

Mart Smart

Barbara The

Showing up at a regional mart is the easy part. Specialty Insider asked the experts what retailers can do to make their shopping trips more productive – and profitable

It's trade show time, and the living is ... well, not quite easy. Squeezing countless showroom visits, networking events and order writing into a few short days, it's no secret that making the most out of the fashion markets can be a daunting proposition. But it doesn't have to be that way.

To maximize a market, specialty apparel retailers would be wise to zero in on a few key goals.

These include mining new resources, surveying the show for emerging trends and cross-merchandising opportunities, and making it a point to network with merchant peers and vendor reps, said a cross-section of the major market organizers.

Indeed, it's vital for independent merchants to nurture a bond with sales reps at trade shows. And regional markets offer a prime venue to stoke that bond.

"The intimacy of regional markets is a prime venue to maximize relationships with sales reps," said Shelli Mers, director of the Fashion Industry Gallery in Dallas.

"Unlike walking into a convention center, regional markets provide buyers a unique opportunity for more one-on-one time, a first hand chance to learn about the collections and a more personal experience," she said. The intimacy of f.i.g., for one, "allows [buyers] to maintain relationships with a small network of sales reps who can recommend other lines," Mers said.

While touching base with one's existing accounts is central to any market trip, if you're not looking for new resources, you're missing much of a show's value and the opportunity to keep your product mix fresh and distinct.

F.i.g. makes it a point to dedicate a part of the Dallas show to emerging designers.

"Buyers can take advantage of untapped vendor resources at regional markets like f.i.g, where there is a better chance of finding new, up and coming designers that have not yet been accepted into larger trade shows," Mers said.

"F.i.g.'s juried show gives retailers a buying advantage in being the first to find emerging designers, deliver hard-to-find cutting edge product to its customers and differentiate from its competition."

Overall, "f.i.g. recommends its buyers, whether new to the industry or well-seasoned, to research lines ahead of time, and spend more time seeking out new product to continue bringing in fresh new merchandise," added Jessica Baxter, marketing director for f.i.g.

In addition to scoping the aisles for new resources, independent apparel retailers should build in ample time to canvass shows in order to decipher key trends.

"Too many stores run from appointment to appointment and then leave the show without spending enough time educating themselves," said Susan McCullough, senior vice president of Merchandise Mart Properties/Chicago.

"In a trade show environment, you see the trends really quickly because the booths are all open." So taking in a sea of booths showcasing premium denim, for example, "a light bulb goes off and you say, 'Maybe I should be doing premium denim,'" McCullough said.

"Could you imagine being a kid's store, and having missed the kids rubber band bracelet [trend]?"

Even if a trend isn't quite right for a retailer's customer, it makes sense for a merchant to stay abreast of emerging trends – such as the current short skirt fad – interpret them when appropriate and impart their fashion authority to customers, she said.

To differentiate from department stores, independents must "be seen as a fashion expert and a personal shopper," McCullough said.

And a hot trend could sprout from anywhere — including an overseas supplier.

"Our temporary shows have a slew of emerging and established exhibitors, some of whom are even international," said Joanne Lee, senior vice president of the California Market Center. The market's temporary shows feature pavilions from Australia, Korea, Israel, Italy and France.

(The market's FOCUS show is dedicated to introducing new talent to the marketplace, Lee said.)

As retailers increasingly branch out into new product categories to spice up business, cross merchandising should top merchants' show agenda,



Regional mart shows can help specialty retailers discover lines they may not have shopped before. Clockwise from upper left: California Market Center, AmericasMart Atlanta, Dallas Market Center, f.i.g. in Dallas and Merchandise Mart in Chicago.

said Albert Maslia, managing director of retail services for AmericasMart.

These days, apparel retailers are abuzz seeking new ways to boost sales volume "by having products customers wouldn't normally expect to find there," Maslia said.

Scoping out the market for additional product categories such as handbags, jewelry and bath and body products should be top of mind for buyers, as "the number one thing today is cross merchandising," he said, noting intimate apparel merchant Victoria's Secret's bath and beauty mix and Avon's handbag business.

That also means taking a cue from the cross-merchandising set-ups in the showrooms themselves, he said.

Trend spotting and product sourcing should go hand in hand with networking. And "it's not only about learning from seminars, but talking to other retailers," Maslia, said, and asking questions like, "What trends are you seeing in your market? Are light colors doing better than darks? Are people waiting longer to buy their fall goods?" If you're a good retailer, you talk retail all the time."

Of course, order writing is a standard part of any show visit. And while it might seem basic, retailers in the market should make sure to have their credit information on hand "to save time and aggravation," said Cole Daugherty, director of public relations for the Dallas Market Center.

"Don't be stopped cold because you forgot to bring key facts such as

your bank contact information, tax identification numbers or your account information with other vendors," he said.

The Dallas Market tends to be an order-writing show with thousands of lines at myriad price points, where retailers "execute on what they have seen/heard/learned," Daugherty said.

For the uninitiated showgoer, there are resources like buyers' tours. "Working a market can be overwhelming for first time buyers," Mers said. To that end, f.i.g. offers buyer tours to help new merchants get the lay-of-the-show land.

The California Market Center also offers buyer orientations on the first days of the market. "We try to accommodate our buyers in every way possible," Lee said.

INSIDER TIPS:

The art of working a mart

1. Use the services at the mart and let sales reps help you, not just sell you.
2. Build in ample time to walk the market to decipher key trends.
3. Use the seminars, breakfasts, lunches and evening events to chat it up with your retail peers.
4. Don't just visit your existing accounts.
5. Check out cross-merchandising opportunities.
6. Be prepared with all the financial information you'll need to conduct business.