

# ON THE MOVE

WHAT STARTED AS A SIMPLE DIRECTORY IS NOW  
THE HUB OF THE SPECIALTY PRODUCTS INDUSTRY —  
WITH A BOOMING EVENT PORTFOLIO

By Loree Stark, Executive Editor

While many organizations are scaling back or holding the line on event programs, the Advertising Specialty Institute (ASI) continues to grow its event portfolio. To wit, the organization this year launched its fifth regional show (in San Diego), added two new virtual shows and pushed forward on its 16-week roadshow program, launched in 2007.

**ASI** is a unique organization among the association and for-profit companies that consider trade shows and event programs a key part of their business. The ASI world includes two distinct groups: distributors (attendees) and suppliers (exhibitors) of promotional products. Suppliers include both manufacturers and importers. Both groups belong to ASI's "network," with about 3,600 suppliers and 22,000 distributor firm members. ASI shows are closed shows, and both distributors and suppliers must meet set requirements to participate. Although exhibitors aren't required to be members, nonmembers pay much higher fees and are approved on a case-by-case basis to ensure they meet ASI's criteria for providing products or services of interest to attendees. Distributors are generally required to be members, although exhibitors are able to extend one-day passes to their customers, who are then screened to ensure they're qualified resellers.

In addition to its event portfolio, ASI also produces catalogs, information directories, newsletters, magazines, Web sites and databases for its network. ASI even has programs to help manage its entire business, from presentations and ordering to inventory and invoicing.

*EXPO* checked in with ASI to get the scoop on how and why the company's grown, what ASI considers when launching new events and the importance of its growing roadshow and virtual initiatives.

## THE BACKGROUND

ASI was launched in 1950 by Joe Segel, who created and distributed a directory of suppliers for the advertising specialty industry that was sold to distributors who wanted to resell promotional items. In 1962, Segel sold the company to the Cohn family, which still owns and operates the company, and went on to found other companies, including the Franklin Mint and QVC.



Advertising Specialty Institute President and CEO Tim Andrews (left) and Vice Chairman Matthew Cohn have led the organization from one to more than 20 events and shows.



ASI entered the virtual space last year with two stand-alone events that were so successful they've expanded to four virtual events this year. The most recent virtual event, held on April 28, averaged 978 visitors per booth.

those distributors are sufficiently served by existing shows. ASI distributors also provide their annual sales volume, number of sales staff,

The first ASI show was launched in Las Vegas in 1998. "We'd gotten many, many requests over the years from people who wanted us to offer a trade show — people who wanted to meet face-to-face and not just through the media and other services we offered," says Matthew Cohn, Vice-chairman of ASI. The first show was a huge success: It sold out within a matter of weeks. To meet the growing demand, the company quickly launched a second event for the following year in Chicago. The organization's event portfolio eventually expanded to five large regional events (in Chicago, Dallas, Las Vegas, New York, Orlando and San Diego), a Las Vegas-based specialty show focused on the holiday selling season, a 16-week roadshow in the United States, a two-week roadshow in Canada, a series of hosted buyer programs in Canada and four annual virtual events.

The goal? To offer a variety of touchpoints for distributors and suppliers. "Our philosophy is to try to facilitate networking in very cost-effective, high-return-on-investment ways that work for our members," Cohn says. "We have many different members with many different needs." The organization's philosophy is to make it ultra-convenient for distributors to connect with suppliers. Can't make it to a regional show? Consider a roadshow stop. Can't get out of the office, period? Log on for a virtual event. The approach gives distributors control over how, when and where they connect.

When determining whether to launch a new event, ASI focuses on data — including the demographics of distributors and sales volumes by city and region. Distributor demographic information includes the number of distributors within specific miles of a potential host city, as well as distributor survey results indicating if

industry segment served, and so on, as part of their ongoing relationship with the company. "We know sales volume by city and region because we can aggregate the sales data given to us by distributors in each region," Cohn says.

