

## From Where I Stand...

The viability of tradeshow is a frequent subject of debate in the Association community. As an executive director of a trade association, I often hear that our business model is inherently flawed because one of our primary sources of revenue is not one, but two trade shows. It seems the Association world has been prematurely writing the epitaph of trade shows for the past 20 years.

Associations are great at coming up with ideas to make \$5,000. Associations, and every business for that matter, struggle coming up with new \$150,000 ideas. Trade shows, when done well, can still make an ample amount of money for the organizer. A lucrative trade show allows associations to keep membership dues and registration fees as low as possible.

Yet, trade shows are a high risk/high reward proposition. Associations expose themselves to a heavy amount of upfront risk in order to put on a stellar event. If the environment changes, that risk comes back to roost. AIG recently got slammed in the press for planning its now infamous top-earners vacation shortly after receipt of an \$85 billion dollar bailout. The capitalist in me shouted "string 'em up!" The association executive in me shouted, "Won't someone think of the deposits!"

So have trade shows outlasted their usefulness? I contend they have not. Open marketplaces have been around since the dawn of man and have survived every type of technological advancement from paved roads to television. Roman forums, Persian bazaars, Arabic souks, and American farmers' markets still thrive to this day in some form. Trade shows no longer feature errant chickens and crooked money changers, but the concept of selling collectively has not wavered. Sellers go where buyers are, whether that is a village square or state-of-the-art convention center.

Now I'm not screaming "all is well!" The current numbers do demonstrate a slow-down in trade show growth and revenue. For the second quarter in a row, *The Tradeshow Week Quarterly Report of Tradeshow Statistics* saw all three indicators that are tracked heading down, generally reflecting developments in the national economy. The most significant drop appeared to be the number of companies exhibiting at trade shows, down 6.5 percent, compared with the same quarter a year ago. Overall net square footage in the third quarter dropped 2.5 percent and attendance dipped 3 percent.

I recently returned from the Green Industry Expo (GIE) Conference in Louisville, Kentucky. This is the primary national trade show for the green industry. It was host to more than 650 exhibitors and 25,000 attendees. I walked the show floor twice and had to zigzag through clogged aisles. Most

exhibitors had less than one minute to talk to me before moving on to other clients. The massive expanse and energy of the show made me steal a line from Mark Twain: "The reports of trade show deaths have been greatly exaggerated."

The Mid-American Horticultural Trade Show (Mid-Am) is the third largest regional green industry conference in the nation. I constantly hear how Mid-Am ain't what it used to be.

Even if that sentiment is true, it's still bigger, better, and broader than all but TWO state and regional green industry trade shows. Often we simply compare Mid-Am to Mid-Am's past. To be fair Mid-Am should be compared to every other trade show across the country.

Strangely, today's primary argument for why trade shows are dead is because of the dawn of the internet. I don't really understand how constant access to the flow of information makes a trade show irrelevant. If anything, the internet should enhance a trade show in the same way it enhances everything else. If pharmacies, movie theaters, and adult bookstores can survive the internet, then trade shows will avoid being a casualty.

One of my favorite television shows is "The Simpsons." I remember an episode where Homer and an animated Mel Gibson try to create the perfect action movie based on the Jimmy Stewart classic, "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington." It, of course, is as bad as it sounds and becomes a box office failure. Mel is lambasted for the result. After the reviews come back, Homer and Mel have the following exchange discussing the apparent death of action movies: *Homer*: I'm sorry I ruined your career, Mel. *Mel*: It's not your fault, Homer. I guess there's no room in today's crazy, gentle America for

violent dinosaurs like us.

*Homer*: How did the country lose its way, Mel? When did we stop rooting for the man with a flame-thrower or an acid-spraying gun of some kind?

*Mel*: I blame the internet. And the return of swing music.

Obviously, the internet and swing music had nothing to do with the public's desire for action movies. They were merely popular fads at the time, so Mel used them to explain why his movie failed. In reality, Mel and Homer's movie failed because they made a bad movie. They didn't want to admit that to themselves, so they blamed the public's poor response on the common trends of the day.

