

EXHIBITOR

THE MAGAZINE FOR TRADE SHOW AND CORPORATE EVENT MARKETING

SECTION 1

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Exhibitor Magazine's Top Exhibit
and Event Managers of 2002

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EXHIBITOR MAGAZINE'S TOP EXHIBIT AND EVENT MANAGERS

How many librarians can you fit into a hotel room? The answer is about 30 or 40, and Ann Curtis knows. In fact, she was the one hosting the party.

As the exhibit manager for ProQuest Information and Learning, a company that compiles online information databases, Curtis has been hobnobbing with librarians for 12 years at shows for the American Library Association (ALA) and the Public Library Association (PLA). And she has her audience nailed.

"The great thing about our customers," she says, "is that they're nice, nice people. They're *librarians*. They're smart, and interesting and quirky." Curtis's relationship with these librarians is one of the main reasons her exhibit programs work.

She proves it, show after show, by customizing themes to her audience and then tying every element of the show to that theme. Take the grand prize ProQuest gives away at each show. At the ALA mid-winter show 2002, Curtis based ProQuest's exhibit on the theme "The Greatest Generation." The grand prize was an original letter about perseverance written and signed by Harry Truman. It included a black and white photograph of Harry Truman — perfect for a library display. At another show, where ProQuest promoted its historical-newspaper database, the grand prize was a trip for two to New York to tour *The New York Times* headquarters.

At the PLA show in March, 2002, Curtis chose the theme "The American Story" to promote the company's genealogical database, HeritageQuest Online. The grand prize was a guest appearance by a professional storyteller to the library of the winning attendee. She also featured the storyteller at the show reception. That was a good call. By the end of the reception, in Curtis's words, "the storyteller had 300 or 400 librarians eating out of his hand."

TRADE SHOW PREPARATION

The first thing Curtis does when preparing for a show is to decide a theme to go with the product that will be featured at the show. To come up with the "American Story" theme, she asked her team two questions: "What about HeritageQuest Online is cool?" and "Why would a librarian think remembrance is cool?"

Next, Curtis works with Jill Wagner from Wagner Graphic Design to develop the different elements of the campaign: an ad for the show program, a flash e-vite, print invitations to the customer receptions and events, and the exhibit graphics. "Our goal," she explains, "is to make every element look like it's from the same family, the same idea, and the same theme." For the American Story

theme, they used a vintage, sepia-toned motif, with yellowed documents and black and white photos.

Another element of the marketing plan for the 2002 PLA show was a Flash-based e-vite. This was uncharted territory for both ProQuest and the PLA show, so Curtis knew this would be a great differentiator. Those who responded to the e-mail, a whopping 30 percent, received a registration card to pick up a leather-bound journal at the ProQuest exhibit.

