

Why Tradeshows Are Good For Your Pockets and Your Soul

By Russ Lawrence, Chapter One Book Store, Hamilton, MT

Like many of you, we just got our ABACUS numbers back from the ABA, and have set about analyzing them. Happily, we still fall into the “profitable” category, but that didn’t stop me from exploring the question of how we got there. We scored well in the “cost-of-goods” category—a relief, since I am PNBA’s “BookPro” for buying—but one thing I noticed is that we spent more than the average on Travel & Entertainment.

What did we spend all that money on—and was it necessarily a bad thing? (For the record, it was heavily weighted to “travel,” and not so much “entertainment.” We follow standard industry practice and charge that to Chuck Robinson’s room!)

We’re a small store—the three full-time employees are also the owners. We don’t all go to every trade show, but at least one of us tries to make it to every PNBA show, and the past few years we have been attending BEA, as well.

That costs a fair amount of money, even factoring in all the free chocolate we can usually scavenge on the show floor at snacktime. As a buyer, I take advantage of as many “show special” offers as I can, to reward the publishers and reps who support the shows, but the savings rarely make much of a dent in what it costs to attend the show. (As an ABA Board member, my attendance at most of the shows is expected, but it’s usually still on my own nickel).

So why go and spend all that money? Because I think that attending the shows, and participating in the larger world of books you can only access there, is one of the secrets to our profitability.

Years ago, when I was on the ABA’s “Booksellers Advisory Council,” we did a BEA “post-mortem.” The BAC identified “opportunities to interact with other booksellers” as one of the most valuable aspects of BEA, and other trade shows. That interaction can take many forms: bookseller panels, roundtables, banquets, breakfasts, user groups, and just rubbing elbows on the show floor or in the hotel lobby—or, yes, even the lounge!

Trade shows have become, for me, a non-stop opportunity to learn about my profession. Everyone reading this column has developed some tricks, and the show’s the place to share them.

Further, by connecting with authors and publishing professionals from both the literary and the political realm, I come away remembering that we’re part of a much bigger world, a world that has implications far beyond the boundaries of our stores and our communities. That, in turn, is reflected in the way we present ourselves in our store, and in the way we present our store to the public.

Our customers respect and appreciate that, and they vote with their dollars. They have many choices for purchasing books, but they enjoy doing so in a place that helps connect them to that larger world, too.

That's why I've come to believe that spending the money—and time—to go to a trade show is an investment that has paid off in terms of profitability for the store.

Lastly, the shows are just flat-out fun! Bookselling and publishing attract an exceptional group of people, and I truly enjoy spending time with everyone there. Injecting some additional fun into your work adds to the intangible bottom line, and that's right up there with profitability as a measure of success, to me.

I'll grant that if we were struggling, financially, this would be something we'd have to consider cutting back, but it would be among the last things—our relationships with booksellers and reps are a lifeline. For stores that have the wherewithal, however, I can't help but think that sending another person or two to the shows might be a useful experiment: see what happens when they come back, charged-up and full of ideas! It just might pay for itself.