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Work trade shows to the max

As you know, the PGMS, ALCA and PLCAA annual conferences (and the Green Industry Expo) are fast approaching, as are many other conferences and shows. The GIE Show is aging like a fine bottle of wine. It is amazing when attendees mention that they did not benefit from a seminar. My reaction is disbelief. Their problem is the inability or failure to allow the time to prepare. With that in mind, let me share my actual experience and benefits in working a conference and trade show to the max. Simply put, you must prepare.

1. Take notes before you go. Keep a notepad within arms' reach of your desk. When a product, piece of equipment or service you have purchased fails to live up to your expectations, make yourself a note. Also, when horticultural questions or procedural questions arise, add them to the list. Jot down your business questions, personnel concerns or general ideas too.

2. Plan early. Three months before I go to a show or conference, I send in my check to take advantage of the "early bird" discount. Then, I request the agenda from the associations so I can manage my time. Before the conference, I pull out the list I've been putting together and I make sure that I pack it.

3. Kill two birds: Get recertified there. The conference is a convenient time to receive recertification credits for your pesticide license. Highlight the talks that you attended in the show summary book. When you arrive home, forward proof of registration to your department of agriculture contact. In return, a block of credits will be added to your record.

4. Get action on faulty products. This is a time to recover costs or receive future purchase allowances for

equipment or products that didn't live up to the manufacturers' promises. I seek out the specific company's booth with the salesman's name or my local contact. Then, I address the complaint right there, in an organized format along with my business credentials. I explain my years of loyalty to their company, if applicable. To date, I have received two substantial checks from separate entities for failure of product performance. Also, three manufacturers have allowed dollar-for-dollar allowances on equipment. Finally, one firm provided free prototype equipment to use in the field to give feedback for their engineers.

5. Get instant discounts. Take advantage of exhibitors who offer show discounts and/or free shipping. During a show, I procure or set up a large percentage of next year's supplies or equipment. In addition, I take advantage of a tax deduction for that calendar year.

6. Bring a trailer. Some exhibitors will offer a larger discount than usual on equipment or tools at their booth, if you can haul them away when the trade show closes. If it is a local or regional show, bring your truck and trailer and have it ready.

7. Break new ground. Exhibitors may want to break into your territory with new, innovative or established equipment or product lines. If you purchase their products, heavy discounts may be available. Also, if you act as a reference or provide a demo in the area, you can be financially compensated for each contact. Start the discussions at a show.

8. Meet new people. Networking is the key to a successful conference. I pull out my prepared list from home and scout out old contacts while making new friends during the stay. This may sound ridiculous, but I take a specific question and ask at least five individu-

als. At the end of the conference, I now have a "practical, hands-on" base of information to digest. Let's face it — if four out of five people offer the same advice, it is the starting point for an educated decision. For example, last year I wondered what type of truck to buy. Should it be a traditional style dump or a front-over cab? Should the engine be gasoline or diesel? After several conversations with knowledgeable users of both types of trucks, I knew the right truck for my needs. One year later, my purchase has worked out just fine.

9. **Share experiences.** Remember that conference

Larry's trade show guide

HOW TO WORK A TRADE SHOW TO THE MAX

Preparation is Job 1. Make a plan before you go, and don't forget these steps either:

1. Note products, questions, concerns in a notebook so you can refer to them at the show.
2. Get 'early bird' discounts and plan your show.
3. Take recertification classes there.
4. Meet with product vendors in person to address faulty products or problems.
5. Save money on orders from exhibitors giving show discounts or free shipping.
6. Be prepared to take purchases with you — bring a trailer/setup to the show. You might save significant money.
7. Talk to exhibitors about trying out their new products or providing a local demo.
8. Network like there's no tomorrow. Make a point of meeting new people.
9. Ask colleagues about their experiences with management, products and issues covered at the show. Most will be open and candid.
10. Give yourself time to try the equipment.
11. Bring along associates or buy session tapes if you can't attend every one you want.
12. Have fun. Save time to explore the local high spots.

attendees will readily share personal and valuable information with you. Networking in these situations is of no threat to their job or business because you are separated geographically. Through the years, I have implemented many new ideas from informal conversations. Remember to exchange business cards for future follow-up. The associations' roundtable breakfast meetings are the easiest and most comfortable means to network and establish long-term relationships.

10. **Demo the equipment.** Outdoor equipment demos allow us to actually use equipment we're considering. In one afternoon, you can feel like a kid in a candy shop and try endless products. There are new prototypes, modified equipment, new inventions and established lines for your review. Don't forget to ask questions of other viewers standing by you at exhibits. Generally, their past experiences and present concerns will mutually relate. This one day of active participation will save you time when you go home and you will be steps ahead in the decision process.

11. **Be in two places at once.** Since there are nine educational speakers at any given time at the GIE conference, you may have time conflicts. If this occurs, buy the taped sessions or split up attendance with an associate and compare notes.

12. **Have some fun.** Pick up a local guidebook before leaving home and experience the host city. Remember, a little fun should be part of the mix.

I think a conference and trade show should always pay for itself, plus provide future dividends. It will also refresh your mind and body, and your clients, employees and family will enjoy the fruits of your efforts.

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