



## Speed Meeting

### ***Association spices things up with speed-dating inspired personal appointment sessions***

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When the American Bus Association (ABA) was looking for a fast, effective way to pair buyers and sellers on site at its annual ABA Marketplace show, it turned to an unusual source: speed dating. The resulting "Appointment Sessions" give buyers and sellers with mutual interests an opportunity to spend private, one-on-one time with each other right on the show floor. Like speed dating, the ABA appointment system pairs each buyer with a seller for seven-minute appointments on the Marketplace Business Floor, a designated area on the show floor. With six appointment sessions of 29 appointments each, the show allows travel buyers to meet one-on-one with 174 different sellers.

"The appointment sessions are the core of Marketplace," says Peter Pantuso, ABA President and CEO. "And people see a lot of value in the format. We tweak it a little every year, but since 1996, the show has grown every single year in terms of exhibit space and number of sponsors."

One-third of the trade show floor is secured and organized into 300 appointment booths, where buyers and sellers meet for prescheduled appointments throughout the show. The remaining two-thirds of the floor includes more than 100 exhibit booths and is lined with buses. On the Business Floor, each participating buyer sits in an 8x8 booth, which has a six-foot table and two chairs. Just outside each booth there's a chair for the seller and a sign identifying the buyer by company name and location.

Appointments are scheduled based on business type; for instance, the first day might offer meetings with destination marketing organizations and the second day might offer meetings with hotel and attractions personnel. Sellers' badges are color-coded, and only the sellers designated for a particular session are allowed on the Business Floor during that time. Travel buyers can take appointments throughout the week, with the possibility of up to 174 appointments. Because each seller group is only eligible to take appointments during two sessions of the week, sellers have a maximum of 58 appointments.

While ABA has offered some type of appointment system since the show began, the feature has really taken off in recent years, especially with the addition of an online appointment-setting system developed in conjunction with Infinite Software Solutions Inc., the makers of DevGuru ([www.issi.net](http://www.issi.net)). The appointment-management system begins at pre-registration. Attendees can enter the system to view lists of attendees organized by group, and select the people they'd like to meet at the show. After their choices have been entered, the system matches attendees and each person receives a schedule of his or her appointments before the meeting begins.

Pantuso refers to the Marketplace show as "an appointment show," noting that although education sessions are ongoing and the entire show floor is open during appointment times, the appointments are the main attraction. The ability to book appointments is included with show registration, and there's no distinction between attendees and exhibitors in the registration process. Even those who want to exhibit must register like all other attendees for the appointment sessions, and pay extra for exhibit space.

Sellers who have an exhibit booth usually bring at least one person to staff the booth and at least one person to participate in appointments, Pantuso says. When the show opens for the day, an announcer calls buyers and sellers to the first appointment. "Every six minutes, there's an announcement that you have one minute to go," Pantuso says. "After seven minutes, the announcer will say, for example, 'This concludes appointment number 101,' and the sellers will move on to their next appointment."

Unlike the usual noise and frills of the exhibit side of the room, the Business Floor "is all business," Pantuso says. "It's intense. People are focused. As a seller, you know you have the buyer's attention for seven minutes."

"Buyers and sellers make selections for the people they want to meet with," Pantuso says. "If I'm in Colorado, I want to meet with people who come through Colorado, so the system matches everybody up based on those types of commonalities. It allows mutual requests to take place first, followed by buyers' requests, followed by sellers' requests."

Based on the show's continual growth and regular, positive feedback from attendees and exhibitors, the appointment system works quite well. "We see a lot of business being written," Pantuso says. "It's not unusual for an entity to write hundreds of thousands of dollars of business while at the show."

#### ABA's Strategy

**GOAL:** Offer opportunities for exhibitors and attendees with mutual interests to meet one-on-one right on the show floor.

**STRATEGY:** Incorporate one-on-one appointments into the show format, including developing an online system to match buyers and sellers and schedule

appointments prior to the show.

**RESULTS:** Buyers and sellers participate in almost 100,000 private appointments on the floor during the three-day show.