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Thomas Green: Power, Office Politics, and a Career in Crisis

Another long day at the office had drawn to a close. Thomas Green felt the pulsing in his temples that usually preceded a migraine. As he stepped outside Dynamic Displays' corporate headquarters in Boston, the brisk air made him catch his breath. It was now February 5, 2008. Green could not believe that in five short months his dream promotion had turned into a disaster. When Green had been promoted to his new position in September, he was a rising star. Now, he would be lucky to celebrate his one-year anniversary with the company. His boss, Frank Davis, had sent the division vice president, Shannon McDonald, two scathing emails criticizing Green's performance. Green and Davis had yet to see eye to eye on work styles or market trends. Tension had also risen when Green did not enthusiastically endorse the sales forecasts made by Davis. Green felt the forecasts were either overly optimistic or outright fabrications.

Before he left for the day, Green had reread the series of emails regarding his performance and was certain that Davis was setting him up to be dismissed. Davis's most recent email had made it clear to Green that his position as a senior market specialist was in jeopardy. He did not have much time to rectify the situation. McDonald had emailed a formal request to him that afternoon, asking for his perspective on his performance and how he was going to improve the situation. With this in mind, Green started his commute home and began to analyze what went wrong and what he could do to save his job.

Company and Industry Background

Dynamic Displays was founded in 1990 as a provider of self-service options to banks via Automated Teller Machines (ATMs). In 1994, Dynamic Displays launched a new division aimed at the travel and hospitality industry, and deployed their first self-service check-in kiosk for Discover Airlines. In 2007, Dynamic Displays' Travel and Hospitality Division had 60% market share with over 1,500 self-service kiosks in use at more than 75 airports. Customers included regional, national, and international airline carriers, as well as various hotels and car-rental agencies. Eighty percent of the Travel and Hospitality Division's 2007 revenue came from airline carrier clients, 15% from hotels,

HBS Professor W. Earl Sasser and Heather Beckham prepared this case solely as a basis for class discussion and not as an endorsement, a source of primary data, or an illustration of effective or ineffective management.

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and 5% from car-rental agencies. The company was a full service provider, offering hardware, software, engineering, and maintenance support.

Kiosks were an attractive option for airlines to quickly and easily check in passengers while reducing processing costs. Dynamic Displays' kiosks not only reduced costs but also improved customer service, shortened passenger wait times, and provided valuable information to these travelers. In 2006, Forrester Research estimated the average cost for an airline passenger to check in through an agent was \$3.02, versus a range of \$0.14 to \$0.32 for kiosk check-in.¹ This impressive savings was realized by allowing the repetitive tasks of selecting or changing seat assignments and printing and distributing boarding passes to be handled by the passengers themselves. Airlines reduced headcount or assigned the agents to more value-added tasks, such as solving complex customer service issues and ensuring compliance with safety and security standards. The cost savings were particularly important for the airline industry during a period when margins were razor thin and fuel costs were continuing to climb.

Airlines were also aggressively promoting another self-service option for travelers. Web check-in allowed passengers to complete the entire check-in process via the internet from a remote location, utilizing their personal or office computer. Cost savings using online check-in was of even greater benefit because the airline did not have to purchase and install a kiosk, and passengers printed their own boarding passes using their own paper. According to a 2006 Forrester report, airport kiosks were a mature application with 75% of U.S. leisure passengers using kiosk in 2006. Web check-in on the other hand, was still experiencing dramatic growth, increasing from less than 45% of U.S. leisure passengers in 2005 to 64% in 2006.²

Thomas Green: Path to Senior Market Specialist

Thomas Green was born in 1979 in Brunswick, Georgia, the son of a postman and a school secretary. At the University of Georgia, he worked in a warehouse and washed cars while earning a bachelor's degree in Economics. His first full-time job was in sales for National Business Solutions in Atlanta. Green enjoyed impressive success in the Banking Division, focusing on ATM sales to regional banks in the Southeast. In March 2007, Dynamic Displays recruited Green for an account executive position in the Southeast territory for the Travel and Hospitality Division. To Green, Dynamic Displays seemed to present a great chance for a fast climb up the managerial ladder.

Green hit the ground running at Dynamic Displays. In his first four months as an account executive, he completed a contract for one of the largest airline carriers, Journey Airlines, to accelerate rollout of kiosks in 20 airports and purchase upgraded software for kiosks in the majority of their locations.

