

Chapter 6

BEING A PARTICIPANT

WHY SHOULD I GO THROUGH ALL THE TROUBLE?

This is a good question. If you are used to doing conventional crafts fairs, it can be hard to imagine the reason for the additional expense of building a themed booth specifically to sell the *same* products at a Renaissance Faire. Unlike a contemporary fair, Renaissance Faires are a theatrical experience as well as a craft event. The success or failure of the overall theme of the event is largely due to the collective efforts of its many participants. The entire theme of any specific area can be enhanced or destroyed by the appearance of a single booth.

Many visitors to European cities comment on just how “clean” they look. A lot of this is due to the collective efforts of its inhabitants and an understanding that each is responsible for the appearance and upkeep of their individual homes and businesses. This is not only because it reflects on their property, but also on the overall appearance of the entire community. The same is true of a successful Faire. The experience of your guests is greatly enhanced by the appearance of the Faire and the individual dedication of each booth owner to do the very best job they can.

“BUY A PIECE OF THE MAGIC”

Renaissance Faires are unique in that their guests often purchase products as a way to take some of the magic of the Faire home with them. Faire guests shop with an eye to accessories their costumes and their lives with the items they purchase at the event. I have often encountered guests and participants that save up for years for a cape, sword, or costume element that they have had their eye on. They do this because the act of buying something actually enhances their experience of the Faire. It is not a mistake that theme park designers place merchandise shops at the exit of many of their attractions. Having just come off a themed ride makes you want to take some of that experience home with you. At a Renaissance Faire the entire event IS that ride, and purchasing some of that is just a natural extension of that

experience. So you see, the more your booth supports the illusion of a Renaissance village, the more sales it may generate, purely because your products help your customers live that illusion when at the event or when they return home.

WHAT STORY ARE YOU TRYING TO TELL?

When creating a booth it is often helpful to create a story that supports the wares you are selling, the food you are offering, the games you are presenting, or guild environment you are creating. Are you a poor vendor that builds his booth with twigs and branches, or a rich merchant that offers her wares out of a timber frame shop? Are you a candle maker that allows the public to enter your shop to create their own products, or a blacksmith demonstrating what a craftsman looks like when they work? Any personal story you can communicate with the design of your booth will only help your sales and the experience of your visitors. If you are a nomadic seller of merchandise scavenged from far off places, drape your booth with exotic rugs and textiles that look like they just came off the back of a camel. If you are dying fabric for clothing, include a few half barrels of colored water, or better yet actually dye fabric in your booth! Supporting your products, services, or performance space with elements that support its theme will add even more

depth to your audience's experience and encourage them to look, watch, and buy.

EXPERIENCING THE FAIRE FROM BEHIND A COUNTER

There are many ways to experience a Faire, one of my favorites is from behind the counter of a booth. Whether you are selling jewelry, turkey legs, ale, or souvenir maps, a place behind a counter affords you a unique window on the ebb and flow of people, costumes, and street entertainment.

Having a booth means you have a home base from which to venture out from and safely return. You have a one-on-one relationship with many of your patrons, and when the Faire gets crowded, a place safe from the crush of humanity.

Although you are technically working, you are also visiting guests, fellow participants, and best of all, playing. There is nothing so nice as to have friends sit with you in your own private living room, watching the spectacle of a Faire parading past.

Some of my fondest, and earliest experiences of the Faire was spent shoveling ice into glasses of tea and feeding them through a window to the counter help. As behind the scenes as this job might appear, I have a framed window of the Faire that allowed me to focus my experience on just a few yards of dusty street where I could watch all the faces of

guests and participants as they came to the counter. One thing I also loved was seeing some of the better knows performers quietly drop their daylong roles, just long enough to order a drink, connect to the counter person, and then launch themselves back into the crowd. It was these moments that made me feel the most included in this much larger event, and yet I was just an ice shoveling individual sitting at the back of a booth.

