

StoreWars in Philadelphia

PROGRESSIVE GROCER'S market-simulation game had retailers acting aggressively in the City of Brotherly Love.



Inside the war zone: Combatants at StoreWars/Philadelphia wanted to learn, but, more importantly, they wanted to win! Top (l. to r.): The group is introduced to a new world of competition; Kristen Simon and Mike Drexler of Giant absorb intelligence along with ACNielsen's Melissa Basile and Dannon's Harry Buskirk; Giant's Michael Knight, Dan McCullough, and Craig Kreider write a battle plan for Manufacturer 3. Middle (l. to r.): Simon and Drexler in Retailer 2's command center; Giant's Ed Sheedy and Steve Fanion set prices for Foodies and Woodies; Sheedy with Giant's Karen Brassel. Bottom (l. to r.): Giant's Bob Serafin, Gary Wagner, and Todd Patti; interest is high as final results are announced; the victorious Retailer 1 team.

It's 6 o'clock on a summer's evening in the lobby of the Radisson Warwick Hotel in Philadelphia, and guests saunter through on their way to cocktails and dinner. But up in a corner of the balcony level, the work day carries on. Giant Food Stores category manager Karen Brassel and Kraft sales executive Dan Shiner are hunkered over a presentation, honing a deal for a retail account. A passerby interrupts the intent duo and asks if they work this hard at their real jobs.

"We don't think this much at work," replies Brassel.

"We don't work as many hours," adds Shiner.

Be forewarned. If you plan to take part in PROGRESSIVE GROCER'S StoreWars event, leave the golf clubs home and be ready for four days of hard-nosed business competition. StoreWars—a market simulation game invented by a French business school professor and pioneered in the workplace by Unilever in Europe—is not your average talking-heads-and-cocktail-receptions business conference. That was quickly determined by executives from Ahold's Giant of Carlisle division and representatives from supplier companies at StoreWars/Philadelphia.

Participants were assigned to one of two retailer teams that operate

stores in the mythical lands of Oland and Limburg or to one of three manufacturer teams that market competing lines of Foodies (a food product) and Woodies (a cleaning product). The opening session spelled out the game and the market conditions, and teams adjourned behind closed doors to map their business plans.

Marathon sessions

Day Two was a morning-to-late-evening marathon of strategy sessions and business meetings in which manufacturers plied retailers with trade deals and new product introductions. Deals were struck and put on paper

and then were filed with the conference managers, who fed the data into a computer program. Though game play officially ceased by 10 p.m., competitors were overheard continuing to hammer out deals at the hotel bar until the wee hours.

Market share and financial results from the first day of competition were revealed to the group on the morning of Day Three, along with some lectures on strategy. Then it was back to the rooms to adjust strategies and cut more deals. The manufacturer and retailer teams with the best overall results were declared winners on Day Four, but all involved appeared better off for the week's effort—most especially Giant Food Stores.

"There are not a lot of training programs out there for retail category managers, but StoreWars was an ideal opportunity to help improve the performance of our people while they were under the fire of making decisions," said Giant s.v.p. of non-perishables Michael Knight. "It's like a laboratory in which you can put people in stressful situations, where they have only half an hour to make a decision. You can see how creative people can be. Sometimes, when they are around senior management, they may be too cautious. But the way this program is designed, there's too much to do to be reserved."

Suppliers taking part in the Philadelphia program got a first-hand look at the problems faced daily by retailers. "The program promotes cross-tactical understanding. Manufacturers may play retailers in the game, and they see what goes on in their decision-making processes," said program director Hope Mandel, who has run numerous StoreWars sessions in Europe. "Our software model is based on real world situations."

For information about sponsoring or attending a StoreWars session, please contact PROGRESSIVE GROCER publisher Judith Princz at jprincz@progressivegrocer.com. ■