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Patron Saint of Everything

-BARBARA BRUEDERLIN

When Ed McNally, founder of Big Rock Brewery, is honoured with a Calgary Business Hall of Fame induction on November 5, the local business community will not only be giving a nod to the entrepreneurial prowess of the lawyer turned barley farmer turned beer magnate, it will also be celebrating the assurance that even when we run out of oil, we'll still have beer. And music.

That's because Big Rock Brewery plays an inordinately large role, for a small Canadian craft brewery, in arts sponsorship in Alberta, and increasingly throughout Canada. One could even argue that Big Rock is on the cusp of usurping government funding programs as a reliable benefactor to an

increasingly diverse list of artistic endeavours. “If you are involved in the arts, you definitely know Big Rock’s there,” agrees Jim Button, VP Corporate and Community Affairs for Big Rock Brewery, “because you can go from one festival to the next theatre group to the next concert all the way down. It’s the power of seeing something over and over again, and it’s way more effective than sponsoring just one charity.”

While corporate sponsorship is hardly unique, the manner in which Big Rock approaches its role as patron certainly is. Even though the Big Rock logo has a ubiquitous presence at sponsored events like the Juno awards and a myriad of folk festivals, the company’s forever evolving and fresh approach to arts sponsorship continues to ignite public imagination.

Part of this has to do with the distinct position that Big Rock Brewery took early on in its role as benefactor, of continually reinventing its community involvement while simultaneously upholding its grassroots mentality. When they aren’t stuffing compilation CDs featuring emerging musicians inside cases of Traditional Ale, the Big Rock marketing team are wrapping up hay bales to look like Grasshopper cans, or offering lecture series on topics as diverse as cricket sex and Rwandan genocide. When they aren’t feting amateur film makers at the annual Eddies, they are sending out Grasshoppin’ reporters to cover the country’s festivals, or tapping into every conceivable form of social media. “You have to be completely holistic,” Jim maintains, “You can’t just pick a channel and top-load it and expect it to reach people in any sort of meaningful way. You really have to be consistent in all that you do.”

This marriage of clever marketing with community advocacy has certainly captured public imagination and has firmly established Big Rock Brewery as both as brand and a benefactor. According to Jim Button, there is nothing particularly magical or complicated about the manner in which the brewery has managed remain fiercely loyal to the farming community from which it arose, while carving out a niche in the arts community as guardian angel of the coffers, and spearheading forward-thinking and novel marketing strategies. It’s simply all part of the vision of founder, Ed McNally.

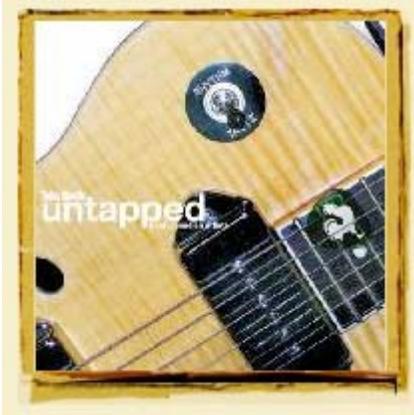
“Ed is Big Rock, Big Rock is Ed, the two are tightly wound,” Jim explains. “You see it in the community support (which comes from his days as a farmer), you see it in the humour of the marketing and you definitely see it in the quality of the beer. His vision during these difficult economic times is invaluable. His ability to see long term trends is quite powerful.”

Of course there were many who questioned Ed McNally's vision in the beginning. In 1984, the idea of brewing premium craft ale in a province of lager drinkers, at a time when the Alberta economy was wallowing in the depths of an oil industry bust, must have seemed madness. But with the backing of loyal friends and family and the staunch resolve that it was criminal not to brew quality beer in a province that grows some of the finest malt barley in the world, Ed McNally began to systematically fit the pieces of his dream into place.

The notion of arts sponsorship began very organically. Jim Button reflects that in all likelihood "someone would have approached Ed and said 'I have an event, can you give me some beer' and that person would have received some beer and either given it to his volunteers or sold it at a profit. That's essentially how Ed would have started sponsorship, just giving beer to somebody. He wouldn't have had cash."

That's a significant part of how Big Rock continues to sponsor events to this day, despite the fact that the brewery actually needs to buy the beer back from the Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission before they can donate it to an event. "Nobody realizes this," Jim laughs. "They just figure there's no value to anything you are giving away; you're just giving away beer!"

