

Franchise Expos Drawing the Crowds

April International Franchise Expo exhibitors' excitement level up after January event in Miami draws flow of prospects.

BY JOEL GOLDSTEIN



The weather was unseasonably cold in Miami as franchisors assembled their booths in the Miami Beach Convention Center this past January, but the annual Franchise Expo South conducted by MFV Expositions still proved to be the hot place to reach potential franchisees with hundreds of exhibitors and thousands of attendees flocking to the popular event.

"We spoke with over 150 candidates on the first day," said Nick Bruckner, vice president of sales for United Franchise Group. "We found the quality of these prospects to be excellent and there's no question that we'll close several deals as a result of exhibiting at FES."

When the doors of the International Franchise Association-sponsored International Franchise Expo in Washington, D.C. open April 9 for its three-day display, exhibitors are anticipating franchising's own version of spring fever to appear in the nation's capital along with the appearance of the famous cherry blossoms. Warming weather there will also offer signs that franchise exhibitions remain a good strategy to not only build prospect interest, but transition them from quality leads into sales.

What Happened in Miami...Could Repeat in Washington

Franchise Expo South serves the southeastern United States, Latin America and the Caribbean. January's Expo brought together numerous leading concepts in franchising

and the Southeast's most qualified entrepreneurial audience.

One of those concepts is Auto-Lab Complete Car Care Centers, a Michigan-based auto repair facility franchise that has been franchising in the United States for more than four years and now has 45 stores across Michigan, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Arizona and Florida. With its end game in mind, Auto-Lab decided to exhibit at FES to meet great prospects and populate the south with its concept.

"My goal as a master franchisor is to sell 30 units in South Florida and I've sold eight so far in one year's time," said Felix Delgado, master franchisor for Auto-Lab. "It looks like we'll sell an additional three units as a direct result of exhibiting at Franchise Expo South."



Delgado states that every time the company exhibits at FES they sell at least one or two franchises. In fact, one of the franchisees who was brought on board from last year's Franchise Expo South actually broke even 30 days after opening his store, he recalls.

"As for our lead generation efforts, there's no comparison to meeting prospects face to face," said Delgado. "You get to interact with candidates here at the Expo in a much more substantial way than any other form of lead capture."

Jeff Travitz, director of franchise sales for the Goddard Systems, Inc. franchisor of The Goddard School, an expanding network of accredited childcare centers committed to providing quality preschool education that surpasses industry standards, looks at the company's trade show participation over the course of the entire year participating in the Franchise Expo South, International Franchise Expo and also the West Coast Franchise Expo.

"When we close two deals over the course of the year from prospects we meet at the expos, we consider that a home run," he said. "The bottom line is that it costs approximately \$30,000 in advertising and lead generation to close one deal. Goddard has perhaps the highest initial investment of any concept here at the expo and franchise events offer a much lower cost per lead and lower cost per acquisition."

Producing Quality Leads

Essie Kronstat of The Learning Experience, a child-care services franchise located in the United States with the goal of international expansion, spoke with attendees from Asia, Brazil, Venezuela and even a few people from Haiti.

"We decided to exhibit at FES because in addition to international growth, we seek to open units in the southeast, specifically here in Florida," said Kronstat. "Also, the face-to-face discussions allow us to qualify a prospect in a much more efficient way than any other type of lead acquisition."

Ruben Oliva, owner of Max Muscle Sports Nutrition, a sports nutrition chain, also praises the quality of leads produced by FES.

"It's all about quality, not quantity when you exhibit at a franchise event such as FES," said Oliva. "We've exhibited at FES previously, and when you have good results, well, don't fix it if it isn't broken."

Oliva spoke with leads from the corporate world looking to break away and also met with current franchise owners looking to diversify and get into additional businesses. Confident that the prospects Oliva spoke to have the financial wherewithal to invest, he compares other forms of lead generation to FES as "apples to oranges."

"The Internet is analogous to a casting a wide net—we catch a lot of fish, perhaps not the kind we're looking for," continued Oliva. "Exhibiting at the expo is like line fishing—going precisely after the prospect that is showing serious interest—these are very motivated candidates."

Based on his experience at the 2010 FES, Oliva has already signed up for FES 2011 to get a better booth location.

Another exhibitor that has already booked space for FES 2011 is Choice Hotels International whose director of emerging markets Charles Gilbert notes

that the company currently franchises more than 6,000 hotels.

In addition to FES, Choice Hotels also exhibits at the West Coast Franchise Expo and the International Franchise Expo.

"Over the last three years I have secured six franchisees that have come on board at Choice Hotels," said Gilbert. "That simply makes it worth exhibiting at these great events."

Gilbert understands that every type of lead generation tool plays an important role but believes standing face to face and having a conversation with a prospect is the best way to qualify a lead. Gilbert also believes that access to capital is one of the obstacles in the franchise business and while Choice Brands does not pre-judge anyone, he has found that at Franchise Expo South people have the liquidity and the net worth to open a Choice Hotel brand in the south.

"We find the quality of the visitors at FES is what we are looking for," continues Gilbert. "The organization puts on a great show. The venues, how they treat both exhibitors and attendees, it just stands to reason that you can expect MFV to consistently deliver quality visitors who will see

a variety of concepts at all investment levels."

Budding franchisee-prospects will be greeted eagerly at the IFE which brings together hundreds of the franchise industry's hottest concepts, and thousands of the most qualified prospects from across the United States and over 80 countries around the world. Endorsed by the U.S. Department of Commerce, the IFE also offers the industry's most comprehensive conference program. ■

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