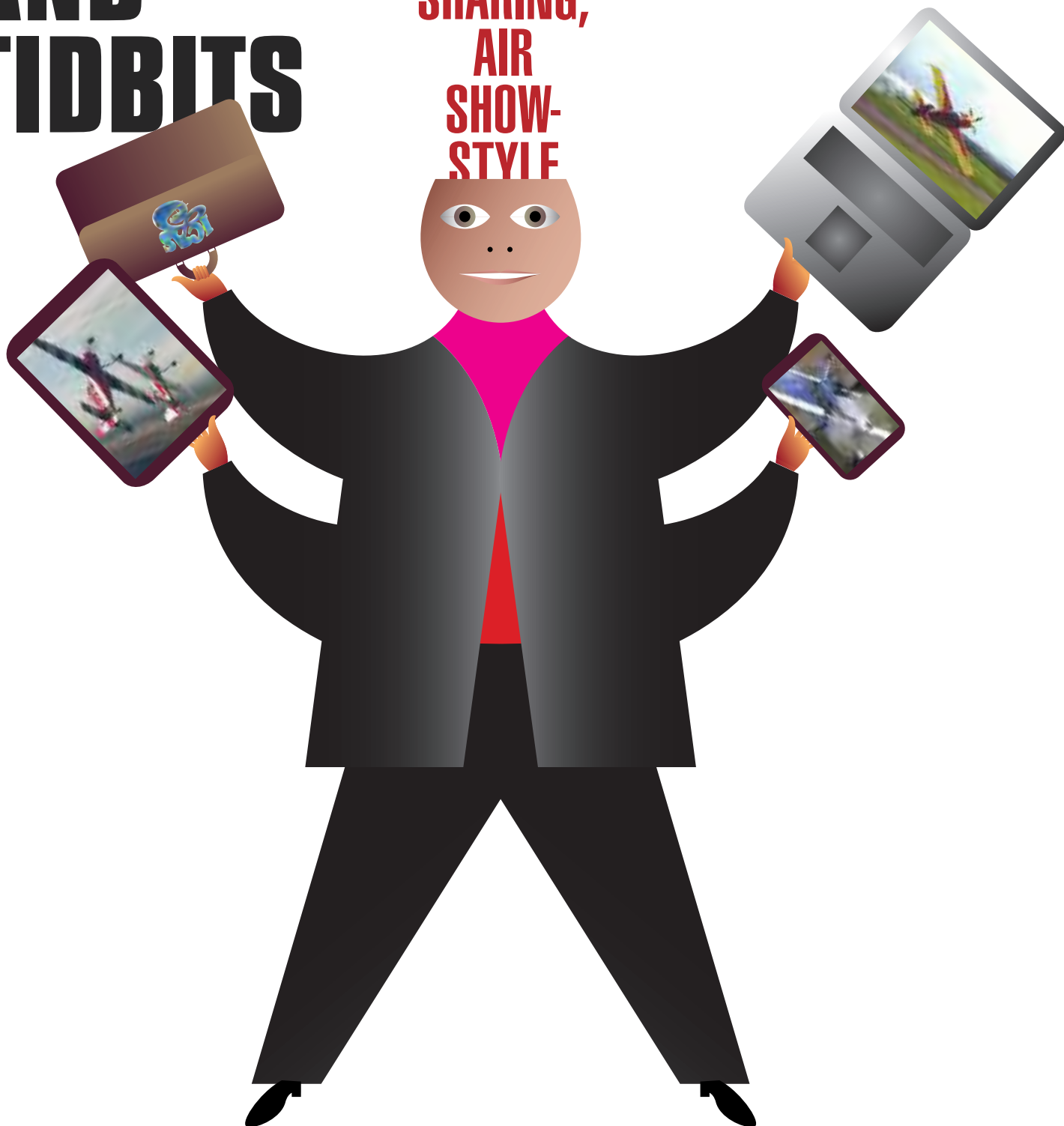


TACTICS, TECHNIQUES AND TIDBITS

INFORMATION
SHARING,
AIR
SHOW-
STYLE



By Mike Berriochoa

Not so many years ago, the air show industry was significantly different than it is today. We still flew airplanes, we still entertained crowds, and we saw shows come and go just as we do today. But unlike today, successful shows closely guarded their secrets to success and rarely shared information. Most show organizers saw other shows as competition instead of allies. They rarely shared budget information, almost never disclosed tactics used to get the attention of jet teams or other military assets, and never shared marketing tools and techniques. Fortunately for all of us, those days are behind us.

