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Tuesday, July 5, 2005

If you build it ... well, it might work



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The American Film Institute's recent list of 400 memorable film quotes included some with obvious links to business -- the "greed is good" speech from "Wall Street," the "show me the money!" exhortation from "Jerry Maguire."

It also included what may be the greatest motivational speech in history: Bluto Blutarsky rallying the demoralized Deltas in "Animal House": "Over? Did you say over? Nothing is over until we decide it is! Was it over when the Germans bombed Pearl Harbor? Hell no! And it ain't over now!"

The list excluded a personal favorite, one that serves as a warning to investors and consumers alike. In "My Little Chickadee," an obvious greenhorn takes a seat at a poker table in a Western saloon and inquires innocently, "Is this a game of chance?"

Replies W.C. Fields, "Not the way I play it."

But one movie quote that did make the list has transcended the status of simply being memorable; in fact it has moved beyond cliché stage and embedded itself firmly in the national lexicon.

"If you build it, they will come."

Actually that's not quite the way the quote reads in the 1989 movie "Field of Dreams," or in the W.P. Kinsella novel, "Shoeless Joe," on which the movie was based. In its original form it was, "If you build it, he will come."

But the phrase, in its altered form, has taken on a new life and meaning of its own.

Examples of its use abound. A letter to the editor of the Highline Times recently used the phrase in discussing the proposed Burien Town Square. In a Business Week article, former WebVan head George Shaheen says the company failed because "it was conceived under the belief that if you build it, they will come."

An Issaquah City Council member, quoted recently in the King County Journal on the subject of a bypass, offered his own variation: "People say that if we don't build something they won't come."

Type "if you build it they will come," exactly that phrase, in quotes, into Yahoo! and you'll get 212,000 hits.

"If you build it ..." is the modern equivalent of "build a better mousetrap and the world will beat a path to your door" (Ralph Waldo Emerson), "supply creates its own demand" (Say's Law) and "rain follows the plow" (the promotional message used to recruit settlers to the Great Plains). It embodies the notion that some ideas have a market just waiting for them to be made reality.

But it can also be used as a handy refutation to ideas that have been financed and turned into reality more on the basis of faith and hope than realistic expectations. For many, "If you build it ..." carries as much validity as "the rain follows the plow."

"If you build it ..." appears to have been the working economic model, for example, for both the monorail and that rolling traffic obstruction otherwise known as light rail.

It's not always a flawed idea. It works, for a while at least, with baseball stadiums; witness the healthy attendance figures the Seattle Mariners have racked up in their tenure at Safeco Field.

The operative phrase, of course, being "for a while." Once the initial glitziness of the ballpark, the shopping mall or the transit system wears off, is there enough content or utility to sustain interest? How will attendance at Safeco Field look after multiple years of bad baseball?

Ken Carbone of the New York-based design and branding agency Carbone Smolan has addressed museums on this subject with a symposium entitled "If You Build It, Will They Come?" His thesis: Some institutions get so infatuated with the dazzling architecture of a new building that they neglect to figure out how they'll get people to come back once they've seen the building. In an article posted on the firm's Web site, Carbone refers to a local institution to which, in its original incarnation, they didn't come -- the Bellevue Art Museum.

"There's no guarantee (that a new building) will yield ongoing success," he says. His advice is to "build a great institution first and a great building second."

As for why the phrase works so well in so many applications, including his symposium, Carbone says: "It's easy for people to put that together. It's an easy phrase to apply."

Which is one reason why there's not likely to be any letup soon in the use of "if you build it. ..." Another reason, and one particularly important in a time when this region is discussing big-ticket projects, is that it raises some useful skepticism. "If you build it they will come" should always be answered with, "How do you know?"

And the answer had better come back as something more substantial than the rationale given in the movie: "Because a voice in my head told me they would."

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