COLD OPPORTUNITY (B): THE ICEHOTEL STORY

Nils Yngve Bergqvist put down the phone in frustration. It was his fourth attempt to connect with Curt Nycander, the head of marketing for Absolut Vodka. The idea for a partnership with a liquor company had come from one of the ice artists, whose father ran Johnnie Walker Scotch whisky, a division of Diageo, an international corporation producing spirits, wine, and beer. But it turned out Johnnie Walker was not interested.

It was difficult to take the rejection without bitterness. Bergqvist tried to fight it by telling himself that aesthetically, culturally, and personally it was Absolut that he really wanted on board. To shake off his disappointment, he walked out toward the new ICEHOTEL (version 1993) taking shape along his beloved Torne River. The Arctic air outside was $-25^\circ C$ ($-13^\circ F$). When the construction was complete, the temperature inside the hotel would be a constant $-5^\circ C$.

Bergqvist had formulated and reformulated his ideas so ICEHOTEL would look like a “vision”:

The entire hotel is on loan from the mighty Torne River and is a place where time stands still. Just a short period before, fish swam in the water, and the river was a crashing torrent of whitewater, wild and frothing. And very soon, when the spring comes and then finally the summer, the rooms, the suites, the bar, the reception, in fact the entire creation, will once again become part of the rushing rapids coursing toward the sea.

Guests would sleep in sleeping bags on a bed of snow and ice on reindeer skins—and would be woken up in the morning with hot lingonberry juice.

Bergqvist realized it was a difficult sell. And what exactly was he selling anyway? He had only recently even come up with the name while groping for words to describe his vision to a journalist, who had heard some people had stayed in an igloo in Jukkasjarvi, 200 km inside the Arctic Circle. “Well,” he had said, “It is like…a hotel…an ice hotel.”
There was something powerful in the name. He felt it even more deeply than the cold in his bones. Just a few months earlier, he had not even imagined such a thing, and yet it now felt as though he had been heading toward the ICEHOTEL all his life. He remembered the first ice sculpture workshop/exhibition he had organized in Jukkasjarvi, 2 km into the Arctic Circle in the north of Sweden.

That weekend had begun beautifully, as the artists created sparkling sculptures from large blocks of ice cut from the frozen Torne River nearby. Monday brought rain, however, and Bergqvist saw the exhibit melt right before his eyes. “Eventually,” he recalled, “we were all led to one reaction: ‘What are we doing? We are trying to preserve something that belongs to nature. Let it be destroyed and make something new.’ So we invented that feeling that day.”

The spirit of the ICEHOTEL was born that day, although its name was yet to emerge. Instead of viewing the dark and cold elements of winter as disadvantages, Bergqvist treated the unique elements of the Arctic as assets.

In 1990, the French artist Jannot Derit was invited to hold an exhibition in a specially built igloo on the same frozen river. The 60-square-meter building, named Arctic Hall, attracted many curious visitors to the area. One night, a group of foreign guests, equipped with reindeer hides and sleeping bags, asked to use the cylindrical shaped igloo as accommodation. In the next three years, Bergqvist and the artists and engineers who worked with him began experimenting with larger, more elaborate igloos—and the ICEHOTEL became an increasingly central part of the annual experience for visitors to Jukkasjarvi. Now, Bergqvist was convinced that he could grow his venture this into a greater venture, if only he could get Absolut to share his conviction!

The Pitch to Absolut

Returning to his office, Bergqvist again reviewed the following ingredients in his pitch to Absolut:

- The cold, dark, long nights of Jukkasjarvi
- The pristine ice from the Torne River
- Artists from around the world sculpting against the backdrop of the Northern Lights
- The mix of curious and romantic adventurers who came to experience the Arctic
- The experience of sleeping in a spacious igloo guest room
- The happy couples who got married in an adjacent Ice Chapel
- A hotel that melted away every summer…and had to be built from scratch every winter
- The welcome fire of Absolut cocktails served in glasses made of ice
- “Here, have a drink in your ice…not ice in your drink…Skol!”
He went over possible reactions: Absolutely unnecessary? Sure, but that’s the beauty of it. Rather improbable? Perhaps, yet that is exactly the lure. Highly profitable? Certainly. Especially if they could find a way together to replicate the experience in other places. Anyway, what did Absolut have to lose by getting involved? Bergqvist simply could not see how the company could refuse to at least give it a shot.

But Absolut was not returning his calls, and he was left wondering what to do next.