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IF YOU DON'T ASK, YOU DON'T GET

One of the most valuable lessons I learned about marketing happened at the Copacabana Club on East 60th Street in New York City. In the 1990s, the club had re-opened and was renting its space to business groups at lunchtime. Naturally, the New York component of SMPS began to hold its regular monthly meetings there. Well, why not?

One month, the speaker was one of those inspirational types who usually make me antsy, but I was a good trooper. I wasn't alone: He attracted a total of 11 tables with ten seats each.

Once on stage, our speaker asked casually if each of us had a dollar bill, and if so, would we hold it up? Some had no singles, only 5's, 10's, or 20's. "That's okay," he reassured them.

He instructed us to put our bills in the center of the table, and he asked one of the members to go around the room to collect each pile. When he came to our table, ten hands went down to protect the cache; no way was he getting *our* money. “That’s okay,” the speaker repeated, in the same calm voice.

He then asked our colleague to bring him the wad of bills. A hundred singles, plus, makes a substantial fistful of money. He held it up high. And then he said something remarkably obvious: “If you don’t ask, you don’t get.”

The short of it is that he returned the money after lunch. I have always thought he should have kept the money: It would have been a cheap price for a very important principle.

How many businesses suffer because their principals haven’t asked for something? Perhaps a higher fee that would give the firm some breathing room? A change in the consulting team that would avoid a conflict or raise the quality of the work? Better terms on reproduction services for marketing materials? An evergreen contract?

In 1997, our client Taliesin Architects designed a “Dream House” for the May issue of *LIFE* magazine. This comfortable home – rather, six versions of a home that would be site-specific in the best traditions of “Organic Architecture” – was the design of the great Frank Lloyd Wright apprentice John Rattenbury.

R. Nicholas “Ryc” Loope, then at the helm of Taliesin Architects, had previously invited me to work with him on a marketing and public relations strategy for the firm, including this wonderful project. Ryc had a Dream House built in secrecy in the Rockies, so there was something real to photograph. An outstanding editorial staff that really understood the design intent completed the article, and both the artwork and the shoot were excellent. The issue of *LIFE* was all but wrapped up, and Taliesin Architects was to have the cover.

But then *LIFE* decided to lead with a story about children who suffered from asthma and allergies. I would argue that a gorgeous house priced so it was available to most people would be a more appealing cover. Obviously, *LIFE* magazine disagreed. So, we lost the cover.

By then, we knew the *LIFE* people fairly well. Our materials to promote both the May issue and sales of the house plans didn’t depend on our providing the cover, but having it would have helped the campaign immeasurably. With nothing to lose, I asked the *LIFE* people if they would give us the right to use the cover that didn’t happen – possibly my wildest request ever.

If you don’t ask... And, yes, the good folks in the art department made 100 copies for us. Our very own use of the famed *LIFE* logo!

One personal anecdote to demonstrate this principle: Not long ago, my family was in Bogotá for a wedding. Everything was enchanting – including a foot-tall, “pre-Colombian” amphora that graced the console in the vestibule of our hotel floor. As we were waiting for the elevator to leave for home, I commented that I would really miss the piece, which had the delicious shape of a chubby, small man. Then I sighed and went to check out.

My daughter, Lauren, who has often heard the Copacabana anecdote, taunted me: “Mother, if you don’t ask, you don’t get.” Won’t work, I crisply told her; no hotel sells its artwork.

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Still, my credibility was at stake, so I asked. The front desk parried, but one of our family members vigorously supported my request in rapid-fire Spanish. After a few minutes of this and, let it be said, a legitimate payment, the head housekeeper graciously had the statuette boxed for the trip to the States. Today “*Señor Si No Preguntas, No Recibes*” sits at my desk, a captivating reminder of a lovely trip and also the usefulness of speaking up.