

CREATING SUCCESSFUL CRAFT CENTERS

by Mary Lee Guderjahn

When I think about a fair, I immediately think of the opportunities offered in two areas. The first is to act as a liaison and the second is the opportunity for families to experience an event as a unit. Sadly, there are too few places a family can go where accommodations can be made for the interests and outlets of the individual as well as the availability of “something for everyone”. It is my opinion that craft centers can add tremendously to both these areas of the fair experience. Primarily, a craft center is an opportunity to have a good time as a family. (One parent, two parents, brothers and sisters, grandparent and child; just about any mix that can be defined as a family.) Here is a place that, if structured properly, people of all ages can be creative, work on a project, and take it home with them. Most crafts can be created by just about any age group. If a child is very young, what a great opportunity for an older person to assist in the creating of a memory. There are certainly crafts that will appeal to different age levels and that is why it is a good idea to have more than one craft available. Much that is of interest at a fair generates energy and excitement for kids. A craft center is a place where everyone has the opportunity to wind down, either in preparation for the trip home or to change gears in preparation for the rest of the fair experience.

When discussing opportunities as a liaison, a craft center offers these on two levels. The first is the fair’s presentation to the community at large which also can be divided into two categories.

The first of these is the opportunity for local sponsorship. Every community has businesses who may be too small to participate in the fair by making a major commitment. Craft centers, by their very nature, are perfect places for a local business to advertise its commitment to and membership in the community. Businesses can participate by donating money or by donating materials. This increases their participation in the fair and the perception that there is a partnership between the business and the fair. The more people in your community who have a vested interest in the fair, the greater the desire to participate in the fair itself. When the business community makes a donation, no matter what size, it is incumbent upon you to thank the donor publicly.

The next opportunity is the prospect of sharing ideas with the educational community.

In my experience teachers, day care providers, girl and cub scout leaders, and Sunday school staff enjoy the ability to discuss various craft ideas with me and my staff. I have not only gotten some great ideas from chatting with folks who come to the craft center, I have been able to share some of my ideas with them and enjoy being able to share in this manner.

If your craft center staff is augmented by volunteers, there are possibilities to involve teens in the craft center experience by taking advantage of community relations credit programs which are available in many communities. These programs offer credit to teens when they participate in certain community outreach programs.

The second liaison opportunity is strengthening the relationship with the community of people who attend the fair itself. The perception of value is something fairs are involved with on many levels. The "joy of free" can only be enhanced when a family spends quality time at a fair creating a craft. That perception is continued when the family takes their handiwork home or the pictures are admired. I can't tell you how many of my surveys come back to me with comments thanking the fair for providing such a wonderful activity for FREE.

LOCATION

Craft centers, by their very nature, can take up a lot of room. You must have enough space to store materials you aren't using as well as properly presenting the materials you are currently making available. Your staff must have enough room to easily get around and access the necessary crafts. The participants also need enough room to properly craft their creations. One of the attributes of a craft center is that if properly promoted, it can bring people to a little used area. After all folks, this is a craft center, a place where folks can use their creativity. It should be creatively constructed and presented. Probably the easiest way to theme an area is through color. By choosing a color scheme and making sure it is consistently used, you have defined not only the physical space but the emotional space as well. Of course there should be signage in the craft area - perhaps telling the craft of the day, or directing people to different stations, but the most important signage is that which leads people to the

area. The signage needs to be clear, easily visible, and should help people to realize that they just HAVE to go make a craft.

When deciding how to physically structure the center, a good portion of your decision will be determined by the amount of total room available. The simplest way of setting up a center is by using tables in a rectangular configuration. This method is useful for many reasons. It provides for an area to store materials (under tables which have been skirted is an excellent storage area) and enables staff to get to the stored materials easily. It also makes it easy for staff to go from station to station to assist folks working on specific crafts. It also enables crossover of supplies as glue, ribbon, colored paper, etc. can be used for different crafts at the same time. Since every center should have an inside and an outside, the physical definition allows for easier identification of where staff is and where the crafters are. It is important to take in to consideration that crafters will be at the center anywhere from five minutes to a half hour and more. Providing shade for them (not to mention the staff that will be there for hours) is not something that you need to think about, you need to do it!

