Shows before she was named President of Women’s Shows in 2000. In 2007, however, she informed Jason that her husband had retired and they planned to move their permanent residence to a beach house three hours away. Diane didn’t want to leave South East Exhibitions entirely, but instead explained that she would like to take on a different role with less responsibility. She was interested in still doing sponsorship sales, but only if she could work from the beach and have no additional responsibilities in Atlanta.

Diane’s decision to leave would affect the entire company. She had built strong relationships with each of her managers, as well as with the exhibitors and sponsors of each show. Cari, one of the show managers, said “I love Diane because she is always diplomatic when making decisions, and she doesn’t micromanage us.” Jen, another show manager, loved Diane because “she was an enthusiastic cheerleader, extremely creative in her approach with customers/exhibitors and she always has the attitude of ‘let’s make it happen.’”

The decision was also a bit scary for Diane. Although she wanted to move to the beach with her husband, she was also reluctant to leave a position that she had worked so hard to attain. So when Jason asked her to wait, she acquiesced. Jason spent the time thinking about his options, but when nothing seemed to fit, he asked Diane to stay a little longer. In truth, he just didn’t want her to leave. “I tried to stall her as long as I could, pleading with her to stay through the next big show, and then the next and the next.” Finally, in early 2010, after three years of waiting, Diane let Jason know that June 1 would be her last day in her current role, and after that she would work strictly on sponsorships.

**Jason’s Dilemma**

Now faced with a firm departure date, different options rolled through Jason’s mind. He knew if he promoted another Southeast manager to fill Diane’s position she would know the process and understand the ins and outs of the company. No one person, however, stood out as an heir apparent. For example, Jason loved Amy’s energy and enthusiasm, but felt she had trouble staying on task; Jen was great with detail and organization, but lacked creativity. Even Jane, a 27-year veteran with the company said “I really don’t think anyone could take her place, including myself.” Some managers, however, identified Alice, a seasoned manager, as a candidate for the job. One manager, Melissa, said “I would like to think I could take on Diane's role” and also mentioned Alice as a suitable replacement. Still others expressed reluctance to promoting anyone from within. Cari believed that “If someone currently working here were to get Diane’s title, I think there would be an uprising among a couple of managers who did not get the job.  These managers angry about not getting the position would try to sabotage the person who was promoted or would constantly disagree with that person to make it hard for them to do their job.”­­­

Alternatively, Jason could hire from outside. Jason, however, felt there could be reluctance among the other employees to accept an “outsider,” and he worried it would disrupt the structure that had successfully existed since the company’s inception.

With such a risky decision, Jason wondered how best to communicate information with his employees. He considered, for example, if he should communicate all information to his entire staff throughout the process, or if he should be judicious about when to communicate information and to which specific employees.

He also contemplated how much participation the employees should have in the decision. One alternative was to make the decision himself without involving the staff. This option would be clean and efficient but it might affect the team morale that Diane had been so good at instilling. Or he could involve the staff in the decision, while participating with the hiring and interviewing processes. This option also held risks since it would be unlikely that everyone would agree on one internal or external candidate. If he were to involve the staff, therefore, he was unsure if he should simply take their input before deciding whom to offer the position or if he should allow a more consensus-based approach and trust the final decision to the majority opinion of the group.

The time to make a decision had arrived. Diane had made it clear she was stepping down. Jason knew that whatever process he chose would upset someone. He struggled with how to engineer the process to be the least disruptive to the organization and still have the greatest positive effect on future business. Time was running out.