

COLUMN: As The Saws Turn

TITLE: Random Thoughts From The Road

I am into day 10 of a 17 day road trip, all of it spent in Las Vegas, producing two shows for two different clients. I have a few hours today to get a few things done before we start dismantle on the first show. I'm sitting here in my Residence Inn suite looking out the window at a sunny morning, green grass and a few shade trees. I hear no slot machines, see no big neon signs and cannot sense that I am in Las Vegas. And that's OK. Seventeen days in this town is way more than I need.

On the day we leave for Las Vegas last week, we have a conversation with my traveling partner, our I&D supervisor, about his dress. He is a biker and dresses the part – black Harley t-shirts, do-rag, facial hair, tattoos, etc. He is a very hard worker, and our sharpest guy on the show floor, but we're a little concerned about how he'll be received.

So what happens? We get to the airport in St. Louis, get to the security check-in, and he breezes right through. I get the full treatment – bag search, shoes off, belt off, spread-eagle for the electronic wand and a pat down from my friendly TSA agent. He's over there watching and laughing. So much for dress codes...

Our first day of set up starts out the way too many have over the years: electrical is down, but someone rotated the plan 90 degrees – it has to be pulled up and re-done. Our carpet, which was promised to be unloaded the day before we arrive, is no where in sight. Our three trailers are staged for unloading exactly backwards – the one we need first is last in line.

This is where the big gamble comes into play: do we keep the six-man labor crew while we wait for the electricians, carpet and crates, or turn them in and try to get more later when we are ready to get to work? We opt to hold them, which turns out to be the right move. Who says there are no strategic decisions made on the show floor?

This show has a long set-up. We're building a double-deck with a lot of custom parts and pieces. Set-up runs over a weekend, we're in good shape time-wise, so our client decides we should all take Sunday off. With a full day to play, our supervisor and I head for the Grand Canyon. We're dressed in shorts and t-shirts (it's 80 degrees in Vegas). We arrive at the entrance to the South Rim of the canyon and are waiting to get in, and it is sleeting! By the third stop along the canyon rim, we give up and buy sweatshirts.

It doesn't matter how many times I fly over the canyon or how many times I visit in person, I am still awed by the size and the scope and the wonder of this place. It is one of my favorite places on this planet. We stayed until dark before heading back to Vegas.

I have been doing this over 20 years, and I still marvel at the transformation that occurs on the show floor the night before the show opens. We've been setting this exhibit for six days, and have been so focused on this one exhibit that we haven't really paid attention to what's going on around us. But when you walk in very early the morning of the first day of the show, and all the aisle carpet is down, the exhibits are vacuumed and everything is perfectly in place, it really is a sight to behold. I see things I haven't seen for the last six days. And I smell...well, I smell new carpet! Too bad it all has to go away in three days...

All the hard work and long hours are worth it when your client comes up to you with his VP and the CEO of the company and tells you what a wonderful job you do and that you are a key strategic partner in their success at trade shows. When our client tells us we have helped them achieve the success they have at shows and have made him look good for his senior management, that is what it's all about.

See you on the show floor.

Jim Obermeyer has been in the trade show industry over 20 years, both as a corporate trade show manager and exhibit house executive. He is now a partner in a new company: Reveal: Exhibiting a World of Difference. He can be reached at jobermeyer@revealexhibits.com.