

# A Good Idea Goes Up In Smoke

Cigar Fest brings back old-time way of doing business.

Let's just start by saying Bill Capizzano and Mike Tieri are my kind of guys.

Capizzano is president of Chemcoaters (Gary, Indiana), which is one of the top suppliers of green coil coatings in the U.S. Tieri is Chemcoaters' director of sales and marketing.

A while back, the two were meeting with other Chemcoaters staffers to try to come up with ways to get their message across to current and prospective customers. We're sure they contemplated all the recent initiatives most companies are looking at—social media, etc.

But finally they settled on a way to meet with customers in a way that embodies good talk, good friends and great cigars ... thus was born Cigar Fest.

Capizzano and Tieri will routinely host 10 to 20 customers at a Casa de Montecristo in Countryside, Illinois, which promotes itself as a fine cigar and smoking lounge. The customers sit back and listen to updates from Chemcoaters on new products and services, have a great meal and work a fine cigar for an hour or so.

Translation: a corporate man cave.

"We might not be politically correct," Tieri says. "But we have a great time and it's a very productive session, as the interaction is just what we wanted."

It's harder these days to enjoy a fine cigar—and I most certainly do—than it has ever been in the U.S., and the reason is that cigars cause cancer just like cigarettes, and nearly all forms of tobacco have been banned from being consumed in most public places.

In fact, the Nebraska Supreme Court in December ruled that cigar bars and tobacco shop smoking was unconstitutional after an Omaha pool hall challenged the constitutionality of exemptions for such businesses to the Nebraska Clean Indoor Air Act.

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Imagine that: You can't smoke in a cigar store in Nebraska, or even a store that only sells cigarettes. Yes, we do need Uncle Sam to protect us from ourselves.

But we're assuming all is good in places like Casa de Montecristo

in Illinois, which is where Capizzano and Tieri decided to hold their Cigar Fest, as they call it, to spend quality time with the people who pay their salaries.

Tieri says the attendees engage in a lively exchange of topics relevant to the business world of the coating service center, as well as talk about the market conditions

and the future outlook for business development between service centers, their suppliers and their customers.

"The sessions conclude with an assortment of cigars and lively conversation," Capizzano says.

And we bet they do. This is how America's industrial manufacturing sector was born and raised, with adults sitting around drinking their favorite beverages and enjoying a fine Padron.

There is something to be said about putting your customers at ease, whether it be with a nice lunch or delicious dinner, maybe a baseball game or even a round of golf. Work gets discussed, friendships get renewed and a few Rocky Patels get burned in the process.

Tieri says the gatherings have been successful for Chemcoaters, and the customers seem to enjoy coming to them to network, chat and shoot the breeze.

"We have intentionally planned these events, so there's a good mix of small and large firms," he says. "Plus the service centers often bring their customers, so we gain that extra perspective on the market and we learn a lot about how to serve it better."

There may be other companies doing a similar thing around the country, but we haven't heard of too many who go out of their way to call it a Cigar Fest like the Chemcoater folks. And I'm sure neither Capizzano nor Tieri would continue to spend company money if it wasn't providing them the results that they wanted.

"Every session so far has yielded some great ideas for our customers and our company alike," Tieri says.

We're sure someone somewhere will say that the event is a bit neanderthal, that maybe those who don't want to partake in the cigars would feel out of place. But they don't need to stay for the smokes afterward; they can get their info and head out the door, the same way a non-golfer might not attend an outing, if they so choose.

But we'll hand it to Capizzano and Tieri for bringing a little life back into the customer get-togethers that so often turn stale and maybe include too much pressure selling. We'll even have to drop in the next time we're in Chicagoland.

"I never smoke to excess," Mark Twain once said. "That is, I smoke in moderation, only one cigar at a time." ■■



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