Green had told a close friend, "I wanted to come in and dazzle them at Dynamic Displays. This was no easy feat. But I wanted more than an account executive position. I had heard there was a lot of opportunity for fresh talent at corporate headquarters and I made it my mission to get noticed immediately."

Senior executives at Dynamic Displays quickly took notice of Green's performance and were eager to strengthen his relationship with the company. In July 2007, Green attended a week-long training session at corporate headquarters. Shannon McDonald, the division vice president, and Mary Jacobs,

¹ Harteveltdt and Epps, "Self-Service Check-In Clicks with Travelers," *Forrester Report*, February 23, 2007

² Ibid.

the national sales director, made a concerted effort to get to know him better. Green and McDonald were both University of Georgia alumni and Georgia natives. They had an instant connection, and McDonald seemed to take Green under her wing. McDonald had several informal meetings with Green, and by the end of the week Green became aware of an open position for a senior market specialist. Green aggressively campaigned to be considered for this position. Over the next month, Green made several trips to corporate headquarters to meet with McDonald. Green discussed his various client relationships, and McDonald agreed that in a short time he had developed unique insights into their markets. Following a dinner meeting at which Green offered lengthy explanations of the client opportunities he perceived and his strategies for winning them, McDonald promoted him to the position of senior market specialist.

McDonald told Green, “Tom, you are obviously a bright and ambitious account executive. You have a great rapport with your clients. You have made a strong case for your promotion and I’m willing to take a chance on you. I think this group needs a fresh perspective. However, I do have a couple of reservations about your lack of managerial experience. You have only held sales roles, and the senior market specialist position is very different. This new job will require you to think strategically as well as tactically, and you will have to coordinate between several different functions and layers of corporate management. I am hoping you compensate for your lack of experience by seeking out guidance from some of our more seasoned managers.”

Green was assigned to work out of corporate headquarters in Boston. The division’s organizational structure is shown in **Exhibit 1**. The promotion had been a giant step upward for Green; an account executive interested in joining the marketing team usually moved first to a market specialist position and then put in a number of years in the field before reaching “senior” status. The other senior market specialists in the division were in their forties. Green was 28. His salary was now \$125,000, a 50% increase over his previous salary.

Senior market specialists were responsible for identifying industry trends, evaluating new business opportunities, and establishing sales goals. In addition, specialists developed general market and specific client strategies to help the account executives obtain a sale. Green directly supervised the two market specialists in his region. Green reported to Frank Davis, the marketing director. Davis had recently been promoted from the position that Green assumed (see **Exhibit 2** for relevant bios).

After Green’s Promotion

Green’s promotion became effective on September 10, 2007. McDonald stopped by Green’s office that first day and told Green, “Tom, you are walking into a tricky situation with Frank Davis. Frank had expected to choose the new senior market specialist and it would not have been you. You’ll have to deal with any fallout that might result from that. You are getting an unusual opportunity with this promotion. Don’t let me down.”

Green used most of his first week to review 2006 and 2007 year-to-date sales. He spent the next week with his boss, Frank Davis, making a rapid tour of major airline industry clients. At the end of the week, Davis told Green, “We had some good meetings this week and the clients responded well to your ideas. However, I think we would have been more effective if we had been able to provide the clients with some market data. When you are on your own I expect you to spend a significant amount of time preparing for client meetings and developing supporting detail for your proposals. I know you will need a little time to get up to speed on your new position, but I expect you to start developing some new market strategies for your region soon.”

Green next visited clients, market specialists, and account executives in New York, Atlanta, and Orlando. In addition to the travel, Green's personal life was very busy. He was searching for a house in Boston, arranging to move belongings there, and still trying to maintain a relationship with his girlfriend in Atlanta.

On October 8, Green attended the 2008 Budget Plan meeting in which Davis presented sales projections for the upcoming year. This was the first time Green had been exposed to the planning and forecasting process. Since Davis had held Green's position when the estimates were due, the numbers for the Eastern region had been developed without input from Green. At the meeting, Davis assigned 2008 performance commitments for all senior marketing specialists and their teams. Performance reviews would be based upon their ability to meet or exceed the objectives. Green was surprised by the numbers that Davis was proposing. Davis estimated 10% growth in the Eastern region.

