

By Dave Swinfen

FACE TO FACE

The relentless drive of capitalism would seem to be diametrically opposed to the Buddhist way of doing things, but Fred Tibbitts Junior, a global Wine and Spirits Consultant for national account hotel and restaurant chains based in Bangkok and New York, has managed to build a successful business without contradicting his Buddhist beliefs. Director magazine gets the low-down.

WHO IS FRED TIBBITTS

Fred Tibbitts spent nearly eleven years with Joseph E. Seagram & Sons in New York City, climbing to the rank of Director of Sales-East, National Accounts for the U.S. before moving to Kobrand Corporation as Director of National Accounts for the U.S. After self-studying Tibetan Buddhism for five years, he asked for "Refuge", the formal ceremony to become a practising Buddhist, and shortly thereafter he was accepted as a member of the Karma Triyana Dharmachakra Buddhist Monastery at Woodstock, New York.

After the 1997 Asian crash, Tibbitts set-up his own National Accounts wine & spirits consulting business in Asia, a service that proved much in demand among the global hotel chains with Division offices in the region. His annual "FTA" industry dinners have proved very successful from Beijing to Bangkok to Mumbai, bringing together the hospitality industry to recognize excellence, provide scholarships for worthy students and to make charitable contributions to UNICEF and the National Elephant Conservation Center at Lamphang.



Do you introduce yourself to new clients as "The American Buddhist", or are you more 'hushed' regarding your beliefs?

While it is true that I often refer to myself as a "Buddhist", as people pay far more attention to your actions than your words, I prefer to do my best each day to be an example for others of the core Buddhist beliefs of cultivating an open heart and focusing on serving others, rather than myself. This I feel is what is most important.

Is it something that you feel differentiates you from others within the industry, and does this give you any competitive advantage?

Along the way I have met many westerners who are Buddhist, but admittedly none who are practicing Buddhists in wine and spirits consulting like myself. I suppose this is because many Buddhists do not consume alcohol. One finds lots of Buddhists in the industry at the local distributor level, but not generally at the Asia Pacific division level. As for a "competitive advantage", the label of "Buddhist" means something different to everyone, so in some cases I suppose it is a positive reference of my core values.

How can you compare the way you handle pressure situations, problems and solutions now, as opposed to how you may have done in the past before discovering Buddhism?

When you dedicate your life to serving others, you are always focused on the importance of making a difference for those who can't do it without your assistance, so even the slightest of details become a priority for you. And whenever I am in doubt of the importance of anything, I simply apply a tried and true Buddhist approach that always brings everything into perfect perspective; I ask myself, if I knew this was my last day in this life, would this be important to me? The answer is almost always "No".

Is there a place for Buddhism within the Western business world?

Of course. The Buddhist philosophy is often considered "science of mind", encouraging serious practitioners to focus on the needs of others; of living with an open heart and

avoiding what the faith considers the most common causes of unhappiness. Anyone who genuinely accepts all others with an open heart is far more likely to be welcomed and appreciated by others, which is a wonderful basis upon which to build meaningful "win-win" business relationships. There is nothing wrong with succeeding in business; the key is to share one's good fortune with one's associates.

How do you think your clients (or potential clients) perceive you in general? Does this differ with how you'd like to be perceived?

As I am fairly well-known around the world in my niche, my reputation generally precedes me. Since my reputation is generally pretty positive, it's a plus going into most new situations. But since nobody is liked or appreciated by everyone, I just continue to practice calm compassion in an open, honest and direct manner. Once others see that I am being transparent with good intentions, they generally return the favour, which I find to be a most agreeable way to do business.

Are there certain areas in which you still falter or would like to improve?

Well, since none of us is perfect, myself included, I know that I will often fall short of my daily intention to be compassionate, practice selflessness and focus on service to others, especially those less fortunate. So, I just do the best I can; recognizing where and when I fall short and re-dedicate myself to doing better in the future. I have found Buddhism helps me rather than hinders me in my business.

What would you say to others in order to convince them to conduct business in a more careful or socially responsible way?

My best advice is to approach one's business exactly as one would approach all other aspects of one's existence; to be compassionate with all others, to be open, honest and direct at all times, to know that happiness is within and not dependent on having a person or thing as our possession; that inclusion, rather than exclusion is a far more peaceful way of life, and that if we don't take ourselves too seriously, we might just find happiness. "Peace" is something so many of us are always seeking, but never achieving.