

Grower Conferences: Maximizing Your Educational Opportunities, Time and Resources



Peter Konjoian is president of Konjoian's Horticulture Education Services Inc. His career spans four decades as a commercial grower, researcher and consultant. Lela Kelly is vice president of Dosatron International Inc. Konjoian can be reached at peterkfes@comcast.net.

This month's guest is Lela Kelly, vice president of Dosatron International. We will discuss how growers and exhibitors can maximize their educational opportunities, time and resources at conferences. Lela has served on trade show exhibit committees, I on grower committees, and together we have served on boards of directors and additional committees.

Peter: Lela, welcome and thank you for discussing this topic. It has been a contentious one over the years and given our overlapping industry service we are in position to discuss opposing viewpoints constructively. Our end game is simple: understand each other's interest to serve growers in the best possible way. Please share your thoughts regarding attendee traffic from your perspective as an exhibitor.

Lela: Hi, Peter. I believe that the topic of trade show traffic versus grower education is one that surely needs discussion. Over the 30+ years I have been doing trade shows, I have experienced all sorts of scenarios. There is truly nothing worse than being an exhibitor at a trade show, spending

all that money for the booth, hotels, travel, food, etc., only to see empty aisles when attendees leave the trade show floor to attend a seminar.

That being said, I also believe that educational seminars are an integral part of trade shows. They draw attendees and are a big part of why trade show events are vital to any industry. The big question at every show is how to balance dedicated trade show time and still offer the seminars growers want.

One of the best shows I participated in opened every day at noon. Every morning was dedicated to seminars. The trade show floor was open from 12 to 6 p.m., without seminars competing for trade show time. The show also offered tours and seminars the day before the trade show opened, along with some evening sessions. In my opinion, this was the perfect balance. As an exhibitor, I was able to get some work done in the morning so I could be ready for the heavy traffic all afternoon.

Peter, if growers want education, do they not see the trade show floor as a vital part of that education? Every exhibitor is a wealth of information if growers see past the idea that they just want to "sell" something.

Peter: Harry Tayama, my graduate advisor at Ohio State and a major architect of OFA's and the Short Course's success had a saying: You can't fly with the eagles if you hoot with the owls. Regarding the morning-afternoon format you prefer, I'm happy with that Lela. I have the morning to educate and you have the afternoon to sell. If only it was that simple.

Putting my double duty hat on, one grower and the other educator, here's my perspective. It intrigues me that your frame of reference is that education seminars are an integral part

of a trade show, whereas mine is that education seminars and trade show combined form the conference. You see exhibitor fees carrying the conference, I see the conference mission being grower education. When growers are given the choice between education seminars or the trade show, they very often choose education. Their choice can cause the empty trade show anxiety you describe.

I understand that exhibitors spend a lot of money and expect time with growers. But my commitment is providing them with the seminar education they expect when they make the choice. It's the crux of our disconnect, striking a balance that satisfies your and my organizing committees.

Your point about growers seeing past an exhibitor's desire to sell is important. My short answer to your question is yes, growers do see the trade show floor as a place to learn. However, dig deeper and they are quite sensitive when selling infiltrates their education. In an education seminar, attendees do not want to be sold to and they routinely sound an alarm through their speaker evaluations.

I get how they feel; I loathe being sold to on every level. It's uncomfortable for me to walk a trade show and have exhibitors intercept me. This may be partly due to me being an introvert. We like having our space to ourselves. If I have a question, please, let me stop and ask.

Lela: First of all, I would love to dispel the troubling feeling that people experience when visiting trade shows and being "sold." Every exhibitor at a trade show is there to sell their products. If they are pushy, or unwelcoming, then everyone has the right to say "No, thank you."

When attendees walk the aisles of a

trade show they are interested in information about products that can help grow their business. That should be their focus. The most important thing an attendee can do is gather all the pertinent information from exhibitors. This is free information; no one has to buy anything.

This, in fact, is education. Most qualified exhibitors have the answers you seek and are more than willing to share them. Educational seminars as well as trade show time should all be looked to as sources of valuable information for the growers.

Peter: Dosatron and a growing group of exhibitors are evolving beyond a sales-first strategy. I have seen your commitment to educate growers for a long time; you represent a group of exhibitors that has proven to grower committees that it can contribute to the education program without selling bias. That's respected by those of us putting seminar programs together.

More importantly, this group's participation in education is earning the trust of growers. My position is that your evolution is partly in response to the feelings being expressed. Educate us today so we can make better purchasing decisions tomorrow.

Okay partner, we've framed the challenge. Next, how do we make exhibitors feel they get their money's worth and attendees feel they're getting enough education? What is your view of exhibitor education on the trade show floor?

Lela: One of my favorite things to do in our booth is to gather a small group of growers to educate them on the maintenance and calibration of their Dosatron injectors. Growers really appreciate that information because it does not take a great deal of their time. Short and sweet.

I am sure there is a way we could do more of this type of education right on the trade show floor that focuses on information and not selling. It can give growers the take-home information to implement and grow their businesses.

Peter: Terrific point. Conferences are making strides toward what I see as hybridized education offerings. Breaking down the wall separating seminar rooms from the trade show floor is occurring, brick by brick. Over a decade ago I attended one of your trade show committee meetings for the then OFA. My proposal that day was to escort small groups of growers onto the Short Course trade show floor for targeted product tours. This proposal capped years of frustration for me as an educator having to show slides of cutting edge technology to growers in a dark seminar room

while the shiny new products were sitting under bright lights on the other side of the wall.

Your committee agreed to allow us a trial run; we called the project Trade Show Interactive. Exhibitors were contacted prior to Short Course to commit a person in their booth during the specified hour of the tour to spend 10 minutes with small, rotating groups to educate and not sell.

How do we make exhibitors feel they get their money's worth and attendees feel they're getting enough education?

Since that project many more bricks have been removed from the wall spawning new and exciting education options. Cultivate now offers its Knowledge Center and Live for Growers programs in dedicated areas on the trade show floor and concourse immediately outside the trade show. These new venues offer 30-minute presentations, the short and sweet concept you mentioned. Traditional 60-minute seminars and longer workshops continue to be offered in seminar rooms for topics requiring more contact time.

Looking to the future, educators and exhibitors are learning how to use electronic platforms for both education and sales. Exciting opportunities await. Never stop learning, right, Lela? Let's invite fellow exhibitors, educators and growers to continue the dialog. Thanks for tackling this issue with me.

Lela: My pleasure Peter, thank you for the invitation. [gpn](#)

selecta ^{one}

Bred and selected for
**Profitable
Poinsettias**

**Strong, well-shaped
poinsettias in the
greenhouse.**

Strong roots
hold up to all
greenhouse
watering
methods,
resulting in
lower shrink and
higher yields.



selectanorthamerica.com

©2016 Ball Horticultural Company 16586-A-GAMS
Visit selectanorthamerica.com for current Terms & Conditions of Sale.