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Using a Strategic BD partner to maximize ROI from ICSC Shows How A/E/C firms and other service providers can reap the benefits - by Mary McCarthy

September 22, 2017 - Retail

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ICSC shows provide A/E/C companies, law firms and other service providers outstanding opportunities to meet face-to-face with developers, REITs, retailers and brokers in a single location over a 2-3 day period. But consider this: How many times have you walked an ICSC show without a plan? How many productive meetings have you had by simply by dropping by a booth? What new clients did you meet and what “real” opportunities did you generate? Getting to the right people with the right message, at the right time, requires a strategic plan to maximize ROI.

Planning yields results

A well-conceived plan together with a highly-focused business development initiative are key to yielding results. I've built relationships through ICSC that have generated millions of s/f of projects for employers and clients alike. As a consultant, one of my niche services is strategic business development for companies who want to improve their ROI from ICSC shows, develop new client relationships, grow opportunities and build brand-name awareness in the lucrative retail and mixed-use markets.

A strategic partner that delivers

Over the past 15 years, I have led business development initiatives for countless regional and national ICSC shows as a consultant and key executive for major design firms VHB, Stantec and Cubellis. Each show has a unique profile and audience. Understanding how best to approach particular shows and being well connected are key value adds I offer.

Len Cubellis, with whom I have worked as a principal for seven years said, “Mary’s results-oriented approach to ICSC consistently delivered opportunities & wins. She is exceptionally well connected with developers, REITs and retailers from coast to coast.”

Many firms simply do not have resources to organize the level of proactive business development

ICSC shows require to yield results. Even doer/seller organizations rarely have the time it takes to orchestrate ICSC shows. As a strategic partner, I can take on those initiatives and optimize clients return.

Delivering results for HFA

Lou Allevato, principal of national retail design firm, HFA, hired me to “organize” RECON and saw first-hand the great results.

“Mary created a laser-focused plan identifying key targets to maximize opportunities with prospective clients. She leveraged her established ICSC contact base to set up key valuable introductory meetings with REITs as well as major regional developers maximizing the effectiveness of our time. More importantly, she briefed us ahead of time on each company’s profile, development focus and pipeline and worked closely with our key staff and marketing leaders to tailor our messaging to be 100% on target for each client meeting. The results were engaging, productive meetings and potential opportunities with many clients. Finally, she followed up on short-fuse opportunities and focused us on next steps to continue to build on the relationships that we made at RECON. It was a win, win situation for us,” said Allevato.

Working with larger firms

I’ve also worked with large multi-office firms seeking to improve their trade-show performance assessing their approach and helping retool their efforts to maximize effectiveness while improving ROI. According to Tracy Lower, practice builder with Kimley-Horn and former principal who worked with me at VHB, “Mary successfully brought our multi-office participation together at regional/national ICSC events orchestrating the activities of multiple attendees. Using ICSC shows as a strategic platform, she successfully leveraged clients across geographic regions.”

So what are the right shows for New England based firms? It depends entirely on your client base, expertise, geographic reach and budget. ICSC New England, N.Y. and RECON are key.

CenterBuild is the primary show for key design and construction decision makers from national retailers and REITs if that’s your audience. For companies with multiple offices, major regional shows should also be considered.

The process. Plan early

To maximize return, plans should be developed 2-3 months ahead of time. For example, I would begin planning for ICSC New York in October as this key national show, which I would consider the most important show after RECON, draws 10,000 attendees.

Unique plan for each client

I begin any client engagement with a planning meeting to understand the firm’s capabilities

experience, client base, and goals. I work closely with principals, key team members, and marketing leaders to formulate a strategy that will optimize results. I then identify and come to consensus on a target list comprising both existing clients as well as new prospects.

Meeting set-up

Leveraging my contact base, I hit the ground running reaching out to potential clients to set up face-to-face meetings with the goal of maximizing meetings throughout the show. During the show planning phase, I conduct weekly progress calls with the client's team to assess and review progress.

Preparing for show meetings

The key to having meaningful meetings is to be well prepared and know your audience! I research each target extensively and I work with the client's team and marketing professionals to tailor messaging/presentations that resonate with the needs of individual prospective clients whether it's a local developer, mall or open-air REIT, or retailer.

Events & Dinners

At every ICSC show, there are a number of parties and decisions need to be made on how best to divide and conquer. In addition, some companies opt to host parties and others just do more intimate dinners. I have hosted everything from major events to dinners, small and large. The right venue is often key to attracting a larger group!

Follow up is Key!

I cannot stress enough the importance of focused follow-up. I typically summarize meetings and connections made, identifying short-fuse and longer-term opportunities in order of priority. This is reviewed in detail with the client to continue to build on momentum from the show and often involves follow-up meetings at the prospect's headquarters.

In summary, for companies looking to grow their retail and mixed-use business via ICSC shows, you may want consider hiring an expert to deliver optimum results! And just so you know, I am open to working with all types of companies that attend ICSC events, and have substantial experience in other national trade shows including CORENT, NAIOP, and IFMA, to name just a few.

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