According to Green, "Frank Davis was way off base with his pro forma numbers. I had been talking with our account execs and there was no way we could achieve double-digit growth in 2008. The sales goals Frank set for my region were totally unrealistic. In the meeting I expressed my concern that my goals would be impossible to meet. I couldn't believe I was the only one with the guts to speak up. After the meeting, Frank stopped me in the hall and told me about all these big opportunities for the market. I listened politely, but the time I'd spent out on the road with clients gave me every reason to doubt Frank's expectations."

Davis was visibly upset that Green openly challenged him at the meeting. Davis commented to McDonald, "Thomas's negative attitude is not what we need on this team. Corporate expects this division to be a growth engine for the company. We've realized a 10% CAGR over the past 5 years. The market indicators are positive, and with the right sales strategy my projections are attainable. The hotel and car-rental markets are virtually untapped right now. Thomas's problem is that he's too conservative in his outlook. He is thinking like an account exec who is only concerned with the sales target. In the senior market specialist position, he has to think outside the box and develop strategies to capture that aggressive growth target."

Meeting with Frank Davis

It was customary for employees at Dynamic Displays to have an informal evaluation in the first or second month after a promotion. When Green saw a meeting with Davis regarding his performance pop up on his Outlook calendar, he was not the least bit worried. On October 15, 2007, Green met with Davis to discuss his performance to date. Quite to Green's surprise, Davis had prepared a list of problems he had encountered with Green's work in the first month after his promotion.

Davis sternly looked Green in the eye and began. "Thomas, you have not done a good job of keeping me informed of your schedule. For example, this past Thursday, I was trying to locate you and your Outlook calendar said you were in Orlando. I needed you to send me some information on one of our accounts. You didn't answer your cell phone. I ended up calling the account exec in Orlando and was told you had left the previous day. To make matters worse, I had asked you to deliver on that same day a brief report on that new kiosk opportunity in Tampa—and I didn't receive it."

Flabbergasted, Green responded, "I decided to go to Atlanta a day early because I had run out of good opportunities in Orlando. I was able to get a meeting with the VP of purchasing at a client in Atlanta and thought that would be more productive than sitting around Orlando talking to nobodies."

Davis continued, "On September 20, I asked you to check why VIP Hotel Group had not purchased any of our kiosks. After three reminders, I still have not received a good answer from you. In the same vein, two weeks ago, I requested the status of the regional jet division of Journey Airlines. I have not received any update from you yet. I also asked for organizational charts on two clients in Charlotte and Raleigh. Do you remember your reply? You said, 'What's the value of charts like that? I have that information in my head.' Thomas, we can make good use of those charts—they can help us lay out a strategy for getting to the decision makers in a company. I expect the charts on my desk by end of the week."

Davis and Green spent the next two hours going over various incidents and discussing a plan to improve the situation.

Later, Green told a manager outside his group, "I can't shake this nagging suspicion that Frank's criticisms of my performance are a direct result of my questioning the validity of his forecasts in the Budget Plan meeting. I was blindsided by his negative assessment of my work. Frank spent two hours picking apart my work style. You would think he would be concerned with bigger issues than how often I update my Outlook calendar."

A few days after the meeting, Davis wrote an email to McDonald, who had promoted Green, outlining the points covered in the meeting and copied Green on the communication (**Exhibit 3**).

Three Months Later: Trouble Continues

After the October 15 meeting, Green met with the national sales director and director of software development. Green was focused on developing a new up-selling and cross-selling software program that would allow airline passengers to upgrade seating; have meals, magazines, or books delivered to the flight; and book hotel rooms or cars at their destination. According to Green, "The only way for us to capture growth is if we can convince the airlines that our products have revenue-generating opportunity and other advantages over web check-in. However, these programs may take months to develop and will not impact our sales in 2008."

Green spent most of November, December, and January working independently on his special software project and traveling to meet with his market specialists and various clients. According to one of the market specialists who accompanied Green to several meetings, "Thomas is great when it comes to selling the clients on his ideas. He is very charismatic and can think quickly on his feet. I can tell he has put a lot of thought into his strategies and I really like working for him. However, the clients are starting to ask me for hard data to back up his claims of cost savings. They are also requiring memos and presentations to bring to their superiors that justify the expenditure. Thomas doesn't really work that way. He would rather talk through the issues face to face."

