

# RECIPE FOR SUCCESS

HOW DENISE MEDVED MADE THE SWITCH FROM TRADE SHOWS TO CONSUMER EVENTS BY TOM ZIND

As a cookbook author, Denise Medved has more than a few coveted recipes. But the one she may prize the most is the one she used to launch the Metropolitan Cooking & Entertaining Show (MCES, [www.metrocooking.com](http://www.metrocooking.com)).

Starting with more than a decade of work organizing trade shows, Medved stirred in a talent for selling and relationship-building, added a dash of passion for the intersection of gastronomy and entertainment and, like all good chefs, tossed in some improvisation. Working 80- and 90-hour solo workweeks in the beginning, Medved adapted what she learned helping launch shows like GovSec, FedFacilities and Ready! for companies like Reed Exhibitions, IDG and National Trade Publications, Inc., to her vision for a food show.

The finished product is a three-year-old, multi-venue show focused on all things food and entertaining, whose steady growth is making it one of the rising stars on the consumer food show circuit.

Built around cooking demonstrations, celebrity chefs, exhibitions, interactive workshops and presentations, two-day MCES events target food, cooking and entertaining enthusiasts. The flagship show, held annually at the Walter E. Washington Convention Center in Washington, DC, is expected to draw some 20,000 attendees and more than 200 exhibitors in November, up from last year and on a steady growth trajectory from the 2006 inaugural show that attracted 6,500 attendees.

In April, Medved staged her second Atlanta MCES at the city's Cobb Galleria Centre. It grew 15 percent over the 2008 show. It was preceded, in March, by the first-ever West Palm Beach, FL, edition, held at the Americraft Expo Center, where about 5,500 people attended and 1,000 exhibited.

While MCES is cresting with the public's fascination with food and entertaining, one seemingly unabated by the recession, its fortunes also are strongly rooted in Medved's aggressive and creative approach to show-building.

## A BOOK AND A PLAN

The genesis for her idea was the egalitarian cookbook she completed while between jobs in 2001, *The Tiny Kitchen Cooking and Entertaining*. Growing weary of the trade show grind, yet confident in her proven show organization skills and energized by the notion of creating a franchise around her book, Medved set out to create her own show. If she could build shows around subject matter that didn't necessarily excite her, she reasoned, how much harder could it be to create one that reflected her true passion?

"I operated under the assumption that an event is an event is an event," she says. "Given the fact that I had managed to help create some very successful trade shows without a very deep understanding of the market or the product, I went to the basic fundamentals of what made the trade shows I worked on a success."

In 2005, after writing a business plan and forming The Tiny Kitchen, Inc., Medved began following the trade show-construction script. Satisfied with research suggesting a critical mass of consumer and exhibitor demand, she scoured the Web, and in three weeks built a database of 5,000 potential exhibitors. At the same time, she began reaching out to key segments of the industry.

"Just as I established relationships with the likes of the FBI and FEMA for the trade shows, here it was groups like the National Restaurant Association and the International Association of Culinary Professionals that we had to reach," she says. "And we had to connect with talent like celebrity chefs and presenters, the trade publications that we'd need to promote us and with all of the vendors and potential show venues."

While taking a bold approach patterned after her trade show experience probably helped Medved tamp down any lingering fears, she quickly found the trade show business wasn't the perfect template for the consumer show arena. Medved learned that constructing the show she envisioned would demand a different approach in some key areas.



## THE KEY INGREDIENTS

Unlike her trade show experience where most exhibitors were on board months in advance, Medved was finding that the launch phase of a consumer show was considerably more precarious.

"The kinds of companies we were selling booth space to in the beginning were many smaller, mom-and-pop operations because many of the big major brands wouldn't commit to a new show," she says. "But the small ones we could get were making decisions about attending just a few weeks out from the show."

That, in turn, ratcheted up the pressure to sell tickets to attendees, the primary revenue source for consumer shows and a model that was foreign to Medved's trade show experience. While Medved knew that going in, she says the implications became more apparent as the ribbon-cutting for the first show drew closer. Leery of gambling everything on on-site ticket sales, she worked with her bank and e-ticketing vendors to set up an online ticket sales portal linked to the MCES Web site. It was an eye-opening experience.

"Getting set up for that and understanding gateway exchanges and the like was definitely complicated and a huge learning experience for me, and it proved that you often don't know what you don't know when you undertake something like this," she says.

### A BLANK SLATE

That was even more evident when it came to creating the show. While Medved had to figure out who to target and how in her trade show startup efforts, MCES posed a different sort of challenge. Whereas a trade show universe was more or less set, the MCES exhibitor and attendee was hers to essentially define, target and coax.

So early on, Medved spent much of her time trying to design MCES from the standpoint of the attendee. Because ticket sales would be the major revenue source, she was intently focused on creating an event that would be compelling for the consumer. In a sense, building the entire show from scratch was a lot like designing the conference or "content" portion of a trade show, she says.

"I knew that we had to design something engaging enough to not only draw people, but keep them in the hall for four or five hours," she says. "It had to be a great experience not only for attendees, but presenters and exhibitors, too. So I invested a lot of time on the look and feel of the show."

Equally challenging, even to this day, was show marketing and promotion. Though she was confident there was an audience for her show concept, Medved says figuring out who to target, what messages they respond to and how to reach them most effectively was a persistent puzzle. It's one she's still trying to hone as the show expands into new markets with different demographics, and the value of traditional advertising approaches has come into question.

"When you're dealing with a limited marketing budget, you have to really focus on how to get your dollars to translate to getting 20,000 people to your show," she says. "We did some print advertising when we launched the Atlanta show and we got essentially nothing out of that."

