

MBJ's annual business & technology showcase saw huge growth in exhibitors

by Ted Carter

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With the weather warming up outside, nearly a 100 exhibitors inside the Mississippi Trade Mart last week heated up some interest in their products and services as visitors strolled the aisles of the Mississippi Business Journal's Business & Technology EXPO, the state's largest business-to-business networking event..

Mercedes-Benz of Jackson salesman Doug White set up shop at a busy corner of one aisle. His plan was simple: gain a two-fer of sorts. One could bring immediate benefits and the other perhaps in 20 years or so.

First, he got to pitch the idea of automotive luxury to plenty of adult visitors to his booth. And kids who accompanied their parents got to see something they would not soon forget: a red, single-seat miniature Mercedes coupe with white-rimmed wheels any child would love. Seeing the youngsters looking wide-eyed at the car, White knew he was cultivating the next-generation of high-end automobile buyers.

"It's our Mercedes 'starter kit'," White said, kneeling by the car to let a visitor snap a photo.

White and the rest of the salespeople at Mercedes-Benz of Jackson are capped off a record year in 2012.

The German carmaker's small SUVs, starting at around \$36,000, are selling well, as are the sedans in the GLK and C classes, he said.

And adding to the dealership's good fortune is a complete avoidance of any damage from Jackson's recent hail storm. "We didn't get the first hit," White said, breathing a sigh of relief.

The booth next to White was not selling a product — it was promoting the idea of teaching Mississippi's children the value of learning about finance, economics and starting and operating a business. It was the non-profit Mississippi Council on Economic Education's first time as an EXPO exhibitor, said Selena Swartzfager, council president.

Regions Bank's Jackson executives Candie L. Simmons and Brian Lott acquainted EXPO visitors with Regions' many financial services products.

"We hope to let the business community know we're here," Swartzfager said. "Even though there are a lot of people who now about us, there are just as many who don't."

An added benefit as an exhibitor came with the networking with teachers and other education professionals involved in EXPO, she said. “We’re having a good time talking with them, and letting them know we’re here for them.”

Through funds contributed by the business-sector, the council provides no-cost training in economics, finance and entrepreneurship to teachers throughout Mississippi. The idea is to get them to take their new knowledge back to the classroom, Swartzfager said

The 10-year-old council will be announcing plans later this month for its annual luncheon forum. Normally held in November, this year’s event at the Jackson Convention complex will likely be moved to late September or early October, the president noted.

Last year’s speaker was controversial but entertaining Fox Business News commentator Stuart Varney, an economist by trade. This year’s guest speaker is still a secret, though Swartzfager revealed the speaker is a non-economist but someone well known to Mississippians.

The council depends on business contributions to put on its annual luncheon and gains much of that through the selling of sponsorship banners. “If there is a business that wants to support financial literacy or economic education we are taking pledges,” Swartzfager said of the opportunity to pledge a banner buy and pay later.

Across the exhibit hall was a booth displaying something both entirely new yet quite familiar – the Yellow Pages.

The Yellow Pages can still be found in what use to be the ubiquitous phone book but their content is also digital and parent company AT&T is providing it on many different electronic platforms. Today’s name for the new generation of Yellow Pages is YP.com.

Access is through the customary web page at YP.com or through a Smart Phone app. The YP.com app, said Yolanda Gunn, area sales manager for new media, “directs consumers in the area to business owners.”

If you need a plumber in Jackson, the app gives you the plumbers and their contact information, she said. If you have a specific plumber in mind but don’t have the contact information, it will give you that as well, she said.

YP.com is expanding the reach of its business listing information through partnerships with search engines such as Yahoo! and Google. But as Gunn is quick to point out: The Yellow Pages “are the original search engine.”

And perhaps best of all, YP.com is promising to end those annoying and frustrating web searches by the Brand X search sites that get you to the business’ name and address but insist you pay a fee to see the number. Want the number for free? Click on YP.com, Gunn says.

Among visitors to the EXPO was Jayne Jackson, membership coordinator for the Madison County Chamber of Commerce. She made a special point of stopping by the Mississippi

Business Journal's 40-under-40 awards luncheon at the Trade Mart. That gave her an opportunity to cheer on her friends and business acquaintances who were accepting the awards recognizing them as up-and-coming leaders in Mississippi's business and civic life.

Some of those same award winners will likely be taking part in the May 18 Dragon Boat Regatta sponsored by the Madison Chamber's ZIP 39 Young Professionals.

Companies, groups and even individuals participate in the daylong races at Pelican Cove. "We offer businesses a way to have an easy, not-complicated company picnic," Jackson said.

Competing are teams from the Ridgeland police and fire departments (the police won last year in a photo finish over the firefighters) and dozens of other organizations and businesses, including the likes of Mint the Restaurant's "Two-Dollar Ores."

For businesses, the regatta offers an opportunity to practice team building "because you can't row the boat unless you work together," Jackson said.

The dragon boats are trucked down from Canada and raced four at a time in 100-yard heats on the Ross Barnett Reservoir at Pelican Cove.

Besides helping to organize the boat race, Jackson has been bringing her outgoing personality to the airwaves at noon Wednesdays and Fridays on WLEZ, 98.1FM. Some Oldies music and some unscripted talk and call-ins are all part of the show. "It's just a lot of fun," Jackson said. "It's not serious. It's like chatting on the back patio."

Last week's EXPO marked a 30-year milestone for the annual business and technology show. Carolyn Boteler's TempStaff crew has exhibited at many of those EXPOs.

It's a time for the staff of the 29-year-old temporary employment service company to renew old acquaintances and make new ones, said Boteler, owner of the company. said.

"We've been doing it for years and years," she said. "We have made a lot of great contacts and new business partnerships."

EXPO has become even more important for the staffing firm as more companies begin depending on full-service companies such as TempStaff to provide workers and human resource management. "We had significant growth last year," Boteler said, particularly in permanent placement.

"That's a good sign for the economy," noted Boteler, whose TempStaff has offices in Jackson, Madison, Canton, McComb and Brookhaven. The company specializes in providing clerical and warehouse workers.

TempStaff is known at EXPO for its large green cloth carry bags. "It's great to look down the aisle and see all the green bags," Boteler said with a smile.

Billed as the venue “Where Business Meets Commerce,” the 30th EXPO had a 20 percent increase in exhibitors this year. The visitor draw was just what exhibitor and Mississippi market leader Regions Bank had hoped to see. EXPO “gives people the chance to meet our bankers,” said Candie L. Simmons, Region’s regional marketing director, who staffed the exhibit along with Brian Lott, a Region’s assistant vice president and mortgage loan originator.