To see how this data works in action, look, for example, to the launch of the San Diego show this year. "California had the most suppliers and the most distributor firms in our industry, and yet we didn't have a show there," says Tim Andrews, President and CEO of ASI and President of the ASI Show. "So we did our research with our distributors and suppliers, and clearly they wanted us to have a show in California."

Each regional ASI show typically lasts three days. ASI offers a number of education options for attendees, including a track specifically focused on new distributors. The organization also strategically offers "power" sessions on the show floor so attendees can get in quick sessions without having to wander too far from the exhibitors.

Every initiative or incentive ASI offers is created with the objective of convenient, cost-efficient opportunities for suppliers and distributors. On the supplier side, for example, suppliers that buy four shows will get the fifth show free. Suppliers that sign up by a certain deadline to exhibit can take advantage of a caravan service that ships entire booths from show to show. "We do things like that to help make it easier and more cost-effective for suppliers to reach the entire country and not miss out on any opportunities to build their business," Cohn says.

On the distributor side, ASI heavily discounts and sometimes entirely subsidizes hotel rooms for attendees.

The organization's sales and marketing strategy has also evolved as ASI's portfolio has grown. "We've started doing

some bundling,” Andrews says. For example, suppliers can join ASI for a fee and then buy a lower-cost experience for the show. And marketing has become super-localized with the launch of the roadshow.

## HITTING THE ROAD

ASI acquired the roadshow in 2005 from Discovery Marketing Associates. ASI renamed the show ASI Advantages Roadshow and invested in growing the event. It launched in its current iteration in 2007 to reach smaller local distributors who couldn't make it to the larger regional trade shows. The roadshow launched with 50 cities in 15 weeks. This year, the roadshow has expanded to 75 cities in 16 weeks.

“Our members were expressing a need for a smaller, local road show, especially smaller distributorships who couldn't afford to be away from the office,” says Karen DiTomasso, Vice President of Sales for ASI. “The roadshow gives those distributors the perfect opportunity to spend time with top suppliers while seeing new products and taking advantage of free education.” The distributors seem to agree; each year more than 11,000 visit one of the roadshow stops.

How it works: ASI has a standard operation team consisting of three to four people who staff the tour full-time. The stops are typically in hotel ballrooms with hours from 9 a.m.-1 p.m. The four-hour time period gives attendees the opportunity to get quick hits of content and still hobnob with suppliers without losing an entire workday.

The education component includes a panel, typically of four to six suppliers, that will each take about 10 minutes to

## BEING SOCIAL

ASI keeps the conversation going year-round with a number of social and new media efforts that give distributors and suppliers several places to connect with each other — and with ASI. The company has a presence on all the major social networking sites, including Twitter and Facebook, and Tim Andrews, President and CEO of ASI and President of the ASI Show, has a blog on the ASI site where he posts about everything from ASI events to industry challenges.

Here, a few key stats on ASI's social media efforts:



### Twitter

- [twitter.com/Tim\\_Andrews\\_ASI](https://twitter.com/Tim_Andrews_ASI): 407 followers
- [twitter.com/ASICentral](https://twitter.com/ASICentral): 2,056 followers
- [twitter.com/TheASIShow](https://twitter.com/TheASIShow): 653 followers



### Facebook

- [facebook.com/pages/ASICentral/55248546043](https://facebook.com/pages/ASICentral/55248546043): 1,916 fans
- [facebook.com/pages/Trevoise-PA/The-ASI-Show/70253521061](https://facebook.com/pages/Trevoise-PA/The-ASI-Show/70253521061): 1,022 fans



### Proprietary Social Network

- [social.asinetwork.com](https://social.asinetwork.com): 4,227 members



### YouTube

- [youtube.com/asicentral](https://youtube.com/asicentral): 187,855 total upload views

talk about the products they have and which ones specifically are at the show. In three cities, the roadshow co-locates with the ASI Stitches Roadshow, which targets decorators — companies that imprint promotional items. At those locations, the decorators as well as distributors attend and the education component is expanded, extending the show day until 2 p.m.

