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By Dawn J. Grubb

From Left to right:
Bob Mikulas, Jennifer Richards, Greg
Strakosch, Robert O'keefe, Susan Givers

The Innovators

5 newcomers to the industry apply unconventional wisdom to producing shows. Find out how these leaders extended their brands, redefined their target audiences and formed strategic partnerships to grow their shows.

When Greg Strakosch, Co-founder & CEO for TechTarget, announced his company would launch a conference in the crowded storage industry, naysayers called him “nuts” for trying to compete with the dozens of established shows. “We went to IBM’s conference agency and they said, ‘No disrespect, but we represent IBM at 3,000 events and evaluate 10,000 candidates. We’ve seen it all,’” he says.

But when Strakosch took them through his conference model and demonstrated how his prequalifying process for attendees guarantees exhibitors nearly 100 percent ROI, the agency was impressed. “They said they’d never seen or heard of anything like this before and called it ‘innovative and unique,’” he says.

How did he come up with this innovative strategy with no previous show experience? Sometimes it’s easier to break the rules when you don’t know the rules.

In our search for innovative show organizers, EXPO has identified five professionals who applied unconventional wisdom, perhaps gained from previous experience outside the industry, to producing shows. These forward-thinking folks ditched business-as-usual practices and adopted out-of-the-box approaches to remain profitable during a recession — and even enjoy growth.

Different as they are, these five show organizers share many of the same ideas and common sense. Keep it simple: Talk to your customers. Analyze the challenges your industry faces and respond accordingly. Be ready to defend your idea when others question you. Deliver qualified attendees, and exhibitors will come. Here’s a look at how these leaders extended their brands, redefined their target audiences and formed strategic partnerships to grow their shows.

Greg Strakosch, Co-founder & CEO TechTarget, Needham, MA

Target audience: Enterprise IT professionals

Playing hard ball: TechTarget promises exhibitors and sponsors guaranteed qualified buyers — a good thing since they pay \$30,000 per booth and \$200,000 for a sponsorship. To attend TechTarget’s storage conference, attendees must be a VP

or director, have 5,000-plus employees, be responsible for buying and, most important, be in the market to buy. All attendees are qualified upon passing a rigorous screening process. "They apply on our Web site (www.techtarget.com), then we conduct 30- to 45-minute phone interviews and ask such qualifying questions as, 'What's your budget?' 'What hardware and software do you have?' 'Which solution are you currently looking at?' 'Which vendors are you considering?'"

How tough is Strakosch's screening process? "We ended up rejecting half of all who applied to come to the show." Turnout to his pre-screened shows ranges from 100-500 attendees. But those select few have major buying power. In fact, the average 2002 Storage Decisions attendee's annual budget was \$8.3 million.

The big payoff: Launched as a small private company with four industry-targeted Web sites and seed funding of \$12 million, TechTarget today boasts a rich media portfolio: 19 Web sites, two award-winning industry trade publications, 14 conferences, 100 e-mail newsletters and more than 240 employees in Massachusetts, California, New York and Virginia. What's more, the company recently quadrupled revenues and became profitable in 2002.

Target practice: Big IT conferences just weren't cutting it for some major exhibitors like Hewlett Packard, Microsoft and Sun Microsystems. Enter TechTarget, which nets a 90 percent exhibitor return rate. "Exhibitors said 900 out of 1,000 trade show attendees might be job seekers, business developers or consultants — none of them qualified buyers. But we put 100 out of 100 terrific prospects right in front of them. It's a smaller audience of decision makers who are ready to buy."

"There's always going to be a show striving for reach, so you must demonstrate a high ROI. The formula isn't complicated: Target your topic and content to attract a target audience."

Standing room only: Strakosch brainstormed this targeted show idea when TechTarget's online community members complained that well-known larger conferences didn't deliver ROI. "They just weren't excited to go. We wanted to create something that everyone would want to be a part of, both attendees and exhibitors alike. Now we've got a waiting list for most of our shows."

Industry kudos: Named one of BtoB's "10 Most Influential People in Business Media" and Ernst & Young's "Entrepreneur of the Year" for the New England region in June 2003.

Early inclinations: "I always wanted to be in business and was a young entrepreneur," says Strakosch, a 1984 Boston College political science grad. "I started cutting grass at age 10, but instead of cutting a few lawns, I cut the whole neighborhood. Working and making money still drives me. I'm motivated by winning and my dislike of losing. It's that simple."

Susan Givers, Director of Marketing & Expositions
The Society of Naval Architects and Marine Engineers, Jersey City, NJ
Target audience: Maritime technology engineers and architects

Challenge accepted: Upon joining The Society of Naval Architects and Marine

Engineers (SNAME) in 1999, Susan Givers was tasked with finding a solution for rebuilding the association's annual trade show from the ground up. An outside firm had been managing the 112-year-old show for years, and it was floundering, drawing fewer attendees and exhibitors. Givers accepted the challenge and jumped in feet first after leaving the Pittsburgh CVB.