During this time, Green avoided interactions with Davis whenever he could. Green continued to tell people outside the group he did not agree with his boss's projections for 2008. Green stated, "With the continued financial distress in the airline industry and preference for web check-in, I don't foresee a lot of growth in spending next year. Davis is holding firm with his upbeat projections. I deliberately steer clear of him. I know my mood is terrible. The excitement's gone from work. I must say, though, I've had a couple of good chats with managers from another part of Dynamic Displays, and they're supportive. They told me to stand my ground."

On January 28, Davis held another performance review meeting with Green, focusing on the continuing deficiencies in Green's work and attitude. After the meeting, Davis sent an email to McDonald outlining his issues with Green (**Exhibit 4**). Green was not copied on this email, but

someone sent him a copy by interoffice mail. McDonald met with Davis the following day to flesh out the issue. Davis told McDonald, "I am truly disappointed with Thomas's work. He is an intelligent and capable young man, but I do not believe he is making a strong effort."

In response to Davis's complaints, McDonald sent a short email to Green (**Exhibit 5**) asking for his point of view on the situation.

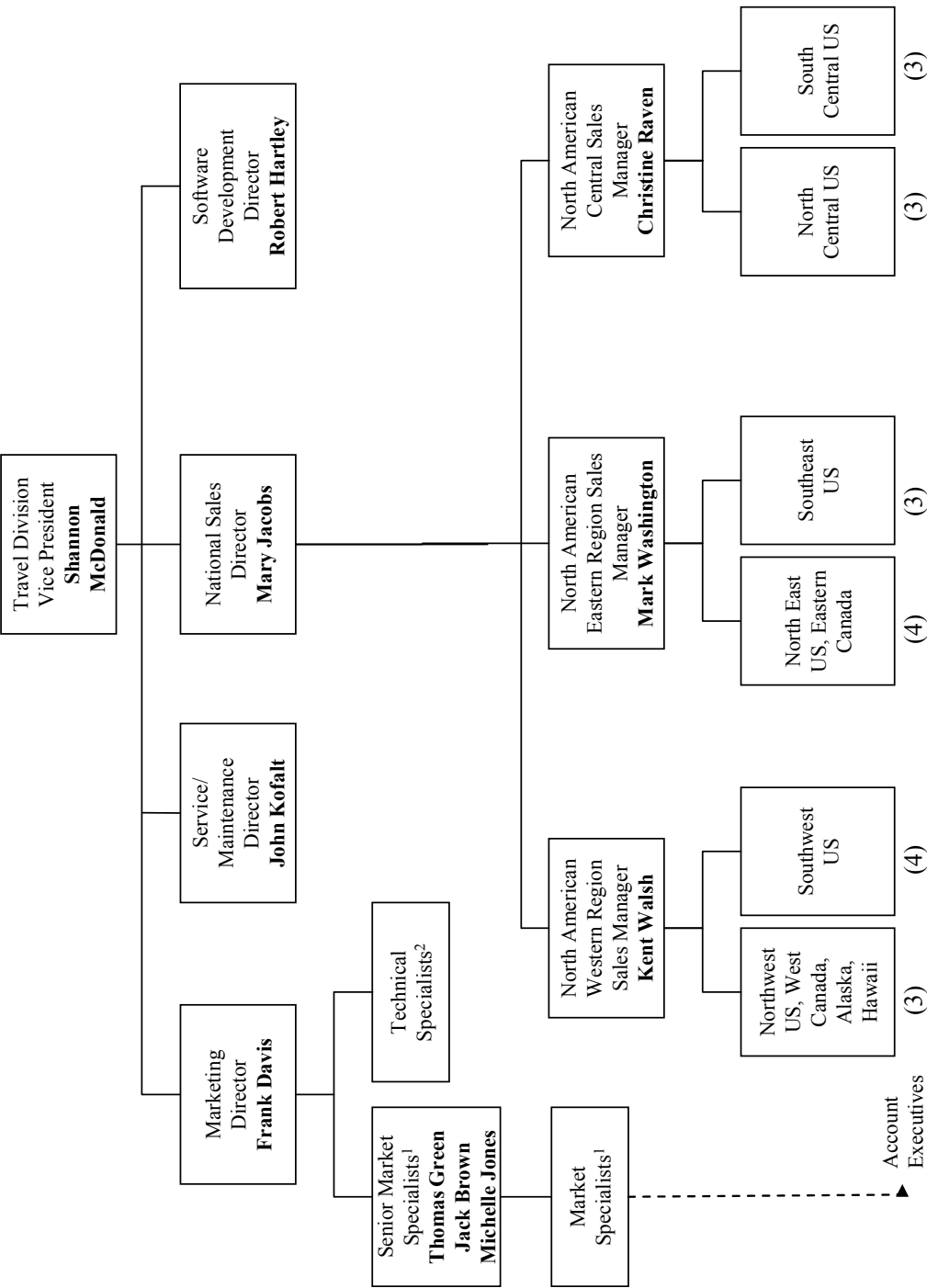
Green told a close friend, "It's clear that Frank intends to get rid of me. He's just putting his argument together."

