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YOUR VOICE

Food for Thought yields dividends for Greenville

By Denise Lee Yohn

This is a column about love. I don't mean the touchy-feely romance between lovers love — nor the air-kiss-“you-look-mahvelous” social love. Rather, I mean love as a game-changer for business leaders.

Now, I have to admit my past approach to business has been better captured by the title of Tina Turner's song, “What's Love Got to Do with It” than by the Beatles' “All You Need Is Love.” I mean, I've understood that the powerful connection some people have with brands is a type of love — and I've always sought to serve my colleagues and my clients in a loving way. But I never really appreciated love as a driver of business — as a critical element at the highest level of business strategy and structure — until now.

My eyes were opened at the Food for Thought Conference, an event produced by Erwin-Penland, the full-service marketing agency based in Greenville. To call the

event a conference is really a disservice, though — it's an extraordinary 360-degree experience. It came closer to TED than any other gathering I've attended. World-class speakers, fine dining, inspiring venues, Southern hospitality, and once-in-a-lifetime activities filled the two and a half days I spent with 80 other attendees.

But, of all that Food for Thought gave me to enjoy, experience and think about, the most profound was love. I was challenged to think about how love changes the business of business. I realized that when businesses are grounded in love and when leaders love the people around them, the result is growth and goodness and success and strength — all the things that we aspire to in business.

Love has this incredible power because it enables risk-taking. Keynote presenter Dr. Geoffrey Canada credited love for the impetus for his creation, the Harlem Children's

GUEST COLUMN



Denise Lee Yohn of San Diego is an author and business consultant who has been teaching companies to grow their brands for over 20 years. Her clients include Sony, Frito-Lay, Burger King and Nautica.

Zone. Global clean water crusader Doc Hendley also credited love for moving him to action.

Leigh Anne Touhy, the inspirational woman played by Sandra Bullock in “The Blind Side” movie,

credited love for her family's incredible story. As she shared her personal Blind Side observations and advocated for serving the underserved, Leigh Anne showed herself to be a pull-no-punches kind of woman.

Her love for Michael wasn't some sentimental feeling that simply broke her heart — she took some major risks, crossing racial, cultural and emotional boundaries to love him. Leigh Anne explains the difference love makes, saying “Everyone has a blind side, but a loving heart always sees a path toward true charity.”

Of course, business is not about charity, but it is about filling real needs. To see and respond to the real needs of customers and employees requires love.

Love is powerful because it leads us to connect. Tiffany Shlain, Internet pioneer and acclaimed filmmaker, described the power of love as she introduced her new feature documentary, “Connected: An Autobiography

about Love, Death & Technology.”

These speakers' perspectives were only one of the ways I came to understand love's transformative power at Food for Thought. I also got to experience firsthand what love can do to a business community.

Joe Erwin, the founder and president of Erwin-Penland, loves the city of Greenville and has formed a powerful community of business leaders who promote Greenville as a great place to do business. The community includes leaders at the city's biggest organizations including BMW and Michelin, as well as local businesspeople like restaurateur Carl Sobocinski, and the owners of Fluor Field and the Greenville Drive — all of whom hosted the conference gatherings.

I've never seen a business community with such passion for their city and commitment to each other. Their love — demonstrated through mutual generosity, support and advocacy — yields divi-

dends in economic development, political power and cultural growth.

As attendees, we were showered with love by Chef Art Smith (executive chef and co-owner of Table Fifty-Two and Art and Soul restaurants) who served us a 5-course dinner after cooking lunch that same day for the Obamas and Oprah; John Ondrasik (Five for Fighting) who treated us to a private concert at the S.C. Governor's School, including his hit songs “Superman” and “World”; and by the Erwin-Penland team who executed all the little details of the conference flawlessly.

These weren't simply amazing experiences; they were examples of how love produces greatness. When people love what they're doing, they do it with excellence.

I'm so thankful for the opportunity to have participated in Food for Thought. Through it, I've become convinced that “All You Need Is Love” isn't just a song title, it's a mantra for business.