

# The Wonder

by Steve Barkley with Terri Bianco



## A Simple Concept Brings Quality, Pizzazz to Learning

In 1994, Tom Peters published *The Pursuit of WOW*, a book aimed at helping businesses become more innovative. The proof of exceptional customer satisfaction, he noted, was when the product or service elicited a “WOW!” or “wow” from customers—whether in amazement or in awe.

Peters discovered examples of quality that met his growing criteria for WOW. Among them was how Southwest Airlines defined itself in

the marketplace as a personality seeking to amuse, surprise, and entertain its passengers. Also meeting the criteria was how General Motors took relationship marketing to new levels when it threw a “homecoming hoedown” for its 30,000 customers who bought Saturns. He also related how the University Bank & Trust of Palo Alto, California, offered customers free shoe shines, balloons for their children, and a huge bag of Walla Walla onions every August.

I began to look for WOWs in my own comings and goings. Entering a restaurant one evening, two people assigned to open the door greeted me as I approached. They smiled and said, “Welcome!” From this experience, I envisioned greeters at a middle school as students approached the door. When I checked into my hotel late one night, I was handed two, hot, chocolate chip cookies. Wow! I wondered, *do kids ever feel this good at school?*

It occurred to me as I flew around the country to various school sites that there was a dearth of WOW experiences in schools. And by WOW, both Peters and I mean many things, chief among them quality. Where is there a quality experience in schools? What do educators do to elicit a WOW from students? How could we put more of a WOW in learning?

## WOWing Students on the First Day

I know that students learn when something is relevant and meaningful to them—when something hooks them and sparks their interest to pay attention to what's next. I began looking for first-day-of-school experiences as an opportunity to pique students' interest so they would be eager to come back and enjoy their next year of school.

What I found disappointed. Most first-day-of-school events consisted of someone reading the rules, outlining what students can and cannot do. I was invited to a high school on the opening day where students came directly from their buses into a large auditorium. The principal welcomed them and went over the seven new regulations. He asked that they bear with him, as he wanted to cover each item in detail. Trust me, there wasn't a "wow" uttered in that auditorium that day.

I began searching for WOWS just as Diogenes held his lantern searching for an Honest Man. I wove the concept into my presentations about coaching or quality education, and I challenged teachers to come up with first-day WOWs and to let me know how they went.

## Here a WOW, There a WOW

Wow. I must have struck a chord. I began hearing about WOWs occurring everywhere. The unleashed

creativity of teachers and principals in first-day-of-school experiences resulted in lively, fun, meaningful WOWs that completely altered the first day of school in places throughout the country. They set the tone for the year. They released stress. They were fun. And they stimulated learning.

The introduction to a child development class for high school students in Clearview, New Jersey, saw students gathered in the main hall doing the hokey pokey. Other students lingered to see what the laughter was about. Later, the students showed others how to hopscotch or play with hacky sacks. What better way to learn about children than to play like them?

At an elementary school in Clewiston, Florida, students arrived to find a long, yellow, brick road fabricated on the walkway from the parking lot to the school entrance. On either side of it, teachers, staff members, custodians, the principal, and the assistant principal smiled and sang along with a loudspeaker blaring "Ease on down, ease on down, ease on down the roh-oad" from the musical *The Wiz*.

## A WOW Experience

What is this thing called WOW? It can be many things and take on many forms. The most important aspect of the WOW concept lies in its focus on gaining the positive attention of students (or teachers, staff members, parents, or other educators) to lead them to learning and to action.

An element of surprise is present in any WOW experience. There is enjoyment, excitement—a sense that "something's happening here." WOWs need not be complex and elaborate events destined to take up valuable resources and compete with past successes. Nor are they meant to serve as entertainment.

They have purpose and exhibit quality.

WOWs set the stage for something new, something worth paying attention to. First-day-of-school WOWs are designed to send a signal to those coming in that they are welcome, they are the focus, and the WOW is for them.

A vocational education teacher in Philadelphia enters the first day of class carrying an official-looking leather briefcase complete with handle and locking hasps. He sets the briefcase flat on the desk and begins talking to the students about the coming year in a droning monotone.

As the students' eyes begin to glaze over, the teacher abruptly stops and asks in a loud voice, "Why are you here?!" Students look to one another surprised at his shift in tone, some wondering why, indeed, they *were* there.



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The teacher then suddenly snaps open the briefcase. He tips it so that students can see that it is full to the brim with neat stacks of money—bundles of \$20 bills, each secured by a rubber band. The students gasp.

(Before you go out to rob a bank, know that this teacher used one of the oldest gangster tricks in the

thumb, grinning at the students who now are completely engaged and awestruck.

### School-Wide **Wows**

Teachers have a first day also. A new school year at Meadow Elementary School near Orlando, Florida, was beginning on a sour note. The

WOW concept to create an experience that would engage staff members for the entire year. In their two-week planning period before school started, Kendrick asked teachers to work through the year's planning using the theme "Get Aboard the Palmetto Train!" (in reference to the train in a nearby town). The teachers wove it into the curriculum, using a train whistle to signal successes and lend encouragement.

Yet Kendrick wanted a bigger WOW to really amp up teachers' motivation for the year. He arranged a surprise trip for the staff on a 19th-century historic train that slowly rumbled into the Orlando train station with a conductor leaning out the window calling "All abooaarrddd!" The amazed and delighted teachers boarded the train and, at 10 miles per hour, chugged up to Mount Dora, a town replete with antique shops and tearooms. During the trip, they relaxed, bonded, developed mutual goals, and became eager to steam ahead (nice!) in the coming school year.

**"WOW experiences signal to the brain that something new and exciting is happening. They prime the pump for learning."**

world. He placed a \$20 bill on the top of each bundle of cut-up newspapers that served as unseen filler.)

"Well," continues the teacher, smiling, "You're here because this is the kind of money you can earn if you are qualified in this program." He slowly leafs through a bundle with his

previous year, the school struggled to avoid a bad "grade" and did not succeed.

Confident in the school's ability to perform, yet conscious that the teachers felt challenged and suffered low morale, Assistant Principal Kevin Kendrick decided to use the

## WOWs from A to Z

Creating a WOW at the beginning of a school year leaves a strong impression. It sets the stage for the entire year. WOWs intrigue and motivate, and they establish a standard of quality. Start with quality, and you automatically develop a foundation from which you can operate.

WOWs can be simple or elaborate. They are designed to surprise, offer a quality experience, and serve a useful purpose:

- A. Welcome
- B. Indicate the year's theme
- C. Entice
- D. Segue to learning
- E. Create laughter
- F. Ease stress
- G. Indicate that school is a friendly place
- H. Create anticipation
- I. Eliminate doubts or fears
- J. Acknowledge
- K. Boost self-esteem
- L. Temporarily confuse
- M. Show acceptance
- N. Assure a sense of security
- O. Intrigue
- P. Activate brains
- Q. Trigger anticipation
- R. Involve the whole mind and body
- S. Start on a positive note
- T. Transform a learning space
- U. Prepare for a quality year
- V. Eliminate isolation
- W. Portray the big picture
- X. Make students proud of their school
- Y. Make students proud of themselves
- Z. WOW your students!