



Business

The hands are out for all the freebies

Swag and million-dollar deals go hand-in-hand at oil conference

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Johnny Hanson Chronicle

Lauren O'Brien, with O'Drill/MCM, gets a character drawing of herself on Tuesday by artist Mac Garcia at the Falcon Electric exhibit at the Offshore Technology Conference.

Even at an oil industry trade show where million-dollar deals are made, sometimes it takes a Fun Size Snickers to get a customer in the door.

Exhibitors at the **Offshore Technology Conference** found that gimmicks — from candy to caricatures, magicians to masseurs — got the crowds to stop and look.

In the crowded aisles of Reliant Center, everything bore corporate logos: pens and lanyards, key chains and tins of mints, and the fabric bags to collect them all in.

Nearly every booth carried bowls of candy. A pressure-washer vendor, Sioux Corp., had Now and Laters. A testing company, Applus RTD, had individual-size bags of pretzels and chips. Bronswerk Heat Transfer BV had an open bowl of jelly beans — not as popular as wrapped candy among an international crowd sensitive to the flu outbreak. Many booths also carried communal hand sanitizer pumps.

Speaking their language

A translation company called **MasterWord Services** mixed Halloween-grade candy with an assertive approach. An eagle-eyed project coordinator, Oubono Correa, scouted name tags as passers-by neared, greeting them by name and in their own language. The native of France is fluent in four: French, English, Spanish and Portuguese.

"When I speak to them in their language, they're really happy," she said, her arms draped with the bags she was handing out. "We have the best bags and the best candy."

No one was above shilling during the weeklong conference, where exhibitors say they make more contacts and gain more business leads than at any other time of the year.

Some companies tried to find handouts that would set them apart. In honor of Cinco de Mayo, one company gave out Mexican jumping beans with invitations to an evening reception. Another company had an artist providing free caricatures. Some had raffles: several for money, one for a Wii game system.

A little magic

At least two booths featured magic shows throughout the day. One of them, a Swedish company called Sandvik, had also set up a recreation area with a pool table and Ikea armchairs.

Some could rely on the allure of eye-grabbing displays. A crowd formed around a lifeboat company, Survival Systems International, which was showcasing its newest escape vessel, a metallic capsule painted bright retro orange and resembling an alien space pod. If an offshore platform catches fire or starts to sink, as many as 60 people can reach safety in the capsule, said George Beatty, a former ship captain and the company's president.

A salesman gave his pitch to a group that gathered at midmorning.

"It's self-righting," he said cheerfully. "And it's American-made, in San Diego."

Gerald Gau, an engineer working in new-product development for a competitor's company, peeked inside the metallic hull. A half-dozen lanyards hung from his neck and a fabric bag from his arm, heavy with handouts.

"He's trying to collect as many lanyards as possible," explained his co-worker Valarie Hardin, who dug in her own bag to show off a pen that glows in the dark.

"And collect all the free stuff," Gau added. "You're done when you can't fill your bag any more."

Getting people to your booth didn't necessarily net you a business prospect, though.

A company called Electronic Power Design supplies electricity for rigs and platforms, and at the OTC, it supplies free five-minute massages from a licensed masseuse. On Tuesday, a line of people with aching backs — from traveling and from lugging bags of conference swag — formed around the booth.

"I don't even know what this company does," Pasadena consultant Doc Skidmore said. "But they've got a massage therapist, and I've got a headache."

Chronicle photographer Johnny Hanson contributed to this report.

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