In terms of exhibiting, each stop has a limited number of exhibitors (there are typically 60 to 80 tables). This gives distributors plenty of time to move around the floor and get some time with every supplier.

As to any concern that the roadshow cannibalizes the trade show business, ASI's super-localized targeted marketing ensures that the overlap of distributors attending both the roadshow stops and the larger regional shows is minimal. “I'd say the overlap is less than 10 percent,” DiTomasso says.

To drive attendance to the show, ASI uses direct marketing as a primary strategy. Annually, the company estimates it sends more than 1 million direct marketing pieces tied to the roadshow.

Designed to reach smaller local distributors who couldn't make it to the larger regional trade shows, the ASI Advantages Roadshow launched in 2007 with 50 cities in 15 weeks. This year, the roadshow has expanded to 75 cities in 16 weeks.



And as the roadshow has grown, ASI has learned new ways to better serve suppliers. For suppliers who don't have the staff to man the show at a roadshow stop, the company has a "rent-a-rep" program in which ASI provides a representative for those suppliers. The company offers a van cargo service to make it more convenient for suppliers going to multiple cities. The company also hires busses for certain regions for suppliers to travel on if they don't want to drive or fly.

In fact, many of the suppliers find themselves making the entire (or the majority of) the roadshow circuit each year. In each region, some suppliers will join for a few weeks and leave as the roadshow goes to a new region. The travel schedule creates "a lot of camaraderie," says Richard Fairfield, Publisher and Senior Vice President for ASI. "The suppliers become best buddies. That's one of the things that really makes the program gel."

## GOING VIRTUAL

ASI entered the virtual space last year with two stand-alone events that were so successful they've expanded to four virtual events this year. "We promised people we'd have 2,000 attendees at each event, and we've met that promise," Fairfield says. The most recent virtual event, on April 28, averaged 978 visitors per booth.

The on-site experience: When distributors log on to the virtual show, they see a welcome video from Andrews. Distributors can wander the virtual environment much like a traditional trade show floor. They can go into a virtual café and meet up with other attendees. They can walk the show floor and go into each booth where they can chat with the supplier manning the booth. Distributors can use virtual "briefcases" to snag catalogs and request samples on the show floor.

Although the virtual events are separate from the physical events, ASI has integrated virtual events with other ASI

initiatives. For example, ASI earlier this year launched its new ESP search software, which enables suppliers to search distributors online, at the first virtual show of 2010. ASI also broadcasts its weekly Internet radio show live at the virtual show.

Why is virtual so successful for ASI? Fairfield says the number of people who can attend from any single distributor is a factor, as it cuts down on travel expenses. And the minimal amount of time required to participate is a factor as well. With about 25 booths at each virtual show, it only takes a distributor about an hour-and-a-half to walk the entire show floor. The average person stays about 70 minutes at the virtual events, Fairfield says.

Although ASI is only in its second year producing virtual events, Fairfield says there have already been some key learnings. "We've found that you have to really market in the last two weeks leading up to the event," he says. "Since you don't have to book hotel or air, it's easy to decide to attend the event on the fly. Probably 80 percent of the marketing for these events is done close to the end, and that's been very effective."

For virtual, ASI largely uses e-mail and e-newsletters to hype the events. E-mails contain links allowing prospective attendees to easily drop the event directly into their Outlook calendars. The e-marketing strategy is particularly effective for virtual events because prospective attendees are more likely to be receptive to e-communications.

What lies ahead for ASI? Look to the company to continue relying on its core philosophy of using events as unique opportunities to serve its constituencies of suppliers and distributors as the company's event portfolio continues to evolve. Says Andrews: "We're looking at even more ways to help distributors and suppliers communicate and conduct business, focusing on digital solutions that cut their costs, improve their service and let them make more sales more quickly. We're helping them do this without losing the important personal touch that comes from meeting face-to-face to see and demo new products and from networking to learn and understand needs." ❌