Green's Next Move

As Green entered I-93 on the way to his new home in North Andover, he replayed in his head the series of events and subsequent emails. Green recognized that he had not paid much attention to office politics when he'd taken on his job. He had met one-on-one with McDonald only twice since he moved to the corporate headquarters. He had been preoccupied with the job itself, and with living up to McDonald's expectations. Now it seemed as though he had no allies in the company. McDonald's email today struck a nerve. Because McDonald sponsored his promotion, Green had taken for granted that she would watch out for him. If Davis was indeed trying to fire him, Green wondered who McDonald would side with.

Several questions persisted in Green's mind. What steps should he take next? Set up a meeting with McDonald? Write McDonald a detailed memo? Do what Davis tells him and keep his mouth shut, even though he was convinced that the forecasts were inflated? Was it his responsibility to expose Davis's overstated projections? Maybe contact a head hunter and start looking for another job? He had to sort through before he responded to McDonald's email. Next week, his first mortgage payment was due and the new furniture he'd picked out was scheduled to be delivered. This was certainly not a good time to be out of work, for 2008 was shaping up to be a very stressful year for Thomas Green.

Exhibit 1 Abbreviated Organization Chart, Travel and Hospitality Division of Dynamic Displays, 2007



¹ There were three senior market specialists (one for each region) and six market specialists (one for each territory). Thomas Green was the market specialist for Eastern Region

² There were six technical specialists (one for each territory)

Exhibit 2 Relevant Bios

Thomas Green (Age 28) – Senior Market Specialist

Thomas Green began his career as an account executive for National Business Solutions in Atlanta, Georgia. He spent six years as an account executive in the Banking Division, selling ATMs to regional banks throughout the Southeast. In March 2007 he joined Dynamic Displays as an account executive in their Travel and Hospitality Division. He is currently the division's senior market specialist for the Eastern region of North America. Green graduated summa cum laude from University of Georgia with a bachelor's degree in Economics in 2001.

Frank Davis (Age 45) – Marketing Director

Frank Davis is a 17-year veteran of Dynamic Displays. He joined the company in 1990 as an account executive with the Financial Services Solutions Division. He has also held positions as an account executive, market specialist, and senior market specialist with the Travel and Hospitality Division. Frank Davis is currently the marketing director for the Travel and Hospitality Division. Prior to joining Dynamic Displays, Davis worked as a sales representative for Advanced Telecommunications Services selling PBX phone systems to large corporations. He holds a bachelors degree in history from New York University (1986) and an Executive MBA from Suffolk University, Sawyer Business School (2002).

Shannon McDonald (Age 42) – Division Vice President

Reporting to the Dynamic Displays Chairman, Chief Executive Officer and President, Sam Costello, Shannon McDonald was promoted to Division Vice President in November of 2006 and is responsible for all aspects of the Travel and Hospitality Business. Previously, McDonald was the director of national sales for the Travel and Hospitality Division (2000-2006). She was responsible for driving Dynamic Displays' self-service business with the largest airline carriers in the United States. Ms. McDonald has also held positions as a strategic consultant with Chicago Consulting Group's Travel and Tourism practice and as a marketing analyst with Quest Airlines. She holds a bachelors degree in marketing from the University of Georgia (1987) and an MBA from Northwestern's Kellogg School of Management (1992).