Much of the arts sponsorship that Big Rock Brewery undertakes comes not in the form of events per se, although they are certainly involved in corporate sponsorship of some of the big ones, like the Junos. Rather, the brewery focuses on a hands-on and a hand-up approach to supporting individual artists. The Untapped Compilation CD promotions of the past two years have given emerging Canadian musicians a chance to vie for inclusion on a compilation disc. Not only are 50,000 copies of the CD distributed across the country in cases of beer and at swishy events like the Junos, the chosen musicians also receive promotional support from the brewery for one year. As a craft brewery in a world of big industrial brewers, Big Rock identifies with the struggles of emerging musicians to have their voices heard. "It is difficult for us to get noticed and we see this same challenge with artists and empathize with their plight," Jim explains. "The music industry is fast moving and is ruled by big labels. We hope that Big Rock Untapped can give them that one step that really moves their career along."



“It’s been a good run with those folks ... absolutely,” declares Ryan McMahon, an indie musician from BC who has been enjoying Big Rock promotional support since having a single included on this year’s Untapped.

If Untapped is a promotional tool designed to give rising musicians the exposure they so clearly need to succeed in the tough world of independent music, the Big Rock Eddies are pretty much on the opposite end of the spectrum. Clearly a trendsetter with respect to consumer generated media, the Eddies are perhaps the best demonstration of the word of mouth mentality and public inclusiveness which drives so much of Big Rock’s good neighbour persona.

The Eddies, now famous for the over-the-top gala which celebrates the best in consumer-produced Big Rock commercials, came into being 16 years ago when Ed McNally was approached by a television advertising salesman who claimed he could help him sell a lot of beer. But the notion of paying the outrageous production costs which were quoted did not sit well with Ed, who instead turned to consumers and invited them to make some commercials. He would rent a theatre for an evening, give out some prizes, and everybody could have a few laughs. The outcome, as Jim Button recounts, was that “on the night of the Eddies, Ed was standing at the Uptown theatre in his tuxedo and waiting for people to show up and he was nervous and said ‘oh my god what have I done.’ And then people started showing up. Showing up in limos, all dressed up. Ed always credits the success of the Eddies with the beer drinkers and the beer sellers, not himself. They were the ones who made it a success. He says ‘I didn’t think about people renting limos and getting all dressed up, I was just going to show some beer commercials.’”

Of course consumer generated media campaigns are now quite common and there have been some spectacular failures in recent campaigns, such as the Chevy Tahoe endeavour which, despite all the tools being provided for people to make commercials, resulted in countless ads that were highly

critical of both the Tahoe and the Chevy brand. “Big Rock, on the other hand, doesn’t help much at all,” says Jim. “As a matter of fact we do very little for them. But still people make very positive and funny ads for us ... because they like the brand and what we stand for.”

People of course support companies and brands who share their values. Big Rock’s image is akin to that of your neighbour who brings over a case of beer and stands in your kitchen to share one with you. There’s an authenticity to the corporation’s virtual shrug of the shoulders and accompanying statement “we’re just beer” that people appreciate and support.

Recently, Mike Peterson from Fresh Dog Productions followed five groups of filmmakers around, documenting the hours that go into producing a Big Rock Eddie commercial. “And for what?” asks Jim, a trifle incredulously. “Just for the fun of it, the opportunity for fame and fortune. But that’s an awful lot of hours without any pay, and so you’ve got to have somebody who’s really engaged with your brand, who really cares an awful lot, to put that sort of effort in.” There’s some prize money, of course, but mostly there’s the reputation that the Big Rock Eddies Gala has garnered as being the red carpet highlight of the year. That and the karma points which come from being part of a gala that annually raises more than \$50,000 for women’s shelters and performing arts groups.

Big Rock Brewery stays ahead of the curve by zagging when everybody else zigs. While other breweries fight for sports sponsorships, they would rather focus on the arts and education. One of the most popular events that Big Rock has sponsored over the past ten years has been a lecture series. With four different lectures held each semester, featuring such diverse topics as cricket sex, sleep apnea, Victorian theatre, and knee pain, and each paired with drinks and dinner at the brewery, these lectures sell out remarkably fast. The proceeds all go into scholarships for University of Calgary students, from a wide range of disciplines, who don’t mind a little beer money to help them cope with rising tuition costs.

The lecture series were created, as Kathleen McNally-Leitch tells it, over a couple of pints of Traditional Ale she shared with her father, Ed, and Dan Mato, an art history professor at the University of Calgary and world expert on African Art. At the time Kathleen was working in the Art Department as a sessional lecturer, and she and Dan were both troubled by the number of top students who were struggling to pay tuition and juggle work and classes. “We knew we had a real resource in the professors at the University,” explains Kathleen. “We saw it as an opportunity to showcase the University and help students at the same time.”

Professor Mato is quick to point out that Kathleen and the rest of the McNally family have been loyal supporters of academia over the years. With nursing scholarships quietly being bequeathed to the University of Lethbridge and with Fine Arts at the University of Calgary also benefiting from their support, the McNallys have demonstrated their dedication to learning institutions. The same holds true for the lecture series. “Kathleen has in truth been the driving force in this since its start,” declares Dan Mato, “contacting profs, making up the posters, everything but pour the beer!”

