

The Business of Rotary Youth Exchange

Al Kalter

Multidistrict Youth Exchange Chair

It is my privilege today to turn your focus to one of Rotary's most visible, most personal, and most successful programs, Rotary Youth Exchange.

In many districts throughout the world, Rotary Youth Exchange is an ongoing effort that involves some of the most dedicated Rotarians, individuals who are motivated by their belief in young people and who take great pride in providing teenagers with unique experiences while truly breaking down barriers between countries. Rotary Youth Exchange is, for so many Rotarians, a labor of love. But today we're going to look at it from another angle. With all the paperwork, all the governmental and organizational requirements, and all the effort required to keep this program going each year, Rotary Youth Exchange is more than a project, more than a program. So let us explore together the business of Rotary Youth Exchange.

It's safe to say that businesses are composed of several elements, components like ideas, investors, suppliers, customers, products, and marketing. How do these apply to Rotary Youth Exchange? Well, let's start at the top.

The ideas behind Rotary Youth Exchange include helping cultures to learn about each other, bringing the world into our schools and communities, and opening up the world to our citizens. It provides us with an opportunity to invest in our young people and, in a very direct and personal way, to promote Rotary's goals of international understanding and peace. Perhaps a mission statement would be appropriate, and for that, we turn to Past RI President Carl-Wilhelm Stenhammar.

When President Carl-Wilhelm was asked why he felt that Rotary Youth Exchange was so important, he responded by saying: "One of our goals is to create peace and better understanding between people. I think Rotary's Youth Exchange program is the best way of doing that. My dream is for every 17 year old to become a Youth Exchange student. If we could achieve this, there would be no more wars."

So it is clear that the ideas behind the Youth Exchange business are truly the ideals of Rotary. What about the other components?

We believe that there are two groups of investors. The first group is the parents, who, after all, are usually the ones who write the checks. But you district governors are also investors, providing financial and organizational support for the program.

Our suppliers are the districts and clubs that provide students to us, who go into schools and promote the program, and then interview and prepare those students for the opportunity that awaits them.

Our customers, in turn, are the districts and clubs that will host our students. Some of you may be surprised at this definition, because it's easy to think that the students are our customers. But that line of thought turns Youth Exchange officers into little more than travel agents. If our ideas are truly to promote international understanding and peace, then our efforts must be continuous, year after year, and we must strive to satisfy our customers — our exchange partners — so that we can continue to do business with them, year after year.

And that brings us to our products, which are, in fact, the students. These are the products that we provide to our customers and receive from our suppliers. These are the products that we hope will help us fulfill our goals and on which we focus our energies.

Those energies define our marketing efforts, in the way that we select and prepare our products to be as good as they can be. It's not uncommon in business — and rather obvious in our scenario, but worth remembering — that our suppliers, our exchange partners around the world, are also our customers. And so both of us must strive to provide the best products possible in order to keep our business relationships strong. So let's take a closer look at those products.

Our products come out with new models every year. They are bright and shiny, and they often consume a lot of fuel. These products are exported all over the world, and they're imported too. In many places, especially in the United States, we've noticed a bit of a trade imbalance, with imports outnumbering exports. In fact, I must admit, the imports are often of better quality than the exports. And it's true that our exports often have features that are not well suited for the international marketplace. What does it sound like our product might be?

We can now move on to establishing our position in the market and how our product should be branded. It's important for any business to create a recognizable brand, something that defines the identity of the product, an image that breeds familiarity and respect. But even a well-promoted, well-designed brand is still only as good as the product it represents, right? Does anyone recognize that logo at the bottom of this slide, the round one with the big "E"? Not exactly a success story, as most of you will remember.

If we want a strong brand and a strong product, we need to ask what our customers would prefer. Perhaps it would be a top-of-the-line model, one with high performance, lots of features, and quality service. This type of product assures a positive experience and generates pride of ownership, leading to repeat customers. Or we could offer a mid-range model. It's OK, not very exciting. Our customers might well look somewhere else next time. It could be less work for us to offer a low-end model, I suppose. Then our customers would be faced with high maintenance expense and an overall bad experience. They might actually be embarrassed to admit ownership and certainly would not come back for repeat business. So, which model do you think our customers would want? And which model would we want to receive from our suppliers?

How about the one that carries this brand? It's a brand that has been enriched by decades of strong performance and is recognized and respected throughout the world. Perhaps it's a brand that your district trades in as well and, if so, we congratulate you for those efforts.

To become more familiar with our product, we'd like to take you on a short test drive. The route for our test drive will be the website of our program, Rotary Youth Exchange Florida, and the journals from our inbound and outbound students. Those journals give us an intimate look at the Youth Exchange experience, so let's get started.