Through the ICAS Convention seminars, networking opportunities and the attitude of openness that now typifies our industry, ICAS demonstrates its value to its members every day. There is still no magic answer that will guarantee success in this business. It still takes hard work and sound business management, but more resources are available than ever before, allowing new shows and those new to the business to be more successful in less time than they could imagine. Big shows and small, they have greater opportunities to succeed.

Show organizers who are new to the business are making extensive use of the resources available to them. They are learning from the experience of others in order to move forward faster than would otherwise be possible. And just as important, by learning from the experience of others, they are able to avoid the pitfalls that so many of us have experienced in our years of producing shows.

The Thunder in the Valley Air Show in Columbus, Georgia has been around for several years, but its event coordinator, **Phaedra Childers**, is new to our industry. When she first connected with the show, it was as a volunteer doing the marketing. Now she is responsible for the entire show.

"I was a volunteer at the show for the first three years before becoming event coordinator and discovered all too fast just how steep the learning curve is in this position," Childers said. She gave high marks to the

marketing sessions at the convention, especially those geared to the smaller shows. Since taking over the helm, her show has grown from 18-24,000 spectators on a weekend to more than 30,000, and is still growing.

"ICAS has helped me compare my show to others my size. I've been able to validate a lot of the things we have been doing well, and I've learned we have been ahead of the curve in some instances, but I also discovered areas where we needed to improve to take the show to the next level," she said.

Based on information gained during the conventions, she has started making better use of the social media. "While strong with some of our marketing, we were weak in using social media. Now we use Facebook and will soon be using podcasting to promote our show. It's hard to get your head around the new opportunities created by technology changes at times, but the possibilities are amazing and the help I have received from ICAS members has been significant," she said. Upon returning from last year's convention, she was convinced it was the way to go. She enlisted a local firm to sponsor the social media for the show and also to manage the content. Now the sponsor's staff attends committee meetings and participates in developing the marketing strategy.

Seminars have also helped her improve her interactions with performers. "I've learned what entertainers expect and to have it ready when they arrive, including fuel, oil, maintenance support and even access to weather information when leaving," she said. And she went so far as to create an evaluation form which she asks performers to fill out to tell her how she did in meeting their needs and expectations. The form she uses is now available through the ICAS office.

Another area where ICAS has been helpful has been in the area of on-line ticketing. "I've been researching this topic for a year and a half. I've called other air shows in ICAS, from big air shows to small shows, to seek their recommendations on everything from service providers and fees, to level of service and how to handle issues," she said. She also visited all of the on-line ticket vendors who had booths at the convention. As a result, she has nar-

rowed the field to a single provider and has entered into a relationship that will bring on-line ticket sales to her show for the first time next year.

Another show attributing much of its success to ICAS is the Boston-Portsmouth Air Show in New Hampshire. It is a joint effort between the Daniel Webster Council of the Boy Scouts of America and the Brain Injury Association. Their first show together was in 2010, featuring the Blue Angels. It attracted 75,000 people. Council Executive Director **Mike Kaufman** said they learned some hard lessons that first year, but also did many things right. "Because of the lessons we learned and the support and information we received from ICAS, we aced it this year. By going to the convention and learning everything we could, we fixed every glitch from the previous year and couldn't be happier. If I hadn't been involved in ICAS, I'd have been at the mercy of trying to figure it out myself," Kaufman said.

One of the biggest improvements was in the area of spectator safety. "Airports are not built to be spectator-friendly, and — like other shows — we had to learn some of this for ourselves. But by going to the convention, we learned to separate performer aircraft from the public, how to identify and mitigate the normal hazards around an airport, and even how to determine the number and placement of our restrooms," he said. They also learned that, due to the heat, they needed to provide access to a free water supply. "This was a serious health and safety issue to us, which was stressed in ICAS seminars, so we enlisted a local water provider to dispense water at various locations on the ramp. It was a cost to the show, but what we spent came back to us in good will and appreciation from our audience," he said.

Kaufman had high praise for the storehouse of knowledge that is present at the convention. All he had to do was tap into it. "When I went there, I laid out all the issues we got hit with. I discovered that none of our issues were unique. If you talk to enough people, you will find those who have worked through the very same issues and are willing to share their solutions," he said.



Phaedra Childers



Mike Kaufman



Mike Hurst



Lt. Col. Byron Newell

I immersed myself in the convention, learned the lay of the land, and started talking to show organizers up and down the west coast.