“There is no *single* person who is responsible for the sell-out evenings,” Kathleen argues. “All the profs donate their time, Big Rock donates the space, the chef gives us a break on the meal cost, even the ladies at the door volunteer.” And the scholarship winners are invited to the evening to share a brief talk about their studies.

But if Big Rock Brewery is unobtrusive in the manner in which they bestow aid to post-secondary institutions, there is nothing inconspicuous about the Big Rock emblem that you’ve surely seen if you have ever driven across western Canada. You know what I mean – those big hay bales that are wrapped to look like beer cans. From the moment that Ed’s daughter, Shelagh, surmised, while driving home from his ranch one day, that two hay bales would make an excellent beer can if they were stacked on top of each other, these roadside monuments have had a powerful impact on the public’s imagination. “Farmers started contacting us and asking if they could put them on their farms,” Jim describes. There was such a demand for these cans that the brewery started a program whereby they now accept nominations for farmers who are “outstanding in their field”, with the winners awarded a hay bale to put on their land as a trophy.

The distinctiveness of these hay bale beer cans has almost made them a victim of their own success. Stories abound of thefts of these massive twelve foot tall cans, with vigilante crews being dispatched to steal them back, or farmers wrapping electrical cables, hooked up to solar panels, around their prized cans to discourage crooks.

“The program continues to tie us to our farming roots,” Jim explains. “To us each hay bale represents the hard work of our farmers and has presented an opportunity for us to meet them and thank them personally.”

The tie to the land remains integral to Big Rock’s philosophy. Even with all the big city interests like university lectures series and festivals, gala events and cd promotions, and a presence in all the social media, Big Rock remains fiercely loyal to the agricultural community and the concept of stewardship. With the implementation of a Sustainable Management Team in 2008, the brewery has been working

to reduce their environmental footprint through better energy management, transportation and material consumption. Through these efforts they have been able to reduce the amount of waste water produced by 35%. And as an embrace of the concept of “think global, drink local”, the brewery moved into the California market when someone recognized the pointlessness of produce trucks returning to California empty. So they started returning to the west coast filled with Alberta beer.

At the myriad of music festivals across the country at which Big Rock beer has such a ubiquitous presence, the brewery has made the switch to 100% corn-based compostable beer cups, even though the cost is significantly higher than plastic. It was a concept that was first introduced at the Calgary Folk Festival, where the brewery petitioned beer drinkers for their feedback on the practice. The overwhelmingly positive response also garnered a phone call from a festival patron, who pointed out that these corn cups emit methane while decomposing, necessitating specific composting facilities. So, specialized containers were built in which to collect the cups, to ensure that they would end up in proper facilities. In order to use these cups, festivals are now required to guarantee proper collection procedures.

If Big Rock Brewery was a person instead of a corporation, they’d be the sort of person that you’d want your son or daughter to marry, because they really would be the complete package. Good taste, lover of the arts, supporter of higher education, fine sense of humour, loyal to friends, and respectful of the earth – what more could you want? Oh yeah, smart with money. Big Rock’s got that covered too.

As is probably only fitting for a brewery which began during an earlier recession, Big Rock is weathering this incarnation of economic downturn admirably well. “Imports are down and domestic brands are flat or steadily decreasing,” Jim Button states, about the general health of the beer industry in the current economic climate. “The beer that is going up in sales is craft beer, up 12% over last year. European imports, on the other hand, are down because with this economic downturn people are drinking more at home, not going out to bars.” He surmises that people drink European import beers in bars mainly because “it’s a good beer to be seen with in your hands, poseur beer.”

The recession may have helped the sale of craft beers per se, but Jim surmises that this renewed attention to quality is part of a macrotrend that is larger than merely the current economic reality. “People are paying more attention to local, paying more attention to quality, caring more about what goes on in their body,” he says. And that’s a trend that marries very well with the Big Rock philosophy of localism, community, and pride in producing “some of the best beer on the planet using local ingredients that are also recognized as some of the best on the planet.”

With a visionary like Ed McNally at the helm, espousing the honest and pragmatic notion of “get the beer in their hands and they will drink it”, there have got to be more than a few struggling musicians, students, filmmakers, festivals, and theatre groups around who are comforted by the knowledge that Big Rock Brewery will still be supporting them through the next recession and the next one after that, even after the oil runs out.

***Photo 1 Courtesy of albertaventure.com, Photo 2 Courtesy of 2008 Untapped CD.*

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ACEFACE: PATRON SAINT OF EVERYTHING

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