The type of crafts you have available will dictate how to set up the actual center. For crafts that involve coloring and gluing, I suggest a multi station format. This will enable crafters to pick up materials and possibly get instructions in one area, and then move to another area to do the necessary tracing and cutting and on to another area to do the coloring and gluing. This also separates the areas that tend to get messy quickly from the areas which are easily cleaned. A single station format works best with crafts that do not involve multiple steps such as pasta necklaces and those where the steps are closely related such as paper weaving.

A lot of activity goes on at a craft center and it can become messy very quickly! I wonder at a craft center that is neat and tidy all the time. What I aim for is controlled chaos - most of the mess is kept at a minimum - the real cleaning comes after the craft center closes. If work tables are covered with craft paper, plastic sheeting or covers such as Kwik Covers, it is easy to change the work surfaces when necessary. Regarding cleaning supplies it is a good idea to keep a dust pan and broom and magic dusters available. Paper towels are a no brainer. I also keep baby wipes available for the staff and crafters who need to clean up. There can't be

too many trash cans! It is my firm conviction that the folks who are doing the crafting are responsible for taking care of their own trash. If there are numerous trash cans available, it makes it that much easier to ensure their help in keeping the chaos controlled.

The easiest way to control the use of glue is to use glue sticks. They are a little more expensive than white glue, but the advantage of glue sticks far ought weigh their cost! By using 1 - 3 oz plastic or paper cups with lids, it is easy to control the amount of glitter, sand, sequins, and other small objects each crafter gets. It is difficult to control things I have available such as feathers, bits of mylar and fabric, and other 'add-on' stuff. Unless you're willing to have your staff constantly watching with eagle eyes - I think you have to settle for the knowledge that some folks will be considerate when selecting 'stuff' to add to their creations, and some might be a little greedy.

CRAFTS

Sometimes it is difficulty to decide what 'age-appropriate' crafts are. When deciding which crafts to make available at your center, think about those that are appropriate on several levels. For example, when offering pasta jewelry, I make sure to have pasta of different sizes so that little hands will have the opportunity to string larger easier to hold pasta, and bigger hands will have the opportunity to experiment with different kinds and shapes. Remember, there will almost always be an adult or older sibling there to assist those who are having a little trouble. The aspect of working together, helping those who may need it is one of the best things about a craft center. This can only enhance the cooperative potential. Remember too, this is a fair, not a school. We afford people the opportunity to be creative and learn; and learning cooperation is an important aspect of the entire learning experience.

The amount of time it takes to complete a craft is as varied as the people who come to the craft center. If you offer a mix of crafts, you might post the approximate length of time needed to complete each craft. The crafter will then have information to help them determine whether to take the time at that particular moment to become involved. The size of the fair also comes into play when determining the length of time a particular craft should take. Smaller fairs most likely have the advantage here since

families will often attend the fair multiple times and take a more leisurely approach to the fair experience.

When determining how many different crafts to have available each day, there are a myriad of contributing factors. First is the ratio of staff to crafter. If you have a large staff, you can handle more different crafts and the staff can be assigned to specific areas. There are also crafts which are mostly 'self working' (posters and banners are a good example) and do not rely heavily on the availability of staff. It is a good idea to have a craft in reserve which can be made available quickly (hole punch wrist bands and bookmarks are in this category) I usually have more crafts available on the slower week days, and fewer on the busier weekends. The busier a craft area is, the more often supplies will have to be replenished and the more staff will be needed to assist the crafter. As long as the craft(s) is clearly designated it may be added to or taken away from according to the crowd flow and availability of staff.

MATERIALS

When preparing the materials for the craft center please believe that the more that can be prepared in advance, the better off you'll be! Your staff should be made aware of the necessity to work on stock preparation whenever there is a slow period.

