

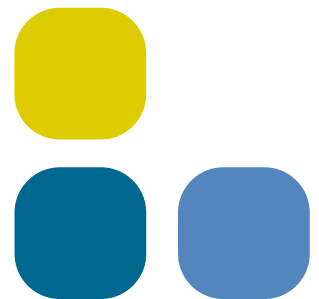
# Livin' It

Whirlpool's "The Real Whirled" program brings a touch of reality television to management training

by Amy Milshtein



Tony Barbee learned a few valuable lessons when he blew up his aptly named "crater cake." First, that the oven he used has a pretty good self-clean feature; secondly, that blowing up a cake doesn't ruin an oven's heating elements; and finally, don't use too small a pan when baking a "crater cake." The young people living and working at Whirlpool Corporation's "Real Whirled" house absorb these lessons and many more. When they graduate, these executives-to-be have lived it and learned it, and are ready to pass it on to others.



**Amy Milshtein** When not changing her 16-month-old's diapers or chasing her kindergartner in Portland, Ore., she folds laundry. When that's done she writes for trade publications on design and facility planning. Then she vacuums.

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The “Real Whirled” experience should sound familiar to anyone who has watched MTV’s *Real World* or CBS’s *Survivor*. Eight total strangers live and work together for eight weeks. The aim, however, is not to outwit, outplay, or outlast. Instead it’s more like wash, microwave, and soak up as much as you can about Whirlpool appliances and the technology embedded in each product.

A pretty intriguing set-up for a rather unsexy product, Whirlpool executives knew they had a great idea on their hands when five out of seven recent graduates were promoted within 18 months of finishing the program. “These young employees leave here super-charged,” says Jerry Fanslow, training experience manager. “They eat and breathe our products so when they go out to our trade partners they can really light a fire.”

Everyone who graduates from the “Real Whirled” leaves with the title of Market Brand Representative. Their job is to visit their trade partners, be it a Sears, Lowes, Best Buy, or any other retailer who carries the Whirlpool lines, and make sure the product is being represented correctly. This can

mean anything from providing literature to sales training. “I am an ambassador for Whirlpool,” says recent graduate Jackie Glossinger. “Everything I say is a powerful as a customer testimonial because I really have used the products.”

And use them they do. The Real Whirled-ers move into a big old house in Benton Harbor, Mich. They get up at six every morning and wait their turn for the bathrooms. After breakfast it’s off to the day’s work, be it a factory tour,



proposal training, or a cooking or laundry lab. “The labs are great,” remembers Rhandi Bobo. “For the fabric care test we stained white laundry bags with cola, coffee, and blueberry jam and then threw them into the wash. Sure enough the bags all came out white.”

The labs and the meetings in the seminar room always have visual

information to absorb, but it is the day to day living with Whirlpool products that gives these employees their extra edge. Glossinger, who worked as a customer care representative for Whirlpool before entering the program, knows first hand. “I had a big handle on the product information before this,” she says. “But there is only so much you can pick up from a manual or a two-day training seminar.”

So along with the labs, Real Whirled-ers prepare more than 900 plates of food, wash no fewer than 120 bags of laundry, and spend countless hours loading and unloading refrigerators, dryers, and dishwashers. Appliances are changed out every few weeks to expose participants to a wide range of products. This is an environment where individuals and the team are given the tools they need to learn as much as possible.

Michelle Watts thought a training program she completed for a previous company was the best, but was turned around. “That company injected a lot of excitement into their program,” she says. “But it was nothing like the hands-on intensity of this.” For instance, she learned about a hidden feature in a KitchenAid® product that she

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would have otherwise missed. "My favorite recipe for yeast-raised dinner rolls kept flopping. Then we found the oven's hidden dough-proofing feature. The rolls came out perfectly ever since."

Aside from intense product and sales training, the Real Whirled-ers benefit from the added bonus of honing their people skills. To keep everyone on the same professional page, the first day of the Real Whirled begins with a meeting with human resources. The eight participants sit down and set some ground rules, from how loud music can be to what days to do your laundry. Even so, relationships in that small, concentrated environment can get intense.

"Being tossed together with seven different strangers from seven different parts of the country can definitely bring tensions to a head," says Ryan Dyer. "But what better way to learn how to stay professional and better serve our different trade partners?" Of course, developing relationships has been a key goal of the Real Whirled from the beginning. "Participants graduate with close friends within the

company," says Fanslow. "A contemporary to call after hours to discuss techniques and problems can be invaluable."

Occasionally a Whirlpool executive will pop by for a home cooked meal and account executives from the trade partners will show up. These help put a human face on all aspects of the graduates' future job and take away some of the anxiety. But not all of it.



One of the "catches" of the Real Whirled is that graduates can be assigned to any area of the country. While Whirlpool makes a concerted effort to place them in first or second choice locations, the final destination remains unknown until the last week of the program. No matter where they



end up however, Real Whirled-ers bring the excitement that only living with and learning from a product can give.

"I never gave a second thought to appliances growing up," says Bobo. "We had a dishwasher in my house and all I could tell you about it is that it was white. Now when I go out to the field I have the same passion as a customer. I think every corporation should do something like this."