This can also be true of participants that create a theatrical Inn-Yard, or Guild Yard. These are themed environments, often with seats, dinning tables, and structures that face out to the crowd. Actors and guild members Play the roles appropriate to the environment, and whether peasants or members of the Queen's Court, they act as a living tableau. The only danger comes when a group so identifies with their own small universe of players that they forget or even ignore the audience separated by only a few hay bales or length of rope. Any opportunity to pull the audience in, if not physically emotionally, will only make your experience and theirs more enjoyable.

BRINGING PUBLIC SPACES INTO YOUR BOOTH

One of the hazards of conventional arts fair is the creation of an invisible barrier between the seller and the buyer. This is a wall that causes many to walk right by your booth, maybe

only glancing at the objects or services you are offering. This may have little to do with the quality of your work and everything to do with the belief that your space is private or unapproachable. Although a jewelry seller may not want guests wondering around behind their counter, there is not reason not to create spaces that encourage visitor to explore and hang out a bit. The more activity in and around your booth the more curiosity and visitors it will attract. If you are lucky enough to have a tree adjacent to your booth space, spend a little extra money to place a few hay bales around its base that the public might use to rest their feet. Although not specifically related to your booth it helps perforate that invisible barrier and suggest that the Faire is happening inside your booth as well as in the streets and byways. Your products and booth should spill out into the world, no tuck back from it, and coming up with ways to attract the attention of your audience and welcome them in will only help your popularity and eventual sales.

TRANSPORTING YOUR AUDIENCE

In the end it is *your* efforts that will support the overall story the entire Faire is trying to tell. You are just one part of the big picture that will transport your audience into the time period. You may be shy about your talents as an actor, but a kind “Good day malady” or a “Good morrow kind sir” can be the extent of your old English accent, but may be just

enough to make your audience feel welcomed into the larger play that is the Faire. Take advantage of cheering when a parade is passing, or boo if a group of Spaniards appears near your booth. Ask customers if they have had the good fortune to see the Queen this day, or if they have tried a meat pasty or sticky bun, it will only help make the story more convincing. Still, if these efforts are just too much work, or just too embarrassing to perform, at least dedicate yourself to not purposefully popping the illusion by whipping out a cell phone or surfing the web on a tablet when in front of the public. Your actions go a long way to supporting or undermining the overall experience and pleasure of your guests and customers.

ACCESSORIZING YOUR EXPERIENCE

Future Faire participants usually started as guests, and many lifetime visitors to the Faire come so they can “dress up” and Play Faire. The usual order of events for a first time visitor is that they purchase some fun, often inexpensive accessory to help them “join in the fun” of Faire. For girls this is often a wearable flower wreath, and for young boys a wooden sword and shield. The next year they may come back with a desire to dress up just a little bit more, maybe add a long skirt or bell sleeved shirt. Shopping the craft booths, they may pick up something else to add to their growing ensemble, and so the process begins.

What Faires do well is promote fantasy, and encourage those that participate in that fantasy. Crafts people that help this process of accessorizing will find unexpected sales, and potentially create a bauble, necklace, or other item that may become a Faire “must have” for all the participants. Often I can tell a fellow Faire participant in the aisle of a local grocery store, not for their 21st century clothing, but by a necklace or pin that I know they could have only purchased at the Faire.

WEARING THE OTHER VENDOR’S CRAFTS

The Faire isn’t just a make believe village, it IS a village of people who depend on each other for the success of the larger event. While the Main streets of most American towns include businesses that are desperate to grab customers away from their neighbor’s establishments, our little family is built on mutual support. One way to support this is by choosing to wear and use the crafts made and sold by other vendors. Sometimes your sale may have come from a Faire visitor seeing your product around the neck of another craftsperson, and you can do the same by proudly displaying the work of others in your booth and on your person. Of course there are limits... potters may be reluctant to display the work of another ceramicist, but that doesn’t mean they can’t wear a beautiful cloak, drink from a pewter goblet, or accessorize with a lovely necklace made by another Faire vendor.