



# Catching eyes — and customers

An engaging trade show booth, with attentive staff working it, is a lifeline for businesses

BY KYM POKORNY

**T**HE FARWEST SHOW is back in 2021, and for exhibitors, that means one thing — time to prepare your “A” game.

Whether the booth is offering plants, supplies or something else, anyone involved in nursery trade shows knows a good booth when they see it. It’s the one with people crowded around asking questions and getting an eyeful of new products.

Why that one and not the one down the aisle? Attitude, said Mark Leichty, director of business development for **Little Prince of Oregon Nursery Inc.** (Aurora, Oregon). He suggests thinking of your booth as entertainment and your customers as a fan base.

“We’ve become entertainers, so we try to do things to keep our fans engaged,” Leichty said. “We give them something new each year. Something that has the ‘wow’ factor. But we’re also careful not to try something that’s going to be a flop. No actor wants to be in a bad movie. We want a hit.”

That approach has worked for Leichty. He’s been part of six Best in Show winning booths, while also garnering a dozen or so

other awards since he started working the Farwest Show for Fry Road Nursery in 2006 and then Little Prince since 2014. To get there, he’s dressed up as an ’80s rock star, worn a *Sedum* beard and handed out “collectible” cards that won people a free lunch if they managed to gather all of them.

Don Sprague, owner of **Garden Gallery Iron Works** (Hubbard, Oregon), knows the value of designing a booth to catch the eye of showgoers. For 30 years, he and his crew have designed and built booths, taken them down and rebuilt them at various trade shows, including the Farwest Show sponsored by the Oregon Association of Nurseries (OAN).

It’s a lot of work, but he’s committed to supporting the OAN, an organization that’s championed nursery people for more than 85 years. “We need to support it,” he said. “I’ve been in this business for a long time and the industry has been very good to me.”

Sprague finds it counterintuitive that participants don’t **>>**

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use the promotional materials provided by the OAN. The organization hands out ready-to-send invitations that just need to be stamped and sent to customers and potential customers.

“They make it very easy,” Sprague said. “I send out maybe 1,000 a year. If you’re XYZ nursery and you get invitations from multiple people, pretty soon they start thinking, ‘We need to take a look at this. Maybe I need to attend.’ If they don’t get an invitation, it’s easy for them to think, ‘Why should I go? Farwest is the same every year. But it isn’t.’”

Nursery owners and suppliers who change their booth every year know show-gers react positively. Kathy LeCompte of **Brooks Tree Farm** brings in a different antique car each year. Like Leichy, she draws people in with drama and then captures their attention. As she talks about

the cars, she gracefully turns the subject to the seedling trees they sell for post-harvest timber replanting.

Their booth used to have just the seedlings, displayed in small, clear glass jars. The presentation was so simple, bordering on boring, that they decided to do something new.

LeCompte’s husband collects antique cars. He got his first fixer-upper as a teenager and had to push it home. What better way to get more attention, they thought, then to put one of the cars on display. So far, a 1954 MG, a Model T truck and a 1935 rusty school bus have had the honors. This year, word is the LeComptes will display his hot rod Model T. Plants get a place around and in the car, drawing the attention of people walking down the aisle.

“It’s a way to switch things up, to use something we already have to provide inter-

est to our plants and our general booth area when our actual product isn’t very interesting,” LeCompte said. “Our plants are barely finished growing for the season. In a trade show where large, lush blooming or new plants are everywhere; our small, ordinary plants can be lost.”

Instead, people stop for the antique vehicles, but end up with information about Brooks.

Same at the Little Prince space where they design their 10-foot-by-10-foot booth by themes. One year it was Christmas, one year the theme was fishing and another it was baseball. Back when he was with Fry Road, they experimented with shabby chic, tropical and rock ‘n’ roll themes.

Every year, thousands of people crowd around Little Prince’s booths, taking selfies and lining up to have their photos taken with Leichy and Little Prince owner Keith de Kanter, who pose patiently, knowing some of those “fans” will become customers.

### Making connections with customers

Writing orders is not as common as it once was. Instead, it’s a time to make connections. Farwest provides an opportunity for networking, a major impetus for participating.

“We like the contact with people,”



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said Lorne Blackman, owner of **Walla Walla Nursery Co. Inc.** “It’s an excellent place to gauge reactions to new products, formats and ideas. There’s more focus on new varieties and signage and less focus on lots of paper and availability.”

Treda McCaw of **Kraemer’s Nursery Inc.**, loves the networking. “I love Farwest,” she said. “It’s like going to a family reunion but I actually like the people I see.”

McCaw has been working trade shows for about 20 years, first for J. Frank Schmidt and Son Co., then Leo Gentry Nursery and Bailey Nurseries. In that time, she’s come to feel strongly about how the sales team works a booth.

The bottom line: Be attentive. Don’t sit, don’t eat and put your phone away. For larger booths, she puts the kibosh on having the table front and center. There

should be a way for customers to walk through without impediments.

“I see people who sit there and don’t even look up,” McCaw said. “There’s none of the welcoming things that say, ‘I’m really glad you’re here.’ You should be standing in the aisle greeting people and asking if there’s something I can tell you about my company. We just need to be aware that they’ve spent money to be there. They are our lifelines.”

Leave potential customers with a good feeling, she said. Don’t immediately try to sell them something. Engage them and then turn the conversation to your company. Instead of telling them what you have to offer, first ask them what questions you can answer. Let them lead the conversation.

Never ignore a customer. If you’re engaged with someone and see another

person hovering, tell them you’ll be with them soon.

“It’s so important that if we’re putting money into the show that we should be engaging,” McCaw said. “Otherwise you’re spending your money on nothing.”

She recalls a visit to a large home appliance store when she was doing some remodeling. Several salespeople were chatting at the cash register. After 20 minutes of browsing, no one asked if she needed help. “Finally, I walked up to the counter and one of them asked if they could help me with anything,” she said. “I told them ‘not a damn thing. I have \$5,000 to spend and it’s not going to your store.’”

Not all vendors make money from a trade show. It’s more about getting their name out and meeting prospective customers. But Little Prince and Kraemer’s make at least enough to pay for their >>



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booth and overhead.

Kraemer’s pays \$2,400 for a 10-foot-by-20-foot booth on an end cap and considers it a good deal. They always pick up customers. “It pays the bills,” McCaw said.

It takes only seconds to catch someone’s attention, Sprague pointed out, so design your booth well. “If you can’t make a good presentation, don’t do the show,” he said.

Sprague’s booth always stands out. He changes the design and brings in truckloads of iron — arbors, obelisks, tables, benches and plant stands, just a fraction of his inventory but it gets noticed and has won him a wall full of awards.

“We’ve never gone in with the idea of winning awards,” Sprague said. “We go in to win customers. You have to keep that in mind.” ☺

*Kym Pokorny is a garden writer with more than 20 years' experience writing for The Oregonian (Portland, Oregon) and other publications. She is currently a communications specialist with Oregon State University Extension Service.*

