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Painted Pigs and Garden Parties

ProQuest taps Martha Stewart's popularity for a show program that harvests 3,000 leads. It's a Good Thing.

Got a problem? Paint a ceramic pig. No, seriously, that's how the folks at ProQuest, an information services provider, tapped their creative talents.

In search of an exhibiting strategy for the 2000 American Library Association conference in Chicago, ProQuest assembled a team of key suppliers and in-house exhibiting, sales and marketing people.

It herded them off to a hip, paint-your-own-pottery shop. Everyone was handed some paint, a ceramic pig and a mission: Develop a trade show strategy specifically aimed at ALA attendees, namely conservative librarians. And by the way, make it creative.

Initially,

some team members felt they'd walked into an artsy-craftsy think tank from hell. But the ProQuest Picassos emerged from the exercise totally satisfied. Not only had they created some snazzy porkers, they'd also laid the groundwork for an integrated program that would go on to wow attendees, further the ProQuest branding message and increase leads by 50 percent over the previous year.





Weed and feed

ProQuest is the library researcher's right arm. Founded in 1938 in Ann Arbor, MI, as Bell & Howell Information and Learning, the company initially provided information on microfilm and microfiche. Over the past 20 years it has branched out into electronic formats and online services. It now offers online access to the ProQuest Digital Vault, a collection of books, periodicals, newspapers, dissertations and research material.

In light of the current worldwide merger mania, however, the company's product expansion has become an exhibiting challenge. "There is a lot of churn in our market," says Ann Curtis, ProQuest's promotions manager for exhibits and trade shows. Companies are merging or being acquired at a frantic rate, and customers have begun to worry whether the suppliers they rely on will still be around in six months. "We needed to reinforce that we're cutting edge, but we're a proven leader that's going to be around for the long haul," Curtis says.

The ALA audience was ProQuest's second challenge. Approximately 70 percent female, the well-educated, conservative

librarians will go for trendy, "but goofy doesn't sit well with them," says Curtis. "We needed to make sure our exhibit was cutting edge and innovative, but it couldn't have so many bells and whistles that it was intimidating. It couldn't be scary."

ProQuest, however, had additional demons. Not only did the company need to develop a theme umbrella under which it could integrate an event, presentations and promotions, but it also had a four-year-old exhibit. Although the forward-thinking structure has withstood innumerable forklifts and passing design trends, the \$350,000 exhibit amounts to a fixed canvas upon which a different theme must be painted each year.

In the face of these challenges, ProQuest painted pigs.

Seed and cultivate

The painting/brainstorming session began by identifying hot media trends in the general public. "Librarians are particularly tuned in to what's hot," Curtis says, because they get requests for popular books and periodicals every day.

Eventually the conversation turned to

ProQuest's ads are elegant parodies of Martha Stewart's *Living* magazine.



Exhibit staffers continue the Martha Stewart theme with gardening garb.



Floral touches. Flower boxes by a winding path (above) and a wheelbarrow full of gardening giveaways (below) complete the scene.



Live plants and a fresh sod floor turn ProQuest's earthy environment into an oasis for ALA attendees.



"When we brainstorm, we always try to do something fun. This time everybody painted a pig."

ANN CURTIS, PROMOTIONS MANAGER FOR EXHIBITS AND TRADE SHOWS, PROQUEST

coffee-table magazines. It wasn't long before media maven Martha Stewart and her *Living* magazine took center stage.

Suddenly it all fell into place. Stewart is a trusted, down-to-earth multimedia veteran and a favorite among female audiences. Yet, with her over-the-top, "I can make a three-car garage out of a lemon peel" shtick, she's a tongue-in-cheek super-human homemaker.

After the initial connection, the ProQuest team combined her *Living* magazine with other coffee-table titles such as *Country Living* and *Southern Living*, then threw in a garden party theme. The resulting integrated strategy was far more than...well, "a good thing."

• **Exhibit and graphics.** Originally designed by The McMillan Group of Westport, CT, and fabricated by exhibit house Folio Atlanta, the 30-by-60-foot island exhibit was a home-and-garden wonderland.

This year, high-tech demonstration stations sprouted among scattered plants and garden equipment. And the double-deck exhibit featured a mock Martha Stewart set. Complete with a sod floor, unfinished wood tool shed and numerous planters, the set served as a presentation theater. Forming one

of the exhibit's corners, the theater offered unfinished wood benches as casual, yet homey, seating.

• **Theater presentations and staff attire.** Live Marketing, a Chicago trade show marketing agency, designed the presentations to parody Martha Stewart's TV show. The two eight-minute presentations featured an ample sprinkling of gardening metaphors and used interactive media support.

Sporting full gardening garb (khakis, light blue shirts, green aprons), staffers and presenters served up the ProQuest messages with a Martha twist. "We played off Martha's know-it-all-ness," says Carol Sites, a writer and presenter for Live Marketing. "Since Martha can get a little tedious, we let the audience have some fun."

For example, Sites says, "When I worked the exhibit, I'd say things like, 'Do you like our benches? I just whipped them up last night with a little wood I had lying around the house.'"

• **Conference program back cover.**

Designed by Wagner Design, a graphic arts firm in Ann Arbor, MI, ProQuest's conference brochure ad was another highly-visible *Living* link. Running on the brochure's back cover, the ad appeared to

be the front cover of a mythical *ProQuest Living* magazine, right down to the bar code and the \$3.95 price tag. The eye-catching ad had a lot of librarians doing double-takes.

• **Pre- and at-show promotions.** Pre-show mailers and invitations to ProQuest's product announcement luncheons also carried the *Living* theme. Scratch and win cards, distributed to all attendees at registration, directed attendees to the exhibit for a sampling of giveaways, including window herb gardens, aloe vera "after gardening" lotion and fanny packs with insulated water bottles.

• **"Garden Party" evening event.** Developed by meeting-planning company CRS Design of Alexandria, VA, the "Garden Party" was held on Chicago's Navy Pier in conjunction with the ALA ProQuest Scholarship Bash, an annual conference-wide event sponsored by ProQuest. The party carried the Martha-based gardening theme off the exhibit floor, and served as a "make you feel special" staging event for the full-conference bash.

Harvest and enjoy

The program garnered more than 3,000 sales leads (compared to 2,000 leads in 1999), and the exhibit won the Donald Kohlstedt Best Island Booth award. Piggy-backing on Martha Stewart, the hip yet earthy theme connected trendy media and entertainment

gags with an underlying message of dependability and trust—and branded ProQuest as an innovative leader that's in it for the long haul. All this from a few pigs and some paint.

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Rooftop garden party: ProQuest's evening event was held at Chicago's Navy Pier.

By Linda Armstrong, senior editor.