Repetition kills trade shows more than anything else. If the trade show is merely a carbon copy of the previous year and the year before that, there is no wonder why people stop coming. Trade shows are no different from any other program an association puts on. I am a firm believer in the sentiment that most people look for an excuse NOT to do something. A viable trade

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## The Trade Show of Trade Shows

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show chips away at those reasons until attendance is inevitable. Mid-Am offers a triple threat of education, commerce, and networking. It's adding new features this year like *A Cup of Success* roundtables and the historic Thursday night Mixer & Reception. Mid-Am refuses to rest on its laurels and I'm glad we're finally thinking that way.

I'm a card-carrying member of Generation X. Then again, carrying cards seems anachronistic, so I'm a Facebook-posting member of Generation X. I truly don't feel the decline in trade shows is a generational issue. Trade shows are cool. They are convenient. They are a simple way to wrap our arms around something as massive as a regional industry. I love the speed and freedom of choice that the internet provides, but give me the hustle and bustle of a trade show. Give me educational salons where new ideas and free thought are allowed to incubate. Give me the late nights and early mornings. Give me the elevator speeches. Give me the deals brokered in hotel bars. Give me polyurethane bags stretched to the seams with glossy promotional materials. I love the smell of trade shows in the morning. They smell like...commerce.

In my previous position, I exhibited at numerous trade shows each year. Some of the conferences were larger than Mid-Am, while others had less than 300 attendees. I will give you rare insight into our psyche. I can say this only because I used to be a frequent exhibitor. We exhibitors are a strange lot.

We can be as difficult to please as incarcerated inmates. We subsist on a steady diet of strong coffee and bowls of free candy. We get very little sleep because we are entertaining clients until the wee hours on retractable expense accounts. We repeat the same things over and over until they become devoid of all meaning. We collect stacks of business cards that result in utter confusion as we try to remember what "No call/Monday/conference/ Rantoul/Red Lobster" means scribbled on the back. We can dismantle and pack up our booth in 1/1,000 of the time it took to set it. We know the difference between those who stop by our booths for solutions and who stop by for key chains. We don't get discouraged when more people visit our booths when we step away to use the restroom. We waste countless minutes telling union stewards why we *can* plug in a lamp without a permit from the city and note from the governor. Our hands throb from endless handshakes. Our feet hurt from thin carpeting. Our cheeks are sore from constant smiling and glad-handing. A trade show is an

endurance test that favors both the strong and the prepared.

We do all this because we want to talk to you. We are proud of our companies and our wares. We are not deluded into thinking everyone is a buyer. We want to establish a relationship with the buyers of the future and referrers of the present. We know that the best business and marketing approach is still rooted in the ancient traditions of the trade show.

The economy will have an impact on Mid-Am like it has had an impact on everything else. It costs thousands of dollars and hundreds of man hours to prepare for the show. In a lean year, that revenue is not always available for many past exhibitors. Yet healthy companies will still line the aisles of the show. They made the business decision that money spent at Mid-Am is money invested in customer relationships and business prospects.

It costs only \$15 to walk the floor (by comparison purposes, it cost \$35 in 1972). You are the reason we are there. Don't search for the excuse NOT to be there. When you do arrive, watch our tails wag when you walk through the door.

Support for Mid-Am is support for ILCA. See you on January 14th.



Scott Grams  
Executive Director

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**Here are just a few of the ILCA Events planned for Mid-Am—**

**January 14**  
**CLT Training and Written Exam**  
McCormick Place West, Chicago

**January 14, 2008**  
**Women's Networking Group Winter Event**  
Howl at the Moon, Chicago

**January 15**  
**Mid-Am Reception**  
Hyatt Regency, Chicago

**January 15**  
**Pesticide Standards Review and Testing**  
(English and Spanish)  
McCormick Place West, Chicago