



Convention Intervention

Here's how you can get the most out of your trip to the SSA trade show in Las Vegas.

By Tom Comi

It's not difficult to spot self storage operators who are attending their first convention. They look lost, disorganized, overwhelmed and flat-out exhausted. And who can really blame them? It's not like somebody offers a crash course before you go to one of these things.

Until now. With some help from folks both inside and outside the storage industry, we have put together some helpful tips on everything from formulating a game plan to wearing the right shoes to ensure you get the most out of your experience at the SSA's fall conference in Las Vegas from September 1 to 3.

Unfortunately for some conference attendees, they will have handcuffed themselves before they even land at the Las Vegas airport. Why? Because a large part of being successful takes place before you leave your home.

Susan A. Friedmann, also known as "The Tradeshow Coach" and the author of *Meeting & Event Planning for Dummies*, says attendees should know well in advance what they hope to accomplish.

"Make a list of the goals you want to achieve," she wrote. "Read through the promotional materials carefully. Use the knowledge you've gleaned to make a plan for attending the show. Include a list of 'must-see' booths and 'want-to-see' booths. Spend a little time researching the vendors, so that you'll have a clear idea of whom you need to see, and what you need to learn from them. That way you'll have useful questions to ask, and will have to waste a minimum amount of time with small talk."

Attendees can visit the SSA website (selfstorage.org) before the show to see a full list of exhibitors and the sectors of the storage industry that they represent. Friedmann stressed the importance of time management.

"Decide how much time you want to spend at the show, and then allot an appropriate amount to each booth, making sure to schedule the 'must-see' booths first," she explained. "That way if your day is abruptly cut short, you won't miss the most vital exhibits. Consider making appointments with those exhibitors you really want to meet with."

It's also important to coordinate schedules with your co-workers. Hanging out with your colleagues can be fun, but there is no need for more than one person to sit in on a seminar if your time is limited. Let one person take notes there, and the others can go to different sessions. Or all of you can attend the roundtable discussions on September 1, and you can split up to cover as many topics as possible.

Perhaps the most important things to consider when you are packing is that you will be traveling to a desert and that you will be spending a lot of time on your feet. That means you need to wear comfortable shoes and clothing that is fairly light. You will also cut down on the amount of walking you do if you stay at the host hotel, so check with Caesars Palace and ask for the special SSA rate.

Attending the Show

The SSA goes to great lengths to make your experience as easy as possible, so be sure to use that to your advantage. You should start by attending the orientation for first-time attendees and new members on September 1.

"For those who are new to the industry or to the SSA, it's a great chance to learn how to make the most of their time at the conference," said Ginny Stengel, the SSA's vice president of member services. "We know

attending a meeting requires an investment of both money and time, so it's important to make the most of being there."

And part of making the most of it is knowing what takes place when and where. Stengel stressed looking closely at the daily events and planning accordingly.

"We get a lot of first-time attendees who assume the trade show is open all day, or that sessions are going at all times," she said. "We don't run these simultaneously, so one doesn't take away from the other. Studying the schedule before each day starts really helps."

In the totebag handed out at registration, attendees will find an exhibit floor layout that includes a list of all vendors and their respective booth numbers (as well as a product and services listing). Look closely at the directory again to make sure nothing has changed since you first looked.

The bag is perfect for holding any handouts and free gifts, so don't bog yourself down with a briefcase or large purse. Friedmann said business cards and a notebook are must-haves, and she warned not to go overboard with the amount of stuff you collect.

"Don't just grab every brochure that's offered to you," she said. "Collect the information that is of interest to you or that could be valuable to others in your company. Many

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exhibitors will gladly mail literature and samples, which relieves you of having to carry them. Use the small notebook to record the most vital information.”

Friedmann also stressed the importance of calling your own shots at the show. Don’t be afraid to let vendors know your time is limited, and don’t feel obligated to visit every booth. That said, Stengel warned to never be closed-minded about those vendors with which you may one day do business.

“Talk to as many vendors and fellow operators as possible,” she said. “You might not be in the market for a specific product or service, but there are always new and innovative ideas being showcased on the trade show floor. And by talking to fellow operators, you may learn something you never thought of to help in your business.”

It’s also crucial to remember that a convention is not solely about walking the trade show floor. Be sure to budget time for the sessions, seminars, keynote address (given by Tom Ridge), roundtable discussions and the various social events.

Best-selling author and speaker Bob Phibbs has written articles about maximizing your time at industry events, and he strongly suggests taking notes whenever possible.

“While I used to think it was important to take down exactly what the speaker was saying, it isn’t,” he wrote. “Listening to a speech is really just a gateway back into

your head. Through their words, the notes you should jot down are actions or brainstorms you have that you think might work for you or your business. That way you have your own words to empower yourself. Back home, they’ll have much more meaning.”

Also keep in mind that you are always working. Whether you are attending the SSA breakfasts or having a cocktail late at night, you should always be in network mode. And never be afraid to step outside your comfort zone. Rather than mingling with the usual suspects, try sitting at a table with folks you haven’t met.

“Don’t sit with the same people you always do,” Phibbs said. “Later you’ll have time to go to dinner and connect. Remember, lifelong friendships could be waiting for you across the aisle.”

Following Up

When you are done with all of your meetings, conversations and information-gathering, Phibbs said it’s very important to set a few goals that you want to implement when you return. Your company spent a lot of money to send you to the convention, so make sure you hold yourself accountable.

“Before you leave the conference, sit down with a pen and paper,” he suggested. “Write out two things you plan to change when you get back to your business and why.”





And everybody suffers from sleep deprivation and jetlag after a business trip, but your work has just begun when you return home from a trade show. Friedmann said it's important to go through your notes right away while everything is still fresh in your mind.

"Take some time to organize the information you've gathered," she said. "If it's for co-workers back at the office, sort it into envelopes and address them to the relevant person. If the information is for you, sort it by priority, affixing sticky notes to jog your memory after you've returned from the show."

Also try to reach out to the people you met as soon as possible. Keep in mind that each vendor dealt with hundreds of potential customers, so do all you can to refresh their memory on who you are and the name of the facility you represent.

"Having a clear plan of action will make sure that the time you spent at the show was a worthwhile investment," Friedmann said.

Finally, never be afraid to say something positive or negative to the Self Storage Association about your experience. In fact, we encourage you to do so, because it's your feedback that helps us take steps to make our next convention even better.

"The feedback is important so we know what was important to them," Stengel said. "We need to know what worked and what didn't work, so we can make adjustments in the future."

For more information on the SSA 2010 Fall Conference & Trade Show, visit WWW.SELFSTORAGE.ORG and the September issues of *SSA Globe* magazine. ❖



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