

MANAGEMENT

Strategic SHOPPING

Any trip to the major gift markets can be stressful and tiring, but there are a few tips from the pros to smooth the process — maybe you'll even enjoy yourself!

By Paige Worthy

(Photos: Sara Kerens, Dallas Market Center.)



Gift shops are serious business for many garden centers, and after the peak spring selling season — especially around the holidays — it's even more important to carry an array of unique products to keep customers excited about your store and shopping year round.

So it's no surprise that the country's major gift markets can be a bit overwhelming: With so many enticing gift products to pack into one shopping experience, it's bound to be a little crazy. But this is an industry that loves to share tips and tricks, from merchandising to the best new varieties, and shopping strategies are no exception.

One Store's Process

Sandy Noten-Heuman of Bob's Home & Garden Showplace in Egg Harbor Township, N.J., has been attending Atlanta's gift market at AmericasMart for years. She and the four other Bob's staff members she travels with are truly a force to be reckoned with: They spend as much as 10 days at the market, waiting at the doors before they open every morning and sticking around past the mart's close some nights — “until they throw us out,” she says.

Before they make the journey to Atlanta, they sit down and determine a budget. Seventy percent of the buy is holiday-related, she says, and the other 30 percent is everyday items. They look at what sold well the

previous year and what is still left over to be reused in themes throughout the store. “Know your inventory and try to incorporate your old stuff and make it new,” she says. Once at the mart, they lace up their most comfortable shoes and hit the floor.

Depending on the vendor, they might stay in a store up to six or eight hours to complete their buy. “Sometimes we divide and conquer; sometimes we stay together,” Noten-Heuman says. “Sometimes we'll each see things in a different light. Everybody has input.” If their visit to a vendor is especially long, the option is there for someone to take off and check out other nearby showrooms.

When asked what advice she would offer to first-time market attendees, she gave these pointers: Go at a time when you can visit the temporary booths as well as permanent showrooms — you might see something new and different. Wear comfortable shoes. Bring snacks. Consider taking a wheeled briefcase or backpack — your shoulders will thank you.

More Tips

And here are a few more thoughts for a smooth market experience — applicable to a visit to any market, from Dallas to Atlanta to New York — from Pat Zajac, senior director of communications at the Dallas Market Center.

1. Preregister and take advantage of special hotel rates negotiated by the market center.





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2. Do your research in advance. Go the website, look at the floor plans and check out publications from the market you're visiting. The

Dallas Market Center produces *The Source* magazine and also issues a monthly e-zine, *The Product Source*, which showcases new products that will be offered at market.

3. Schedule appointments with showrooms ahead of time, but leave room in your schedule to explore new showrooms and areas of market as well as attend some seminars.

4. Once at market, pick up a directory and as well as the seminar schedule and new product listings.

5. If possible, schedule an entire day — or at least a half day — to walk the entire market before you make purchases. Be sure to include temporary exhibitors in your walkthrough.

6. Bring plenty of business cards; include both your billing and shipping addresses.

7. Ask the showroom staff for help: What are their top sellers? What is the volume? The sales reps generally have a good sense for what's happening in the marketplace.

8. After market closes down for the day, go out and have a nice dinner. Visit some other area retailers to see what product they are carrying and how they display it.

9. You will pick up hundreds of brochures and catalogs while walking the floor. Consider shipping them to yourself rather than carrying them back home.

10. Establish relationships with similar retailers from around the country that you can share ideas with.

11. Look for market specials, deals not available from the sales reps who visit your store. If you place a big enough order, the savings may be enough to cover your airfare.

12. After market, follow up on the orders you made. Make sure you got all the information you needed. Figure out when you should expect delivery. Go over the orders with your staff so that they feel part of the process and are familiar with the product once it arrives. ❧

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