

A Fantastic Marketing Tool – Showcases©
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Showcases are great vehicles for exposure to specific audiences. Showcases are sales shows. WE are the products on display. THEY are the hiring groups. We say, *“Talk with me. Watch me perform. Hire me.”* And they, the librarians, PTA moms, LRC directors, and/or college entertainment directors say, *“Who are you? What do you do? What do you have that I need? Why should I hire you?”*

Get the idea? They need performers. We have the talent they need. They ask questions; we provide answers – a win-win situation. It sounds easy, right? I’m not so sure about that. For many of us, showcasing is a double-edged sword. It’s the ultimate yin and yang of performing. We want to be hired, but we dislike the necessity of promoting ourselves. Nevertheless, that is the challenge at hand. So, how do we do it successfully and with integrity? First, let’s break down the showcase experience into its three primary components.

The Audition

If you want a chance to perform at the event, you typically have to audition. You are given a prescribed amount of time, say 8, 10 or 12 minutes (once I got 20 minutes – what a treat!). Within that time frame you will need to cram two or three story parts into a cohesive program that is engaging, funny, moving, intellectually stimulating, spontaneous, and spiced with audience participation.

The Performance

Okay, so let’s say you passed the audition. Now you get to perform. This will be a tremendous asset because hiring people will have seen you in action. In the performance you must repeat your audition piece verbatim and, of course, you must stay within the time limit. Never in your life will time pass more quickly. If they give you eight minutes, it will seem like four.

The Booth

In the exhibit hall you will occupy a booth during the event. This is where you will spend most of your time trying to look appealing. Now if you were able to perform, everyone will have seen you and will know so much more than your booth can ever describe. But what if you didn’t get chosen? Then the booth experience is even more critical. You must make your booth space interesting enough to draw in people who want to hire you.

So, how do we maximize the showcase experience? How do we make the best use of our time? How do we plan fantastic auditions that get selected for performance? How do we keep our auditions & performances on time? How do we attract hiring folks to our booths? Here is Part One of “Linda’s Showcase Survival Plan.” ©

Surviving the Audition

How can you keep on time?

First of all, time your performance carefully. You may be disqualified if you go over your time. Second, find out in advance how they will time you. When does the time start? Will they have a clock available? Will they have countdown signals? To be safe, bring a clock or timer and coordinate it with their timekeeper.

Who will be listening to your audition?

Find out who comes to the showcase -- elementary, high school or college program coordinators? Librarians? Gear your performance stories to the audience and let them know what ages you are targeting. It is critical that your audience understands who your stories “speak to.” This is usually covered in your advance paperwork, but it can be creatively worked into your presentation.

What stories should you select?

Your goal is to project as much of your personality and story variety within the time frame. The most successful storytellers use masterful segues to incorporate pieces of several stories. And make sure you begin and end with your name.

How much should you practice?

A lot! And practice with a timer. I even allow for audience laughter when I time my audition piece. I also recommend memorizing your presentation. Why? You’re going to be doing pieces of stories that you know well, but for the audition you’ll be under the time clock while you cut and paste story segments in an admittedly artificial way. There is no room for error. You’ll have one chance to get it right.

What should you bring?

Bring extra copies of whatever the showcase promoters requested in advance. Who knows, perhaps they lost your materials. Also bring extra copies of your marketing kit and business cards.

Are there alternatives to “live” auditions?

Yes. Some venues allow you to send in a videotape of your audition or of a live performance. They usually want to see the audience (and their reactions) in these tapes. Use a videographer. The best tapes will require some splicing and will need at least two cameras (one on the audience).

Surviving the Performance

So now what?

Again, know how time is kept during your performance. Remember to use the same material you used in the audition. The promoters don’t want surprises – changing material could disqualify you for subsequent years. Arrive in the staging area two or three sessions ahead of yours (depending on the length of the sessions). They usually run on precisely on time. Then go back to your booth. Program coordinators will be looking for you.

Surviving the Booth

What happens during the day?

The exhibit hall is typically open all day. Most prospective hirers spend the day in an auditorium listening to those selected to “showcase.” During planned breaks, they come out and stroll through the exhibit hall to see all of the performers. If you were chosen to perform, you’ll probably get plenty of interest in your booth. (Getting on stage is priceless at a showcase.) But either way the booth becomes your “home” during the event (except when you perform). During slow times (when most of the program coordinators are watching the showcased artists), feel free to walk around and meet other performers. You can learn a lot from them.

What is a “booth?”

A booth is typically a space about 8’ by 5’ with a fabric backdrop, a table, and a chair. The backdrop can be used for display if you have lightweight items that can hang on it. Be prepared to provide your own large “S” hanging hooks (big enough to go over a one-inch PVC pipe). The table is typically 8 feet long with a plastic or cloth skirt. The chair is usually a standard uncomfortable folding chair.

What are the basics for my booth?

You must have: brochures, business cards, a sign up sheet (for follow up and/or your mailing list), and a display board (typically the 3-sided type used for school science fairs). The sign up sheet should have room for a name, address, city, state and zip code plus a school, library or business name. It should also include a space for an email address.

What are the “booth extras?”

These items are not necessary, but they can enhance your booth:

- Television playing a VCR (you must make arrangements in advance)
- Picture book of action shots
- Binder of ‘thank you’ letters
- Newspaper articles
- Booking Calendar or PDA
- Your audiotapes and CD’s
- Tablecloth
- Bouquet of flowers
- Dish of candy

What goes on my display board?

I have five display boards, some retired, some still in use. I bring one or two. My boards have included the following:

- Action pictures
- Newspaper articles
- Collages of my pictures
- List of story themes
- Special program titles
- Quotes
- Web site
- Logo
- Headshot

Audience shots
List of significant gigs

Keep in mind that too much is overwhelming for the casual viewer. The old KISS (Keep It Simple Stupid) theory works here. Ask yourself. Is it clean? Is it neat? Will it draw attention without being overwhelming?

How do I generate interest in my booth (especially if I did not perform)?

Well . . . you can become a circus hawker and thrust your brochures in everyone's bag as they pass by. *Yeech!* I prefer a more subtle approach including:

- Make your booth space worth a visit
- Stand up
- Have brochures in your hand
- Give folks space to see / enter your booth
- Get eye contact with everyone who passes
- Invite folks into your booth

Are there booth etiquette rules?

Yes, you'll have folks on each side of you and across the walkway. Don't infringe on their space. Don't be too loud. And don't assume that someone talking to the performer in an adjoining booth will want to talk with you next.

Will I get to see any of the performers during their showcase times?

Sometimes. It depends on the venue. It's a good idea to try to see others, especially those in your field. It can let you know what 'worked' during their auditions.

Will people want to book me on the spot?

Some folks come prepared to book their entire year of assemblies during a showcase. Others may want more information, and will call later to hire you.

What if I didn't perform?

A majority of performers will not get a chance to do a showcase performance. Don't give up on your chances for success. You CAN still get hired.

So there you have it - a beginning look at showcases. Use what you can and may your first (or your next) showcase be a success.

Before her storytelling life, Linda spent thirteen years as a three-piece suit wearing, briefcase carrying, Human Resources Manager for Prudential Insurance Company's Home Office in New Jersey. As a storyteller, Linda is known for using movement, humor, and sometimes zaniness as she tells imaginative multicultural folktales updated with "attitude." Her new CD, "**Common Sense and Uncommon Fun**" has won three National Awards: Parents' Choice, iParenting Media, and NAPPA (National Parenting Publications). You can reach her at Linda@LindaGorham.com.