

Entrepreneurs we love

Putting 'Entrepreneur' in 'Association'



Gary J. Shapiro, J.D.

President and CEO, Consumer Electronics Association, owner and producer of International CES™ (www.ce.org)

Perhaps the lowest point for Gary Shapiro came in 1994, when his association board lost its summer show to a fledgling upstart powered by rebelling videogame makers. It was a painful lesson in not taking customers for granted.

In the years since, he has taken that lesson to heart, propelling International CES into first place among North American shows. With more than 140,000 attendees and 1.53 million NSF of exhibit space, the nonprofit association show is a case study in how to be "entrepreneurial." His team even managed to grow international attendance from 18,000 to 23,000, despite considerable security and visa restrictions. "A good leader's job is to turn lemons into lemonade," Shapiro says.

Here are some ideas:

- **Incentivize every employee.** All 140 employees at Consumer Electronics Association, the show's parent with \$50 million in revenues and 2,000 corporate members, have a vested interest in the show's success.
- **Adopt a strategy of partnerships** (25 at the last show) and exceed the expectations of every one. Without them, "we couldn't grow the show by ourselves," he says.
- **Listen to customers.** More than 15 surveys after each show address attendee, exhibitor and partner categories and their issues.
- **Provide a value proposition** for all attendees. They should fear they'll lose something if they're not there or gain something by being there.
- **Identify ways the audience is changing** to find new target audiences.
- **Look for the next new trend.** Attendees have come to expect that, both in conferences and "Tech Zones" on the exhibit floor.
- **Create entry-level opportunities.** At International CES a circular kiosk gives a supplier a presence, just not as big as a booth.
- **Make each show fresh and exciting.** "We are not complacent," says Shapiro. "We must give every attendee another reason to come."



Chuck Yuska

President and CEO, Packaging Machinery Manufacturers Institute (www.pmmi.org)

PMMI shook up the exposition industry when it decided to act as its own general services contractor for PackExpo International. For associations used to being risk-averse, it was a wake-up call that they, too, could no longer sit on their laurels.

"Nonprofit doesn't mean 'non'-profit," says Yuska. "That's just a tax status. We run this association like a business."

That means a board of directors that empowers activism, as well as a streamlined decision-making process. When Yuska had the chance to compete with a for-profit organizer to buy 50 percent of a show in Mexico City, he met the owners and completed the deal without going back to his volunteer leadership to run the numbers.

"It made business sense and served our mission," he says. "I even acted more quickly than the for-profit." PMMI bought the other half of ExpoPack last year.

For PMMI to decide to become its own contractor was truly entrepreneurial. It required the association to make presentations to exhibitors and outline the worst-case scenario: doors might not open and machines might not work. Exhibitors said it was worth the risk, if PMMI could stabilize and lower costs. "We learned a lot and made a few mistakes, but we did maximize the value to exhibitors and attendees and improve customer service," he says. "After understanding the size and logistics of moving in a 1.2 million-square-foot show with 1,600 exhibitors and 70,000 attendees, I told Don Freeman, 'This is a job!'"

With its new-found knowledge, PMMI can help exhibitors avoid wasting money because a missed target date forced an overtime situation, for example. Every exhibitor who did not order services 30 days before the show was called and told why charges would be 30 percent more after the deadline.

The greater emphasis on service boils down to one thing: accountability. "When I started out, every show was always promoted as bigger and better," Yuska says. "Now we're told, 'Show me what I can get out of it.'"



Jason McGraw

Senior Vice President of Expositions, International Communications Industries Association Inc. (www.infocomm.org)

ICIA's InfoComm International®, with 25,000-plus attendees and 350,000 NSF of exhibit space, and other ICIA events contribute 60 percent of the organization's funding. So this association needs to continue to innovate and produce vibrant events — always looking to deliver more value and return on investment for exhibitors and attendees. "We run our shows like a for-profit, but with the heart of an association," McGraw explains.

ICIA took three actions the last few years to stimulate growth:

1. It developed new technology pavilions (now seven) for InfoComm in areas that started to "bubble on the surface." Matching educational content is presented in conference courses and on the show floor, with a media partner to help with marketing. "This helped drive 100 of 180 new exhibitors last year," McGraw says. So did a first-time exhibitor package that takes care of hundreds of pounds of freight, electricity, tables and chairs, for more than \$1,000 in savings over "a la carte."
2. ICIA increased sponsorship revenue at InfoComm 20 percent year over year for the past three years by integrating its sales approach. The expo team meets with the top 25 exhibitors, listens to their needs, and customizes proposals that can include sponsorships, banners, pre- and post-show recognition, and even meeting space. One account rep is dedicated to each company and personally handles services on site in a "cradle-to-grave" relationship.
3. Thanks to its board, ICIA takes risks and makes investments in events that expand its global reach. Either alone or with partners, it has developed international shows in Europe, China and Asia under the Integrated Systems brand. The second edition of the European show doubled attendance and exhibitors, and the other two international events are seeing the same trending. "You have to offer a more compelling reason for people to invest not just money but time to come to your events," McGraw says.