The usual places one may think of to purchase craft supplies may not be the best places to buy those supplies. Craft stores and craft catalogs will most likely have the most complete inventory of what you might need, but they may also have the highest prices. Of course nothing beats the convenience of being able to do most of your purchasing at one time, so you need to weigh the convenience vs. the cost. Discount stores such as Costco and Smart and Final often offer substantial discounts when buying bulk items from pasta to glue. Big Lots and dollar stores can be a gold mine when looking for everything from paper to markers to containers. The only problem you may encounter when shopping these stores is that they often buy closeouts, so when you go back for more it'll be too late. Don't discount (no pun intended) looking in stores that are not meant to be craft stores for items that may be easily used in the craft center. Craft sticks are available through craft stores and popsicle sticks are available through grocery supply stores. You tell me what the difference is.

Shrink wrap is available through craft stores and window insulation material is available through hardware stores. Again, you tell me the difference!

The hard and fast rule for determining how much material to have available each day is to figure out how much you'll need, and then double it! There are certain craft materials that you can easily portion out by using one to three oz containers with lids. These can be prepared in advance and given out as each crafter gets to the point in the craft construction that the material is needed. The easiest way to control the use of glue is to use glue sticks. They are a little more expensive than white glue, but the advantage of glue sticks far ought weigh their cost! By using 1 - 3 oz plastic or paper cups with lids, it is easy to control the amount of glitter, sand, sequins, and other small objects each crafter gets. It is difficult to control things I have available such as feathers, bits of mylar and fabric, and other 'add-on' stuff. Unless you're willing to have your staff constantly watching with eagle eyes - I think you have to settle for the knowledge that some folks will be considerate when selecting 'stuff' to add to their creations, and some might be a little greedy.

You'll find that if stored properly, most materials (even glue) will last from year to year and can form the basis of your supplies for the next year. If you do a complete inventory and clearly mark the storage boxes, you will know at a glance what you have available. When purchasing supplies for your craft center that will get a lot of use, such as scissors, I suggest you invest in good quality materials. I use Fiskars scissors for the craft center staff's use as well as their kid-safe scissors. They are a little more expensive than other kid safe scissors but are sturdy and will not need to be replaced as often as less expensive scissors. Markers and such will get a lot of hard use. I use markers with polyester tips (such as Discount School Supplies) that will last longer.

PERSONNEL

In my opinion you need to have a paid staff when trying to present a center that is well-run and fun for all who participate. At minimum you need at least one person to coordinate the center. It is advantageous to have a paid staff (at least two for smaller fairs, more than that for larger

fairs) in addition to the coordinator. Your staff can easily be augmented with volunteers, and having a core staff, who know what needs to be done, will ensure that your volunteers will be able to easily learn what it is they need to do in as short a time as possible.

Volunteers can come from a variety of places. Many school districts have programs at the Senior High level in which students perform community service for credit. Working at a fair's craft center can be a good position for both the fair, and the student seeking community service. Service organizations are also good places to contact for volunteers who may fill the bill quite well. Since volunteers are just that - volunteers - you may find that they may not have the vested interest one would hope in the running of the craft center. Also, it is more than likely that your volunteer staff will change day by day, sometimes within the same day. That is why I suggest that you at least have a core staff that is familiar with the set up of the center and able to help the volunteer staff accomplish their tasks. The ratio of staff (whether paid or volunteer) to the number and type of crafts is more a question of the staff you have than vice versa. If you present a lively craft center, you'll be able to use all the help you can get. If all the staff are aware of what preparation and cleanup needs to be done, there should be no problem finding stuff to do! A reminder. Staff is there to assist, not to do for. I see no problem in helping someone figure out how to do a craft, but the crafter should experience the creation of the craft itself.

BUDGET

The types of crafts you plan to offer are determined by your budget. There is a multitude of inexpensive, easy, fun to do crafts available. A craft center provides a wonderful opportunity for local businesses to become involved as sponsors. For just a small donation, a business can help make it possible to create an area on the grounds that that will be enjoyed by many.

IN CONCLUSION

Having a craft center at your fair is a wonderful way to involve entire families, enabling them to enjoy themselves while creating a memory. What better way to provide that 'value added' experience that fairs are looking for than to provide the fair goer with an experience that is free, fun, and educational all wrapped up in one package!