Airport manager **Mike Hurst** and **Lieutenant Colonel Byron Newell** ran the 2010 air show for the Air National Guard Base at St. Joseph, Missouri last year. It was a first for both of them. They were hosting the Blue Angels, and took the preparation seriously. They studied the work done at the eminently successful show in Rhode Island and used it as their model for staging a show on a joint-use field. They used in-house experience and expertise when they could. And they went outside the base and into the air show community when they needed to. By all accounts, they did an excellent job at almost every level, saw 30,000 people a day come through the turnstiles, and even took home the Dick Schram Memorial Community Relations Award for the first show that the base had held in many, many years.

A key to their success? The ICAS Convention. “Byron is an Air National Guard pilot. I’m a retired military pilot. We’re both up to speed on the aviation side, but have had zero to do with air show production. ICAS was critical to our success,” Hurst said. They networked, picked brains and attended seminars, focusing on everything from emergency planning to parking to managing vendors. “We attended Air Shows 101 and military workshops, too. Without that, I don’t think we would have had the right direction of where we were going,” Hurst said.

For Lieutenant Colonel Newell, it was all about learning from those who had already

been there. “When we first started going to the convention, we noticed which shows were winning the Schram award. We asked them what they did right and they were quick to share their experience. We looked at other shows that were recognized for doing things right and picked their brains, too. We went to their shows, mixed with their crowds, and found out what the audiences liked and didn’t like. Without ICAS, we wouldn’t have had those connections,” Newell said.

ICAS also helped them gain a new perspective on entertainment. “We learned about the importance of producing variety

and keeping up the pace of the show. It also became apparent to us the importance of a professional air boss. A good air boss makes all the difference,” he said.

Newell and Hurst also focused on performers... not just their entertainment value, but also what a performer needs to ensure a good show. “From a hospitality perspective, we found out what performers like about good shows. We asked what helps them stay safe. Our goal was to make it easy for the performers to be here and to have ready everything they needed. We made sure all our performers, from the jet team to statics, didn’t have to worry about the small stuff. We took care of the small stuff so they could concentrate on giving a good performance,” Newell said. And it all worked. Because the show was held at a military base, they weren’t able to charge admission. In spite of that, they

were still able to generate \$40,000 for local charities.

Darcy Brewer joined the California Capital Air Show in Sacramento in 2008. While technically no longer a newbie, she acknowledges she is young in the business and that her road to success was smoothed by aggressively surrounding herself with people who knew what they were doing. She caught on quickly and developed a great show. “I started with the ICAS Academy in 2008 [at the Wings over Houston show in Houston, Texas] where I met some of the best of the best in this industry, including the ICAS leadership, who took me under their wing and really protected me from not being able to serve my community with the best resources available,” she said.

“My second year here, I immersed myself in the convention, learned the lay of the land, and started talking to show organizers up and down the west coast,” she said. Before long, the shows began working together to attract east coast performers to come west with the assurance of performing at multiple venues. They also attended each other’s shows and combined their collective wisdom. “We are all friends and we end up having a mini-ICAS academy among ourselves every year. We each have our strengths as well as our weaknesses, and together we make each other stronger,” she said.

By any measure, the air show in Princeton, British Columbia is small. The city itself, which owns the airport, has just 2,800 people. The airport has one runway measuring just over 3,900 feet long, and the ramp is so small it doubles as the hot pit area, meaning spectators have to sit, literally, outside the fence to watch the show. Attendance is usually between 3,000 and 4,000 people.

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Because of its size, the show can't afford to send people to the convention. City manager **Patrick Robins** doubles as the air show director. He stays connected to ICAS through the Northwest Council of Air Shows. Regional councils were established specifically to reach out to small shows and the Princeton show is a testament to the success of the outreach effort.

"We have found a good formula that allows us to do this show every year. We have a limited budget and are limited by the length of our runway, but we have found ways to work around those limits and put on a successful show," Robins said.

The show started four years ago as a means of celebrating and showcasing the importance of the airport to the community. "We did a lot of research, went to shows that were nearby such as Chilliwack and Abbotsford, and borrowed as many good ideas as we could. I watched what they do, talked to their people, researched them on the Internet, and read the ICAS magazine. It was like puzzle pieces all coming together," he said.

Like any show, Robins and his team have to market and promote so people will come out. They have developed an Internet presence which provides the foundation for their marketing effort, and — using what he learned from ICAS — was able to develop relationships with local and regional media which have been a big help.

All of the sponsor benefits are presented in an "air show store" which allows sponsors to see how much each item will cost.

"Our small newspaper has a network with other papers in the region, so we are able to leverage that to expand our media coverage," he said. He has also been able to leverage the community good will he has built up to attract volunteers. "We started with a small core of people and, before we knew it, we had over 100 volunteers doing everything from taking tickets to picking up garbage. It's been amazing, and the help I've received from ICAS has been invaluable in making it happen," Robins said.

