The Big Picture The View from Thirty Thousand Feet

Recently, I ventured north to the semi-annual trade show for the equestrian industry. This is the event that tack stores from around the country attend to re-stock shelves as well as put an ear toward what’s new. I have attended this event in the past as a buyer, so I was somewhat familiar with the terrain.

My mission on this particular trip was to gauge interest from manufacturers, suppliers and distributors on the possibility of moving their business…here. As a community that has our equine infrastructure in place – all things equine from horses to instruction to retail to services to tourism to art—I felt, in theory at least, that businesses want to be where there is established synergy. We have synergy.

The plan involved doing an initial mailer that asked, “Would your business benefit from a relocation?” followed by the suggestion that Tryon Horse Country is the place to be. I was surprised, actually astonished, that the majority of company principals I spoke with at this 600+ vendor trade fair had received our mail teaser, had read it and knew about Tryon. However, most were surprised by how much entrenched in the horse industry we were. Two competition venues with a third in the works, really? Trail systems? Two fox hunts? Two pony clubs? A monthly equine publication? Your own horse mascot? An equine ambulance? A surgical hospital? I could have gone on, and told them that our horsey mascot Morris had his own retail store, but I thought that might be construed as bragging.

I spent a lot of time with companies asking the questions they couldn’t ask each other. What is business like? Are you growing? Are your retail customers here buying more than they did last year? Have you had to lay off employees? Are you developing new product or just holding steady with what you already have? Are you planning on exhibiting at the World Equestrian Games in Lexington?

Somehow I was surprised to learn that at the particular show, there were quite a few start-ups, and they were very optimistic. Some, being in business three years or less, reported that sales were satisfying and growing. The equestrian supply industry is very diverse (textiles, apparel, lumber products, health care products, leather goods, etc) but by and far it is an entrepreneurial industry. Most companies are small and employ five or less. There are some big companies, and there were a good number of foreign companies represented from Europe, Canada, Mexico, South America and the Pacific Rim. It was a good representative mix of products.

I spoke with a few sales representatives, the road warriors. They told me it was much harder to make the sales they made a few years ago when horse owners with money were spending freely, however, they were still in business, still writing orders. Everyone longs for the days of the hot economy.

At the end of four days, I came home with four prospects that had said, yes, they are looking to move their companies and yes, they would probably move south. Each considered the foothills of the Carolinas a good choice for consideration. Each received a packet on the area with an economic profile. Each received a promise for follow up.

Whether these prospects, or any prospects for that matter, actually turn into revenue generators for our tax base remains to be seen. In reality, the opportunity to step outside our little bubble of villages and get a different prospective was worth the price of admission. It allowed me a chance to see how the other half was living, so to speak, and, more importantly, to get out my virtual measuring stick and see how we were stacking up.

I please to report, that we (you, me, our beloved horse country) are doing just dandy, thank you very much.