



## Tradeshow Week Also Honors National Lawn & Garden Show

Maybe you've heard of speed-dating, or even speed-networking. But what about speed-exhibiting?

Bob Mikulas, now president and CEO of the *Natl. Lawn & Garden Show*, said he saw early on the challenge that corporate events and downsized shows were presenting to the tradeshow industry and came up with an old idea to combat the new problem. His hope was to combine the best features of an exhibition with a foolproof way to get vendors and attendees together.

Mikulas' idea was to methodically and scientifically unite buyers and sellers by pre-arranging quick, 10-minute appointments for them, but not necessarily at exhibit booths. So he asked potential tradeshow-goers in one field he knew something about, the lawn and garden industry: How about an event consisting entirely of buyers sitting at conference tables instead of exhibitors staffing booths? They would set advance appointments with vendors, who circulate among buyers they hope to do business with.

"They loved the idea," Mikulas said. "So, in 1995 we began the Controlled Marketing Conference, an event with only pre-set meetings. We had 18 buyers and about 40 or 50 manufacturers participating. The word got out after that, and the concept kept growing."



Bob Mikulas, *Natl. Lawn & Garden Show*

The CMCs, as the get-togethers are called, grew in popularity and Mikulas, like any show manager, is always looking for ways to grow his business and please customers at the same time. That's why, in 2002, things came full circle: Exhibit booths were added, forming the *Natl. Lawn & Garden Show*.

Now, virtually every vendor participates in both the CMC and the exhibition.

The exhibition and conference areas are adjacent to each other in the same hall, but cordoned off from one another. In the area for pre-set appointments, a strict protocol is followed. Only vendors with appointments are permitted in, and then only with the buyers they've arranged to see. The 10-minute time limit is strictly observed for each appointment because, Mikulas said, "This is a controlled marketing conference."

Of course, the 10-minute meetings are expected to lead to longer, more detailed meetings later. The event also offers sit-down meals and other networking opportunities.

Vendors say they like the format. Marvin Rezac, president of McGrayel, called the event the most cost-effective

method he's found for meeting buyers. "It would take us thousands and thousands of dollars to visit each buyer individually," he said. Mark Getis, vice president of sales and marketing for Summit Chemical, said it would have taken him four to six weeks of traveling around the country, costing thousands of dollars, to accomplish what he did at the show.

Buyers are also enthusiastic. Darla Deters, purchasing manager for The Stark Brothers Nursery, said she got more good information and contacts in a shorter amount of time than she ever expected. "I love this format," she said. Darrell Ross, merchandise manager for Earl May Seed & Nursery, said, "This is a serious sales meeting, matching buyers with vendors who can negotiate programs."

Integrating a tradeshow floor with the appointment segment for the first time last year did cause some problems that Mikulas said were instructive. "They included complaints about a lack of buyers, so we adjusted the times of the show and the appointments." Both portions of the show go on at the same time, but there are three days devoted to appointments and only two to the exhibition. "Three days of booths would be too much, but if the industry said we should extend the booth days, we would," he said.

Next year's *NLGS* will be held June 14-16 in Denver. **TSW**



Controlled Marketing Conference