Exhibit 3 10/19/07 Email Regarding Green's Performance

FROM: "FRANK DAVIS" <FDAVIS@dynamicdisplays.com >
TO: "SHANNON MCDONALD" <smcdonald@dynamicdisplays.com >
CC: "THOMAS GREEN" <TGREEN@dynamicdisplays.com >
SENT: FRIDAY, OCTOBER 19, 2007 3:48:32 pM
SUBJECT: THOMAS GREEN

Since Thomas assumed the position of senior market specialist on September 10, 2007, numerous incidents of poor judgment and questionable behavior have concerned me. Thomas and I talked about most of these incidents as they occurred. However, I concluded that we needed to have an overarching discussion about his performance and to develop a strategy for improving his work style. At that meeting, held October 15, 2007, we reviewed a range of problems. Among them:

1. Thomas fails to inform me of his plans and keep me updated on his schedule.
2. He does not follow up when information is requested of him.
3. Thomas's lack of enthusiasm is troubling. He has a right and an obligation to question aspects of our plans if he finds them illogical or unfeasible, but the kind of negativity he displayed in the Budget Plan meeting on October 8 is dangerous to the organization and unacceptable to me.

Thomas seemed to accept my criticisms in a thoughtful manner and assured me he will do what is necessary to succeed in his position. He and I plan to discuss his overall performance again in mid-November. Meanwhile, he'll be expected to take the following corrective measures:

1. Plan to make focused calls when dealing with market specialists, account executives, and clients. Have a specific communication strategy going into a call, and have all sales collateral and other necessary materials available. Stop making calls purely for the purpose of meeting people.
2. Update Outlook calendar regularly and always return calls from our office promptly.
3. Provide feedback to my requests in a timely manner. Thomas says he now recognizes that my requests are not merely "reminders"; they are a call for information that I genuinely need.
4. Demonstrate a more positive attitude both inside and outside the company.

Frank R. Davis
Travel and Hospitality Marketing Director
Dynamic Displays
 212-314-1420

Exhibit 4 1/30/08 Email Regarding Green's Performance

FROM: "FRANK DAVIS" <FDAVIS@dynamicdisplays.com>
TO: "SHANNON MCDONALD" <smcdonald@dynamicdisplays.com>
SENT: WEDNESDAY, January 30, 2008 4:28:12 pM
SUBJECT: THOMAS GREEN

On October 19, 2007, I sent you an email communicating my concerns with Thomas's attitude and job performance. On January 28, 2008, Thomas and I had another meeting on this subject. I would like to summarize that conversation.

Thomas wastes a great deal of time complaining about the problems of selling to our current and prospective clients and far too little time developing strategic marketing approaches and effective sales tactics. I informed him that his job is to sell the accounts, not to agree with our clients' assertions about alleged disadvantages of our products or the current excess capacity in the industry.

I told Thomas his lack of effort and enthusiasm are not consistent with the standards of Dynamic Displays and could lead to an outcome he likely would not find pleasant. Thomas then said he felt I was micromanaging his activities. It was here that I think we uncovered the root of the problem. I inquired as to what new or even slightly imaginative marketing approaches he documented in the past five months. His answer was, "None that are documented." When I see no new targets and no thoughtful, creative marketing, I feel I must micromanage, and I communicated this to Thomas.

I then pulled up several Power Point presentations, spreadsheet models, and associated emails that Michelle Jones, the Western Region senior market specialist, had used to shape her region's strategy and to support their selling efforts. As we paged through her work, Thomas stated that all those email updates and fancy presentations and models were "political" and didn't match up well with his personal approach to selling. I told him this was not only good politics, but also proved to his boss that he was working effectively.

Thomas ultimately conceded the mistakes and personal shortcomings that I explained to him.. He pledged to develop creative marketing approaches and keep me updated on his progress. I hope these promises materialize in the next 30 days. If not, I recommend we part ways with Thomas Green and quickly seek out a competent replacement for this extremely important position.

Frank R. Davis
Travel and Hospitality Marketing Director
Dynamic Displays
212-314-1420

Exhibit 5 2/5/08 Email from McDonald to Green

FROM: "SHANNON MCDONALD" <smcdonald@dynamicdisplays.com>
TO: "THOMAS GREEN" <TGREEN@dynamicdisplays.com>
CC: "FRANK DAVIS" <FDAVIS@dynamicdisplays.com>
SENT: TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 5, 2008 8:38:53 AM
SUBJECT: PERFORMANCE

Frank Davis has explained to me his point of view on your performance. I think all of us want to improve the current situation, which is regrettable. At this point I would like to get your perspective on your recent performance and to understand your ideas about specific areas that need improvement.

I look forward to resolving this issue ASAP. I would be glad to discuss this matter with you in detail, but first I would like to receive your statement in writing.

Shannon A. McDonald
Travel and Hospitality Group Vice-President
Dynamic Displays
212-314-1415