First, I'd like you to meet Chelsea King, who spent her exchange year in Japan. In one of her journals, Chelsea wrote: "My classmates ask why Japan, and I say I wanted to live an adventure, and they say, I am afraid of adventures, don't you miss home? And I say, no, for home will always be there, the USA will always be there, and a chance like this will not always be here.

"I have about 48 days left until I go back to America, and I don't even want to think about it. I have a farewell speech to give, but sometimes I wish I could forget how to say the word good-bye. It's just going to be so hard for me. I have just really grown to love Japan and all the people that I have gotten to know over these nine-plus months. I suppose that is how all exchanges go, but I have really enjoyed mine and hope to make the most out of the last 48 days I have to make happy memories with."

Here is Tajah Schroff, who went to Ecuador. She wrote: "Hector gave another introduction speech, explaining the role of the medicine man in a society, his duties and responsibilities, his training. Domingo then lit the fire in the middle of the hut and rolled a couple of cigar-type things. One by one, we took our seat on the chair in the middle, and Domingo performed the

traditional cleansing ritual on us, brushing us with a small bunch of leaves and blowing smoke down our backs and around our faces.

“With every hug from a family member, every outing with friends, every kind word or encouragement, I create a new voice, one that says that even though my time here will end, my impact here never will. I might be gone, but I am sure taking a part of the heart of every person that I have met here with me when I go, and I’m leaving behind a million parts of my own.”

Next, please meet Mike Williams, who was an inner-city kid living with his grandparents when Rotary Youth Exchange changed his life. He wrote: “Believe it or not, I think I am enjoying myself more on this farm [in Italy] than I ever have in the city. Maybe the smell is affecting my mind, or maybe I’m just having the time of my life.

“Now I have a new feeling in my soul, I am not sure if I know exactly what that is. It’s a strange feeling, unlike anything I’ve ever felt before. One day I will wake up, and it will be July 14th, the day I come home. And then I have to say goodbye to it all — my families, my new friends, my new life. I don’t wanna go home. If you ask me, I feel as if I am already home.”

Here is Jacob Dobbs, who was hosted in Phuket, Thailand, when the tsunami struck in December 2004: “Now, as I write this report, the death toll climbs to about 70,000. Yesterday I spent the entire day at city hall, where over 30 representatives of embassies from around the world tried to help the victims fix their passport or money problems and send them straight to Bangkok. The area was filled with boards of fliers with the faces of missing loved ones, and a large hospital board posted pictures of people that were too mangled to recognize. I was an English-Spanish-Thai translator for the tourists, basically escorting people through the whole process of getting enough paperwork done to get sent back to their countries.”

Next, meet Matt Hagler, born and raised in Jacksonville, Florida. We sent him to northern Siberia. “After the play ended, our group of five went to a nearby cafe. We were constantly being watched, since we also represented five different countries. After all, one foreigner in Yakutsk is unreal enough, but five means we must have been banished here.

“The raw horse didn’t taste so strange anymore. It wasn’t much different than reaching into a bag of potato chips or popcorn; doubts only arose in me after seeing the occasional purple vein emerging from a chunk of the frozen meat.”

This is Hannah Klein, who spent her exchange year in Japan: “I’ve been having amazing, out-of-this-world experiences in my beloved Japan. I might say out of this world, but in this period of time, Japan has become nothing but my world. It’s the only place I can picture myself in. Being with my friends, forgetting my English, chatting under the *sakura*, representing my school in kyudo competitions, reading Harry Potter and understanding some of the kanji. It’s everything I’ve waited my whole life to find.

“There are no thanks great enough to give Rotary for what you’ve given me. Thank you, Rotary, for making me a citizen of the world. You’ve helped to provide me with the confidence, knowledge, and love that I know will last a lifetime. If there’s one thing I aspire to be, it’s a Rotarian, so that I can make this experience possible for other kids like me looking for a home in a country where they don’t belong.”

Finally, let’s circle back to Mike Williams, who wrote: “I get it now. I understand what this program is all about: understanding. An exchange never ends, it continues forever, because the only thing guaranteed in life is change, the only thing to satisfy change is understanding, and the only way to truly achieve understanding is adaptation. Rotary gives you an opportunity to *witness* change in understanding through adaptation, firsthand. And that is truly a miracle. That is how and why world peace can be achieved. We are all so different, yet so alike, that it is actually possible to change the world, one person at a time, one year at a time. So, whose turn is it next?”

Ladies and gentlemen, the answer to that question is truly in your hands.

With your help and support, and with the realistic vision and goal of promoting international understanding and peace, I am proud to tell you that Rotary Youth Exchange is open for business, and I hope we can count on every one of you as investors in this program and in the future.