

MALL EXPO GIVES BUSINESSES EXPOSURE CHAMBER EVENT DRAWS ALMOST A DOZEN COMPANIES

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Local businesses and organizations are finding that chamber of commerce sponsored business expos are excellent ways to reach new clientele.

“We have been in business for 23 years but a lot of people have not heard about our services,” explained Sam Tolbert of Davie who was staffing a booth for A 1st Choice Healthcare Systems at a recent Pembroke Pines Miramar Chamber of Commerce expo at the Pembroke Pines Mall. A 1st has offices in Davie and Miramar.

“The expo gives us an opportunity to offer our services,” Tolbert said referring to his companies therapeutic procedures that focus on pain relief.

The expo, held on Saturday May 3, drew nearly a dozen businesses to the mall to display their services and products.

“The expo is very beneficial,” said Amy Crutchfield, co-owner of Identity Travel in Pembroke Pines. “Our office is in a medical building so we have a lot of older people who walk in and want to travel. Here at the mall we see a lot of younger people and families and a better cross-section and diversity of the community.”

Crutchfield, who spent several years as a tour guide in Scotland before taking over the Pembroke Pines business 2 ½ years ago, said that the travel agency business has been changing and now is much more than just selling airline tickets.

“We are consultants, not agents,” she explained. “We have to know the community well and learn what people like. We believe in building a relationship with the client.”

At the expo Crutchfield was passing out travel brochures for travel to Europe and other destinations. “We are starting to see an improvement in business,” she reported. “There are some amazing values to Europe for this coming summer.”

While Americans have been reluctant to travel internationally because of terrorism, the war with Iraq, SARS and the decline in the stock market, Crutchfield said that the “pendulum is swinging back. People are tired of waiting to see what will happen and are ready to travel.”

Another exhibitor, Cindy Parella of the Miramar office of Eastern Financial Florida Credit Union, said that the expo offered an excellent opportunity to introduce her company to mall shoppers. “We just started offering our services to the public,” explained Parella who lives in Pembroke Pines. “Before that, we were open only to charter companies and their family members.”

“We offer checking and savings accounts, CDs, loans, mortgages, everything a regular bank offers,” Parella said. “We have had a lot of people stop by to inquire about our interest rates.”

Information is the key product made available at the expos according to Susanna Apestegui of Hollywood who works in marketing for the Florida Center for Cosmetic Surgery in Fort Lauderdale.

“A lot of people know us by our commercials but they don’t know a lot about cosmetic surgery,” Apestegui said. “Some people are scared about it, so this is a chance for us to answer their questions.”

Apestegui, who explained that many of the employees of her Center were originally patients, said that the chamber’s expos have been so successful that “We always go to these shows.”

Butch Stark, owner of Stark Photography in Southwest Ranches reported that he always finds new customers at the expos. “We have been here twice a year for six or seven years. There is always a good turnout and we get good exposure,” he said.

Stark, who specializes in family and children’s portraits, said, “We always pick up new business. It’s good for us.”

Commercial enterprises aren’t the only ones who find the chamber’s expos helpful. Glenn Vann, the Economic Development Coordinator for the city of Miramar said that the municipality participates in each event “because we support the chamber of commerce and we want people to take advantage of the business opportunities in Miramar.”

“Miramar is the fastest growing city in the State of Florida and has more Fortune 500 companies than any other city in south Florida,” Vann said. “The population has doubled since 1995 and there has been a huge growth in community and economic development.”

Vann passed out pencils, pens and other trinkets to adults and children who passed by the booth. “Each of them has the city’s general assistance number on it. People can call and get help or direction for any of their questions,” he said.

Florida Bible Church and its adjacent school have found that the expo has been particularly helpful in attracting students to the school. “Being here is also a way for us to give back and show our support for the community,” said Joey Bain of Miami who teaches at the Miramar school.

“The expos are a way that we can link to our community,” said Stella Tokar, the Chamber’s Executive Director. “Also, for businesses, it gives them an opportunity to show their wares.”

Tokar said that the mall normally welcomes 60,000 to 80,000 visitors a weekend. “It’s a perfect venue for businesses to show who they are, where they are located and what they are about.”

MALL EXPO GIVES BUSINESSES EXPOSURE, *South Florida Sun-Sentinel*, May 4, 2003