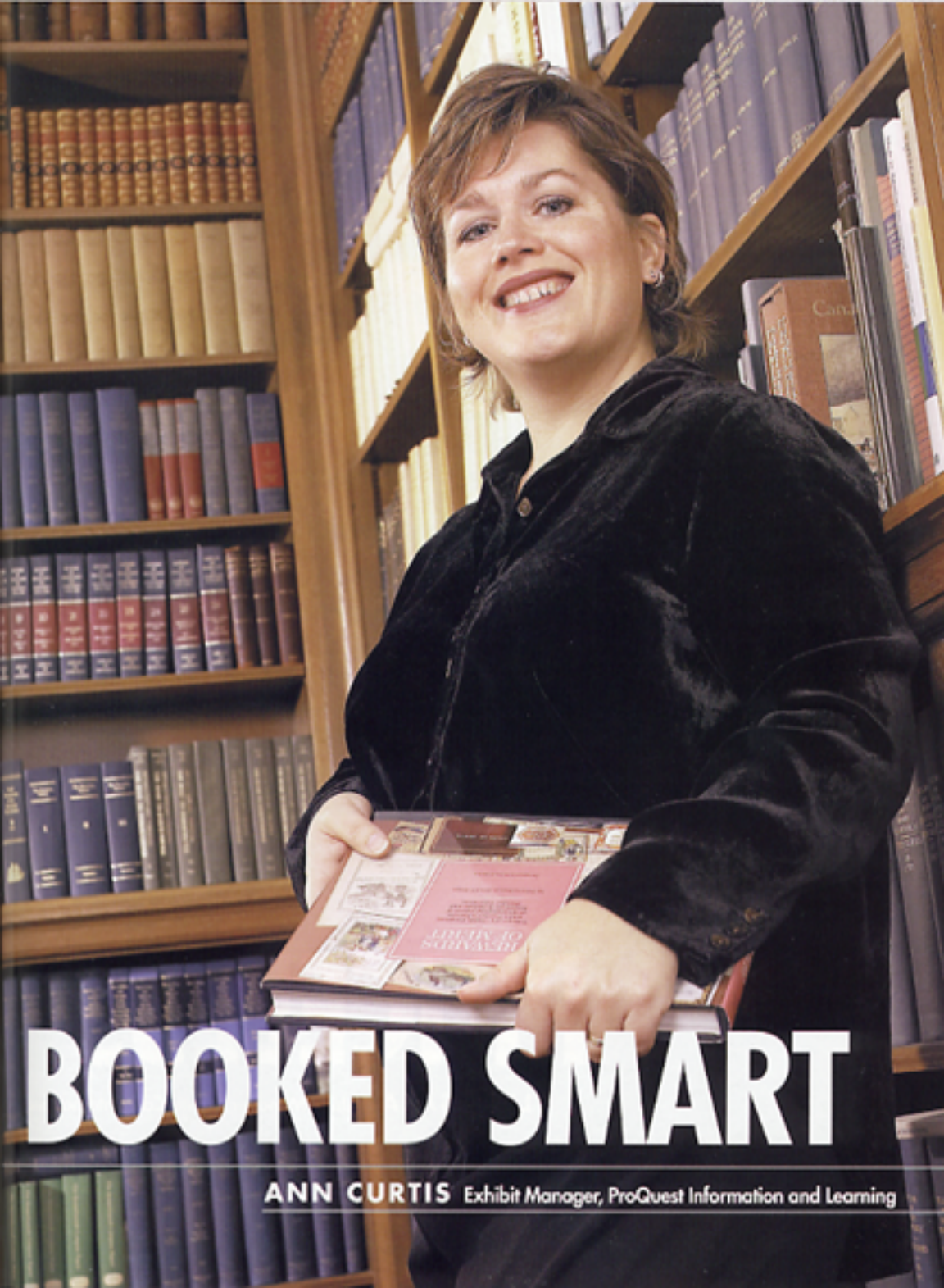
Finally, Curtis concentrates on the exhibit itself, usually managed by exhibit house MC², based in Atlanta. One of the main attractions is usually a live presentation by Carol Sykes from Live Marketing, based in Chicago. At the 2002 PLA show, the presentation was set on a stage with a huge graphic of a kitchen for the backdrop. The scene followed a husband and wife as they used HeritageQuest Online to research family history from the comfort of their own home. This "home" was made even more comfortable by the chocolate chip cookies that the wife baked in a toaster oven during each presentation and handed to attendees.

By the end of the 2002 PLA show, ProQuest recorded "meaningful interactions" with more than 30 percent of the 5,100 paid attendees, including those who watched the presentation, those who redeemed their e-vite premium, those who attended the reception and those who chatted with the ProQuest staff over coffee in the espresso bar on the upper deck of the exhibit.

If you ask Curtis to what she owes her success, she would not credit her boundless energy and creativity ("I'm not freakin' Leonardo Da Vinci"), nor to the knowledge of her target audience inside out, but to her supportive team at ProQuest and her vendors. This is something she's come to rely on. Curtis recalls a show ten years ago, where she had to ask someone to unroll some carpet so she could sprawl her six-month-pregnant body on the show floor during setup. "If I could go back and talk to the Anne who was lying on the floor, wiggling out inside her head, I'd say, 'Look around you. You've got Tom. You've got Bob. These guys will handle it all.' It's amazing the people that I get to work with."

She also credits the freedom and support that the management at ProQuest gives her. She explains, "The management here sees how truly important trade shows are. They stand behind pretty much every cockeyed idea I come up with." Her cockeyed ideas would knock the spectacles off of any librarian. □

By Whitney Archibald, staff writer; warchibald@exhibitor-magazine.com.



BOOKED SMART

ANN CURTIS Exhibit Manager, ProQuest Information and Learning