

Exhibitions saved Caroline Horgan's business. You can make them work for you too, writes Sandra O'Connell, The Sunday Times

CAROLINE Horgan has turned an ailing furniture factory into a thriving soft furnishings firm through the canny use of trade shows and some smart rebranding.

Abbeylands Furniture, her family's business, dates from 1959. Horgan, the managing director, realised five years ago she could no longer compete with the influx of cheap leather suites from low-cost countries. "Our business was being decimated," she said.

Unlike some of her competitors, she decided not to close but to change direction.

It was ironic but the demand for imported leather sofas that was putting us out of business provided us with an opportunity to create cushions and throws to soften their hard look," said Horgan.



On with the show: Horgan used fairs to launch her firm's move from sofas to soft furnishings. To succeed at events, inset, you must plan your strategy in advance and identify your targets

"It really was a case of, if you can't beat them join them."

Using skills and equipment she already had in the factory, she created a line of soft furnishings and headed to a furniture trade show in Dublin in 2005.

"It was the first time we had exhibited at a trade show since 1976 and the reaction was fantastic," she said.

She ended the show with a packed order book and a decision to create a brand called Scatterbox that she now sells across Ireland and Britain.

Staff numbers have since grown from 33 to 43 people. "All the figures indicate that this year will be our best yet," said Horgan, who now attends two Irish and three UK trade shows each year.

Apart from the branding of the range, Scatterbox's success is down to attendance at key trade shows, she said.

"In the UK in particular, buyers need to see you attend for a year or two before they will even think to do business with you, so exhibiting builds your profile."

Visiting trade shows as a delegate can be a useful way of checking out the competition, sourcing new suppliers and identifying possible partners. The shows really come into their own, though, as a sales platform.

Do your homework

The preparation you put into a trade show is the key to the return you get from it, says John Whelan, a trade

show veteran and chief executive of the Irish Exporters Association.

Those hoping to sell at a show should decide who they want to see beforehand.

"Target who you want to see at that show well in advance," said Whelan. "Key clients should then receive a written invitation from you, including a complimentary ticket. Though only worth a few quid, it is something people appreciate."

Kathi Carroll is a marketing consultant who helps companies prepare for trade shows, mainly in the food sector. "To succeed, the first thing you have to do is decide which trade show is for you," she said. "You have to know exactly who your target market is."

A lot of Irish companies try to hit everybody and find their budget doesn't stretch that far or the product they have doesn't suit the show they have chosen," said Carroll.

"You need to get your distribution in line so that, when people come to your stand looking to do business, you are ready to go," she advised.

For William Hogan, of gift item wholesaler Soap Opera, trade shows are, "after the cost of keeping a salesperson on the road", the single biggest marketing investment he makes each year.

"We opt for shows that are part of the build-up to certain key selling times, such as spring time and Christmas," Hogan said.

"Not only do we write a lot of orders from

existing customers at trade shows, we always win new ones too, so you get a concentration of orders in one fell swoop."

The trade show is a great way of identifying potential clients too, he said.

"The leads generated from a trade show only stay hot for a few weeks, so you've got to follow them up pretty quickly."

Take notes on the day

Whelan advises visitors to trade shows to get down to price discussions early on. "If you are on different stands during the day, it can be easy to get bogged down with the look and feel of what's on offer," he said.

"What you really need to know is an indicative price so you know which suppliers are likely to be most competitive." The danger is that you can end up at the end of the day with a huge mountain of cards and no memory of what you found out, he cautions. "So after visiting each stand, put a few notes on the back of each card to help you remember."

Market your stand

Size isn't everything when it comes to creating a buzz at your booth, according to Carroll.

"Even a very small stand can be made attractive and inviting," she said. "With food companies, for example, I always suggest pictures of Ireland because people are attracted to it as a clean, green environment."

A little showmanship is required on the day. "You

need to be proactive," said Whelan. "Step off your stand into the walkway to shake hands and invite people in. Don't just sit there looking out. It's off putting."

Don't deck out your stand with details of everything you've ever produced because it will just look cluttered and confusing, Whelan advises.

"Pick one item and promote it clearly and have a small amount of other material to hand if it is needed," he said.

"When talking to people, find out who they are currently buying from. After the show, work on identifying the points of competitive difference you can offer before following up the lead."

Don't bombard people with paper

People don't like having to carry loads of material and they're likely to bin it, says Carroll.

"Just have one really good quality A4 sheet, printed front and back - it will save you money and you can always forward further info later," she said.

"The money you save should be put into really good quality photography for your info sheet and your booth, so that you look professional."

Getting trade shows right is something Birgitta Curtin has learnt through experience.

The co-founder of the Burren Smokehouse in Clare, a smoked salmon producer, Curtin believes her initial forays into international trade shows yielded little results.

"In the beginning we wanted to conquer the world, but we found it wasn't that easy. Instead we concentrated on growing our heritage centre in Clare and orders from abroad grew organically as people visited us," she said.

"I think also we might have been ahead of our time in terms of speciality food. Now we are in the right frame of mind to try again."

Next month the company will exhibit at not one but two food trade fairs, taking place simultaneously in Dublin and London.

"We have a unique product, and a tasty one - at a trade show buyers can taste it for themselves," Curtin said.

"Also, my awareness of who I want to talk to has grown significantly. I have a list of contacts that I am preparing to contact before I go."

Getting it right is all about timing, she reckons. "And I'm more serious now about what I want from a trade show than I was before."