Advertising's shifting ground has prompted Medved to experiment with new show promotion tactics. She's become especially intrigued with the idea of using social networking to more finely target likely show-goers and create bonds with them. In mid-August, she was testing some directed show ads on Facebook that allowed viewers to order tickets to November's Washington, DC event.

Knowing what she knows now, as a consumer show creator, entrepreneur and a "buck-stops-here" decision-maker, Denise Medved believes she might have been even more successful in her previous life as a trade show organizer.

Here are some things she's learned launching the Metropolitan Cooking & Entertaining Show (MCES) that organizers at any level might take to heart:

**Think of your show as a brand.** Just as branded products need a personality communicated by a unique look and feel, so do shows. From the type fonts used in marketing materials and show signage, to a communications style, consistency helps build recognition and loyalty. That can translate to moving responsibility for some small and overlooked show elements like signage away from operations and to marketing, she says.

**Market more aggressively.** Relying on show content to drive ticket sales and revenue, Medved has learned to be in almost constant selling mode. "We start marketing nine months out and we realize we don't need to have the show completely built and every track and description written to start doing that." As elements come together, like keynote speakers, sell around them, she says.

**Where possible, be entrepreneurial.** Sometimes it pays to put the standard playbook down, she says. Interested in social networking to market MCES, Medved got books on using Facebook and Twitter for that purpose. "I read one and my marketing director read the other, we mapped out a social media strategy on a conference room wall and started testing some ads."

**Relationships are the glue.** Medved's effort to launch MCES was aided by her track record in building trade shows. But more important were the relationships she had built, and her determination to forge new ones. "It was the relationship I had with staff at the Washington Convention Center that got me the first show dates," she says. Her ability to create and describe her vision for MCES, combined with her natural selling and relationship-building talent, got the ball rolling, she says.

A broader and more focused social networking campaign would be in line with Medved's overall strategy for continuing to build MCES, which includes the possibility of taking it to new locations as early as 2010. A big believer in the investment value of creating relationships and building a recognizable and attractive brand with the show as the centerpiece, Medved is striving to build a loyal following among attendees, exhibitors, sponsors and presenters.

And for Medved, that's the enjoyable and rewarding part of creating and now continuing to build her own show, something that comes naturally to a person with a knack for connecting with people and a track record of getting big projects off the ground. Indeed, even with a growing staff to help her take MCES to the next level, she still finds time to do even the little stuff of show promotion herself, like tapping out quick, friendly communiqués that

take the form of e-mail blasts to 60,000 people in her growing and increasingly loyal MCES community.

“In the consumer show world you have a lot more opportunity to create more casual, friendly relationships with people than you do in the b-to-b show world,” she says. “The whole process of marketing to the consumer is a lot more fun than trade show marketing.”

As MCES continues to grow, Medved is proving that having fun, using your talents and following your passion and your dream is a recipe for success in the competitive world of consumer shows.

Tom Zind is a freelance business writer based in Lee’s Summit, MO. He can be reached at tomzind@att.net.



◀ Responding to the logistical challenges of accommodating more than 1,000 show-goers seeking an autograph from celebrity chef Paula Deen in 2007, MCES created a VIP Book Signing and Luncheon with Paula Deen in 2008. Available only to those willing to spend \$100 for a ticket to a meal and book signing, the event drew 350 on each of two days. Tickets sold out in two days nine months in advance, testimony to what MCES Founder Denise Medved says is a big opportunity for shows to sell access to celebrities who have almost “rock-star” like qualities.



▲ At MCES, a signed chef’s jacket has become the equivalent of the signed baseball or bat at the ballpark. Celebrity chefs appearing at MCES, like Giada De Laurentiis, shown here, put their John Hancocks on chef jackets and then MCES sells them for upward of \$300. Show Founder Denise Medved got the idea after receiving several offers for her personal jacket, adorned with chef signatures, while walking the show floor. For the 2008 Atlanta show, 25 signed jackets sold out in two hours, netting the show \$7,500. Ahead of the 2009 Washington, DC show, jackets, available for pre-order and pickup at the show, were going for \$400.



◀ An opportunity to meet celebrity chefs, like Bobby Flay, right, is one of several perks that Medved, left, includes in limited-availability VIP ticket packages. Priced at \$500 for the November 2009 Washington, DC MCES, the ticket also includes a chef jacket, a celebrity cookbook and a front-row seat for one of five celebrity chef presentations. Only 90 VIP packages were being sold, and Medved expected them to sell out in two weeks. MCES uses targeted e-mails to market the high-margin tickets, which carry an incremental cost of just \$50 to MCES, to those willing and able to pay for a special show experience.



▲ In designing MCES, founder Denise Medved concentrated heavily on building not just a series of two-day shows, but a brand that could be leveraged at other times, in other ways with a devoted fan base. That led to her testing sales of merchandise branded with the MCES logo at the Washington, DC, show in 2008. Having experimented with several items, which are sold both at the show and on the show’s e-commerce site, the biggest sellers have become aprons, chef jackets and totes. It’s all part of Medved’s strategy to build a loyal following for a show and then translate that into sales of products effectively endorsed by or connected closely with MCES.



▲ Autographed cookbooks from celebrity chefs who stage demonstrations and meet-and-greets at MCES have been a big source of revenue and on-site excitement. In addition to staging book signings at the show, which have drawn long lines of people, like those waiting for Bobby Flay, MCES sells signed books online. In advance of a recent show, \$85,000 worth of signed books were sold. Its profit margins on book sales have increased to 40 percent since taking over sales from a third-party reseller. Show signings and sales became so popular that, for 2009, MCES made them a special, off-floor event available only to purchasers of a special book-signing ticket.