Perhaps the best benefit he has derived from his involvement with ICAS is in the area of safety. "I learned just how important a good air boss is in terms of safety as well as in keeping the show moving. I've also relied on my

ICAS contacts for guidance in developing our safety and emergency plans, which we review on a regular basis to keep them updated and relevant," he said.

Another show hitting a home run, thanks to its ICAS involvement, is Air Magic Valley in Twin Falls, Idaho. Twin Falls is a quiet southern Idaho farm community located about a hundred miles southeast of Boise. The airport has hosted several small shows over the years, and in 2008 they featured their first ever jet team. While they wanted to do it again a year or two later, the economy forced them to put the show on hold. Now, heading into 2012, they will again host the Blue Angels and they feel they are ready.

"Almost immediately after my selection by

our city/county airport advisory board as the air show director, I became a member of ICAS. I knew enough about the organization to realize how valuable an asset it would be for me and my team," said **Jim O'Donnell**. He considers the information and ideas that are available to be invaluable. "As I bring on team members, we give them copies of the ICAS job descriptions and other information to help get them going. This saves us a lot of time in developing our organizational structure, gives our people access to a wealth of information to assist in developing our air show, and helps set expectations for each job," he said.

O'Donnell also combed through ICAS magazine articles and other resources to learn as much as possible. "I knew we were weak in sponsorships in the past and had to do something about it. We were giving away far more than we should have. By going to ICAS magazine archives [located on the ICAS website at www.airshows.aero], I found a number of excellent ideas on how to develop our sponsorship package, what to consider in pricing our packages, and how to use the demographics that are available. I've incorporated all of this into a brochure which we use when approaching potential sponsors to get involved," he said.

And from this came a unique idea for attracting sponsors. All of the sponsor benefits are presented in an "air show store" which allows sponsors to see how much each item will cost...from tickets to program advertising. They then can pick and choose what they want in their package, so they will get the best bang for their buck.

"The idea for the store came from my meetings with business leaders who support-

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ed us last time. From their feedback, we developed nine levels of sponsorships that allow them to pick and choose. They can accumulate store points which can be traded for things like tickets, preferred parking, T-shirts, hats or posters. This cuts down on how much we spend on sponsors, avoids giving them things they don't want or won't use, and allows them to tailor a package to suit their needs," O'Donnell said.

One example he cited is a business owner with his own hangar. His sponsorship package included a gazebo which was set up for him, but he never used it, preferring to host his guests in his own hangar. With the new sponsorship package, he was able to trade the gazebo for VIP passes for his guests. "ICAS showed us that one size does not fit all and we're saving money as a result," he said.

O'Donnell said they also focused on attending other ICAS-member air shows in their region. "We divided our people into teams and went to several air shows to see how they do it. We studied everything from number and location of restrooms to the set-up of the crowd lines. We looked to see what ideas we could bring back and also got a first-

hand look at a number of different performers. This let us figure out what works and what doesn't," he said. O'Donnell acknowledges that this has helped them avoid mistakes. "We made mistakes four years ago, but we did a lot of good things, too. Now we know a lot more and can fine-tune the show to make it even better," he said.

Ivey Liipfert runs the Marine Corps Air Station Beaufort air show in South Carolina. She took over last fall and had her first show in April of this year. She came to the show from a non-aviation event planning background, but slipped into the air show role very well, which she attributes in large part to attending the ICAS Convention and the 2010 ICAS Academy held at the Oregon International Air Show in Hillsboro, just west of Portland.

"I learned about everything from hospitality and rental cars to hotel rooms at the academy. They did a great job showing us the packets they use for performers, air crews, the announcer, air boss, room keys, car keys, invitations, passes, the importance of having a central point of contact, and the importance of having it all available when performers

arrive. That makes it easier for everyone," she said.

But Liipfert's most important take-away from ICAS? "The number one thing is knowing that no matter what the problem or challenge, there is a resource available to help and people you can trust." She also learned that the first people to hire when producing a show are the air boss, announcer and sound system. "Once I had them in place, I picked their brains, relied on their guidance, and then hired the performers. They know so much more than I do about this business and they saved me from reinventing the wheel," she said. ☺



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

For a similar article on resources that ICAS makes available to small shows that was published in the Third Quarter, 2010 issue of *Air Shows Magazine*, visit: <https://www.airshows.aero/docs/2010%203Q%20ICAS%20Convention%20Provide%20Critical%20Resources%20to%20Small%20Shows.pdf>.

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