"I was on the job four days when our next show opened. I bought a pair of tennis shoes and hiked to every booth, asking exhibitors' what we weren't doing right. I didn't do anything special — I'd been in the hotel and hospitality industry my whole career where you're taught to ask questions. It was simply a re-education process to get association leaders to listen to exhibitor concerns."

The power of two: Armed with exhibitor feedback, Givers set about finding a workable solution to revive the show. One key aspect missing was a trade publication. While other shows had their own publications, Givers knew SNAME wasn't ready to allocate resources to become a publisher. Instead, she partnered with an industry leader: the 50-year-old Maritime Group, publisher of the Maritime Reporter and Marine News. It was a great fit because Maritime didn't have a show. Partnering would create a solid brand.

Buy-in for ROI: Although she knew she'd hit the jackpot, Givers had to convince her boss and SNAME's board of directors. "My boss got it right away, but it was a controversial idea for the board because it was a big change. Most members viewed it as a risk because of the cash outlay. I had to quantify what we'd get in return."

Maritime Group is in charge of selling booths, while SNAME handles administration and registration. SNAME gets 25 four-color ads in the magazines, which reach 55,000 readers worldwide, and internal communications (e-mail blasts, ad inserts, direct mail and online promotions) to Maritime subscribers. What's more, the publisher promotes the show at the 30-plus industry shows it attends each year. On top of this, SNAME is promoted through editorial. "I did the math, and we're gaining about \$250,000 in marketing exposure. It's a great partnership. The brand recognition is great for both of us and they get commissions for booth sales."

Record sales: Maritime sold out the exhibit floor in record time this year (four months before the show). Typically, SNAME sells 120 booths but this year netted 175. What's more, attendance doubled and, for the first time in the show's history, there's an exhibitor waiting list. If things continue along this path, Givers plans to double the show's size within the next five to 10 years.

Testing the water: Givers spent 15 years in the hotel and hospitality industry, as well as stints in the CVB arena. "I learned a lot about service and follow up. Your first answer should always be 'Yes' and then you decide how you'll do it later."

**Bob Mikulas, President and Chief Executive Officer
Controlled Marketing Conference, Monument, CO
Target audience:** Lawn and garden industry

360 degrees: Twelve years ago, Bob Mikulas worked the other side of the trade show industry as an exhibitor. The manufacturer in the lawn and garden industry frequented many traditional booth-style shows with little success. But when he

attended a conference with pre-set appointments he wondered why the industry as a whole didn't practice this approach. "You could sit down with buyers and know within minutes whether they were interested in your products. Think about it: If you do 10 shows a year, spending \$1,000 for a 10x10 booth, it gets expensive pretty quick. And you may not even get connected with the appropriate buyers."

Enter Mikulas' Controlled Marketing Conference (CMC), which connects qualified buyers and sellers face-to-face in preset 10-minute appointments. "Buyers love the efficiency and ROI. They can eliminate three months of in-office appointments by attending our show."

Go get 'em: Mikulas is living proof bad advice can lead to big business. "When I started in the manufacturing business, I was told to attend as many shows as possible. But I was frustrated waiting for attendees to come to me. And it became expensive, time-consuming and risky. The fact is, they won't come to you, you've got to go get them."

It took him one year to launch CMC by persuading folks to forego business as usual and try something new. He marketed the concept with collateral and personal calls to build relationships with buyers and sellers. His first show in 1995 for the lawn and garden industry drew about 20 buyers and 45 manufacturers. Today it boasts 72 buyers and 220 manufacturers.

Packaged goods: Now Mikulas is shopping the appointment-setting model to other industries, including sports, air, motor, and home and garden. "What we do is applicable to any industry. It's just a matter of sitting down with show organizers and explaining how our concept works, including the benefits from attendees' and exhibitors' points-of-view. Small events like ours have higher value because you don't have every Tom, Dick and Harry on the floor. It takes a different breed of show organizer to pull off a format like this."

Success sells: Mikulas preps exhibitors for success by offering a preshow package that outlines tips for efficiently taking care of business. "We urge them to forego chit chat and learn how to make quick pitches. This is about presenting their business in the best light but in a short time frame."

CMC's proprietary software helps show organizers manage scheduling, and CMC "appointment police" patrol the show floor making sure attendees adhere to meeting times. When people connect, they can request bonus time — an additional meeting outside the show. "That's the success of the program — it's very beneficial for both and a chance to further build relationships when the interest is there."

Science experiment: Mikulas earned a bachelor's degree in biology and chemistry from West Virginia Wesleyan and a master's in administration from the University of Colorado. Fresh out of college, he joined the government researching weed seeds and then moved into work reclaiming abandoned coal mines.

**Robert O'Keefe, Vice President, Marketing
Toy Industry Association Inc., New York City**

Target audience: North American toy, game and entertainment product producers and importers

Toys are us: For 100 years, the American International Toy Fair — the association's marquee show — has drawn buyers, toy manufacturers, inventors, licensors and consultants alike. As the industry's premiere North American event, the Toy Fair draws an average 1,600 exhibitors and 40,000 attendees annually.

