

# Steve Miller's Ramblings

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## **BRANDING, BENCHMARKING, AND THE ELUSIVE “WOW!”**

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In my last *Rambling*, I began a discussion of the importance of branding your trade shows to your customer base - including both exhibitors and attendees.

This importance cannot be overstated. In a world where technology is rapidly turning practically every product into a commodity, the branding experience may be the only way to separate yourself from the competition.

Consider this situation. How does a clothing retailer specializing in very low-cost threads separate itself from a saturated and overly competitive market? Many original stores are located in outlet malls throughout the US; not exactly a precursor of explosive growth. But Old Navy has broken the mold and created a singular branding experience.

Stores are staffed by enthusiastic young people (just the target you want), trained not only to know their products, but to be overly helpful with customers. All employees are equipped with wireless radio headsets. Not only does it look cool to their young target market, but the radios are practical, too. A question from a customer about where to find a particular product is quickly relayed to the employee nearest that section. I actually asked an employee at the front entrance of a store about some blue jeans and by the time I had walked back to that section another employee had several pair in my size ready to try on.

Even the Old Navy TV commercials help to establish the campy, cheap-threads brand. When you watched the “Old Navy Lady,” the late Carrie Donovan wax enthusiastic with Morgan Fairchild, Barbara Eden, and a dog named Magic, you know this store is different.

The point is that Old Navy basically just sells cheap, casual clothes. It’s the low-end subsidiary of The Gap, whose upper-end is Banana Republic.

Cheap clothes are cheap clothes. But then there’s Old Navy. They are establishing a relationship with their clients through a solid branding experience.

I just left a meeting of the Board of Directors of the International Housewares Association (sponsors of the International Housewares Show). Of the many items on their agenda, I was involved in three important issues.

The first was the discussion of possibly moving the show from Chicago to the new World Expo Center in Orlando. As most of you know by the time you read this, the decision was made to stay in Chicago. This was not exactly the easiest decision to reach. I mean think about. They decided to STAY in Chicago ... in January. Brrrr.

The second issue was the ongoing mandate to make sure the show is well-designed and laid out for the attendee. It's pretty common knowledge that any of the mega-shows out there are basically walking nightmares for attendees. To cover a show of 800,000 nsf efficiently and effectively is very difficult. As a result, many major shows have taken to the concept of categorization.

The purpose of categorization is to collect exhibitors with some pre-defined commonality in designated sections of the show. This allows attendees to more efficiently work that show. The buyer can select the categories important to him or her and invest their time in only those categories. The idea is to cut down the walking time for the attendee. Many major shows are going to this concept and we're starting to see smaller shows do it, too (the CBA International, as an example).

Finally, the third issue I've been involved in with IHA has been the mandated objective of adding more "WOW!" to the show. We continually work hard to create new ideas that make this year's show visibly and measurably better than last year's.

The fact is, all three of these issues - show location, categorization, and the "WOW!" - are all components of the branding experience for the International Housewares Show attendee (and exhibitor).

In Part One of *Branding, Benchmarking, and the Elusive WOW*, I discussed the importance of understanding the fact that every component of your trade show - the location, the dates, the way its laid out, the way you transport people, any other value-added pieces - is an integral part of the branding experience for your customers.

The "Elusive WOW" enters the equation when you are looking for ways to totally separate your show from all potential competition. The "Elusive WOW" becomes the memorable part of the experience that only you can deliver.

The problem is that a trade show is a trade show. They're all in a convention center or hotel. They all have an Octanorm-framed registration area with familiar-looking headers and pipe-and-drape. We've seen the carpet somewhere before, too. The aisles are all north-south, east-west.

Obviously, the modularization of the exposition industry was developed for practical reasons. It just wouldn't be possible for every trade show to buy new carpet, new furniture, new kiosks, and everything else. Convention centers must work with a grid system to efficiently provide the needed services.

But the downside of all that sharing is a sense of sameness about trade shows. And sameness begets dullness, and dullness begets boring.

Thus, the importance of the “Elusive WOW.” What are those things that you can add to your trade show to stimulate the attendee and exhibitor to be wildly enthusiastic? And maybe more importantly, what is the process you can go through to actually learn some new ideas to enhance the value of your show to your customer base?

The common practice in our industry is to go visit other expositions when we are looking for new ideas. What are they doing at Comdex, or SuperShow, or PackExpo, or Housewares? Let’s go attend those shows, see what they’re doing that’s new, and then we’ll just go back and do it, too!

Yeah, but then after a while, we’ve all got video walls. We’ve all got brightly colored signage. We’ve all got CNN broadcasting in the registration area. We’ve all got a concierge. We’ve all got a buyer lounge.

We all still look alike!

Edwards Deming, one of the fathers of the Total Quality Management concept once explained to me that the purpose of benchmarking was to “observe correct behavior both within and outside your industry and then emulate within your own context.”

