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A BOOTH IS A BOOTH IS A BOOTH

by Chris Dichtel

Convention halls are weird places. The whole business has a bizarre side to it, hard to describe if you've never been to a trade show. For example, ever try to explain what a booth looks like?

The dictionary definition of "a small stand for the display of goods" just doesn't cut it. In the interests of further confusing the issue, here are some alternate definitions:

A booth is a multi-media shrine to consumer capitalism, where the latest product line is enthroned, shined-up, and bedecked with all the accoutrements of a discotheque (including the babes).

Where else could you find a long-limbed beauty in a bathing suit standing at a stall to autograph the pinup posters eagerly awaited by a line (and the only one in the place) of tool merchandisers? Her title? Why, the company's, of course: "Miss Rigid Tool, 1989."

A booth is a one-dimensional survivor of the agora of ancient Athens, where tradespeople met from all over the world.

And as in olden times, language barriers sometimes prove awkward. At the Cybold Desktop Publishing Show, the exhibitors from a German company had a sign made for their VIP room. The company's name, "Hell Graphic Systems", derives, I was told, from the fact that in German, "hell" means "light". At any rate, what they wound up with was a sign that read: "Welcome to Hell: Hospitality Suite." Nice idea...

A booth is a surreal tableau, the hybrid creation of the indiscriminate mating of Modern Advertising with Product Specifications.

A light box graphic seen on the Surgeon's Show: advertising a drug to suppress nausea in post-surgical patients, the photograph shows a naked woman's torso. The image starts just below the nipple line of a well-formed pair, travels down the shapely waist and abdomen, and stops just (and just barely) before the pubic area. The color of the torso is a chalky blue. In the lower left area of the abdomen is a four-inch horizontal incision, with eight black thread stitches looping vertically across it. Three of the stitches in the middle of the incision have burst, and two thick drops of bright red blood hang like pendants off the wounds. Just to the left of the incision, and typed across the silky-smooth upper thigh of the torso, are the words, "Nausea and vomiting can ruin your best work."

A booth is a tawdry circus stall wherein suited conventioners grapple for freebies like kids in a candy shop.

Was told by an attendant at the Clinique booth at the Cosmetics Show that the demand for their free samplers was quite intense: one well-dressed fellow, accompanied by wife and young child in a baby stroller, rushed up to the booth, removed the child from the perambulator, and, handing the infant over to his wife, demanded of the attendant: "Fill 'er up!"

A booth is a Buckminster Fuller-style "pop-up" skeleton that springs together without even the use of a screwdriver, or a back-breaking monster concocted by sadistic designers whose final line of defense is, "Well, it went up in the shop!"

And a booth is a place where we installers scramble around like ants turning ten-foot sections of cubic space into gleaming altars to Mammon, god of material wealth, and picking up various splinters, bruises, and headaches along the way.

But it's a living... see you in the Hospitality Suite.