Expand the brand: When O'Keefe joined the Toy Industry Association (TIA) in January, he was tasked with building upon the century-old brand. Working with members, TIA leaders saw an opportunity to expand the brand while helping members overcome planning woes. Timing is key, and the Toy Fair wasn't quite hitting the mark for large mass retailers like Wal-Mart and Target that work on a longer business planning cycle (about a year in advance). The Toy Fair's annual February date left little time for product preview, negotiation and order placement for the holiday season. The solution? A new show, the Fall Mass Market, which debuted in October, allowing plenty of lead time for mass retailers' order fulfillment.

Game on: The Fall Mass Market features an appointment-only format where buyers and sellers can meet one-on-one to talk business and preview products scheduled for fourth quarter of the following year. "We're basically stocking the pond with fish. We don't coordinate appointments — buyers and sellers contact each other directly to schedule appointments."

In addition, the association launched the Holiday Preview, a full-day, media-only event to create a buzz about new, hot products that will be on retailers' shelves this holiday season. The Holiday Preview also debuted in October and drew more than 200 media members and 50 exhibitors.

Something for all ages: Going forward, O'Keefe plans to help TIA expand into other segments by becoming less toy-centric and more youth-oriented. The challenges: The ever-changing youth market is heavily segmented and kids are developing (physically, emotionally and cognitively) at a much faster rate than they did in the past. "They are so much bigger and brighter, and they need more challenges today. Connecting with other organizers and experts to keep up with these changes is extremely important in achieving our goals."

Playing to win: O'Keefe hopes the two new events will further TIA's age-old mission to promote growth globally and to ensure the industry's right to market and manufacture fun, educational and safe products to all ages, supporting the positive development of children. "Both shows are extensions of the Toy Fair and are our first chance to extend beyond tradition and reach consumers and the media. The shows allow retailers to plan ahead so they can finalize their purchasing decisions at the Toy Fair in February."

Background check: A Clarkson University MBA graduate, the 43-year-old O'Keefe spent more than 20 years in consumer packaged goods marketing, including 18 years with Duracell (marketing, product management and business development), where he created multi-industry promotion and business alliances, including global executive forums.

**Jennifer Richards, Senior VP of Executive Programs
CXO Media, Framingham, MA**

Target audience: Chief information officers and chief security officers in the

business, government and nonprofit sectors

More bang for the buck: If you own the industry's leading publication, why not expand the brand and build greater loyalty? That's exactly what CXO Media, publisher of CIO and CSO magazines, did in 1987 by launching executive programs for chief information officers and chief security officers. The four executive conferences — extensions of CIO and CSO magazines — draw the industry's "cream of the crop": 400-500 C-level attendees and eight-12 vendor sponsors. CXO works with sponsors in advance to get their logos in conference materials, establish meeting times, and lead breakout sessions on hot topics. Sponsors can also conduct focus groups or hold special events for attendees.

Elite club: Richards and her team put attendees through a strict prequalification process during registration by asking such questions as: What problems are you facing? and How innovative or resourceful have you been in solving prevalent business problems? "There's a small pool of CIOs in the country — only about 1,000. We're looking only for leaders." Richards and team also get leads from the magazine's CIO 100 Symposium and Awards, which recognizes resourceful CIOs from nonprofits, large corporations, government and small businesses.

Mix it up: Attendees choose from four quarterly conferences: the Enterprise Value Retreat and Awards Ceremony in February, CIO Perspectives in April, the CIO 100 Symposium and Awards in August and the CIO/O4 in November. Each format offers unique leadership and networking opportunities.

Keep it simple: Richards' nontraditional conference approach doesn't allow booth displays. And the once-allowed table-top displays are becoming a thing of the past. "We want to encourage informal dialogue. These displays became almost an entry barrier to executives. Now sponsors come armed only with their laptops and a box of collateral, and they're extremely successful. Plus, the meetings are held in resort hotels so busy executives can get a break from the daily grind and high-stress environment they're accustomed to."

This laid-back, no-frills approach pays off. During this summer's conference, qualified attendance rose 38 percent while revenue climbed 28 percent — a solid showing for an industry that's been hit hard by budget cuts, financial woes and job displacement.

Royal treatment: Richards sets her conferences apart from traditional industry trade shows by keeping the size small and dedicating staff to connecting people. CXO brings a group of senior staffers to each event whose sole responsibility is helping attendees identify who they'd like to meet and then facilitating introductions. Sponsors also receive a compendium of participants to use as a networking tool. Richards calls it an attendee "bio on steroids." It provides general bio information, as well as areas of accomplishments, special expertise, what the attendee is looking for, etc. It helps sponsors determine who they want to be introduced to.

Matchmaking expert: Before joining CXO, the 39-year-old Ohio Wesleyan history graduate co-owned a Boston market research firm for 12 years. "We did various technical conferences that focused on networking. It was like a dating service."

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