Obviously, we need to benchmark other shows. One of the tenets of being successful is that you don’t fall behind the competition. So, it is necessary to have video walls, CNN and a concierge.

But in addition, it’s also necessary to do things that are uncommon at other shows. In fact, it should be a mission of every trade show to look for ways you can be *completely different* from every other trade show in existence. And even going a step farther, it should be a mission to find those “Elusive WOW’s” that would be difficult, if not impossible to copy. CNN broadcasts at expositions was new once, but it was easily copyable. Now every show I attend has it.

So how do you find those “Elusive WOWs,” those uncopyable, value-added benefits that blow away attendees and exhibitors ... and after a show make them say, “Wow, I can’t wait to see what they do next year!”?

One answer lies in the “outside your industry benchmarking” Deming spoke of. This concept was clearly driven home to me in a conversation with Jim Nordstrom several years ago. Nordstrom regularly benchmarks companies outside their industry. “You can teach us about trade shows. We’ll figure out how to use that information in our stores.”

This ability to look at outside industries and resources as benchmarks is like having the “new eyes” of a young child. Our kids are not hampered by the blinders we develop as we get older.

Let me give you some examples of observations I’ve made recently with “new eyes” and see how they might be used in an exposition:

- Speaking of Old Navy ...

I was riding a taxi into McCormick Place yesterday. As we drove on I90 into the downtown area, we passed an enormous billboard with the Old Navy log framed around an electronic billboard. The billboard was flashing the message, “Tune your radio into 1550 on your a.m. dial for a message from Old Navy.” I couldn’t get the taxi driver to understand that I wanted to change the station from some far eastern music to the Old Navy station.

It hit me as a great idea for setting up a localized radio signal around a convention center. You could post billboards, promote the radio site in you promotional materials, show daily, and show directory. You could broadcast prerecorded messages about the special events of the day, educational seminars, and even sell sponsorships.

- Southwest Airlines only serves peanuts on their flights.



Southwest Airlines makes a big deal about the peanuts they serve on their flights. Why not have a peanut vendor walk through the aisles giving away free bags of peanuts with the show logo imprinted on the sides (or apples, or breath mints, or water, etc.)?

- The Ritz Carlton Experience.

This was really driven home to me in Washington DC at the Pentagon City Mall. The mall is loud, boisterous, and crowded with people pushing and shoving to get around. But then, you walk past the Disney Store on the first level and there is a door marked “Ritz Carlton.” You walk through that door and into a different world. All of a sudden the noise is gone, replaced by a peaceful quiet, only broken by the soft sounds of a calming harp from the library. You stroll through the lobby where every employee smiles and treats you like a special guest.

Trade shows are loud, noisy, uncomfortable affairs. people are bustling though the aisles, rushing to appointments that are all the way across the convention center. It is high stress chaos.

Why not offer a “quiet room?” Not a buyer lounge that’s just a room off the show floor. A real “quiet lounge” that is designed to keep noise out and calmness in? What would it look like? Go visit a Ritz.

- While writing this, I am on an American Airlines flight back to Seattle. The flight attendant, Amanda, just came through the first-class cabin passing out hot, moist towels for us to freshen up with. The towels are common on every American flight, plus several other airlines. However, Amanda has a small glass with dry ice on the tray giving a special effect to her presentation. It also reminded me of another American flight attendant who walked through the cabin with dry towels and club soda to wash your eyeglasses before we took off.

Little special touches like these can make a big difference. Imagine offering eyeglass cleaner to people standing in a registration line? Or complimentary USA Todays on the bus? Or hot towels in the exhibit hall?

Many times it is the little things that make a branding experience. Doubletree Inns get a lot of repeat business from travelers who just stay there for the chocolate chip cookies! That’s their “Elusive WOW.”

Creating a powerful brand in your customer's eyes is imperative to your long-term success. Why should they go to your trade show when there are two or three other ones with a lot of the same exhibitors or attendees. After all, isn't one of the biggest complaints, "There are TOO many trade shows?" You don't want to be known as just another trade show. You want to be known as THE trade show to attend or exhibit in.

What is the branding experience your customers have at your show? What are the benchmarks you've been emulating? Are they all within the trade show industry or do you get ideas from your local supermarket, or flea market, or radio station?

And what are those "Elusive WOWs" that you have developed that are difficult, if not impossible, to copy? What are those little things you can do that don't cost an arm and a leg, yet offer high, perceived value to your customer base of exhibitors and attendees?

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Steve Miller, Kelly's Dad and a strategic director, works with both show management and corporations worldwide, advising them on competitive advantage and innovation. He also speaks to business groups around the world on corporate strategy. His website is [www.theadventure.com](http://www.theadventure.com).

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