

Capturing the young(er) antique buyer in Chicago

Story and photos by Bruce Rodgers

The view can be wondrous when looking east while standing on West Randolph Street in the 1300 block. If it's the last Sunday of the month, anytime from May through October, and the weather is clear, the skyline can freeze a body accustomed to lesser man-made profiles etched across a horizon.

Standing there, in the middle of street, looking up, alerts everyone around that here is a tourist. Why? Because most everyone else will be walking pass booths, browsing, talking with others, touching what interests them, and generally making mental decisions as to what to buy. Many are repeating a journey they took the previous month.

The scene is the **Chicago Antique Market** in Chi-town's West Loop neighborhood. And yes, the locals will forgive a visitor that continues to stare at the city's architectural presence, including the Sears Tower, the world's fourth tallest building. This is still the Midwest after all.

"This is a beautiful venue and it is a historical venue," said Kathleen Finley, co-founder of the Antique Market, "near downtown but enough off the beaten path."



Marketing divas and Chicago Antique Market founders Kathleen Finley (l) and Sally Schwartz.

Overcoming the hurdles

Creating a destination unique in its own way was deliberate, getting there took some effort. But Finley, a former corporate communications strategist, and co-founder Sally Schwartz, a 22-year veteran of advertising and special event marketing, possess a laser-focus determination.

A mutual friend introduced Finley and Schwartz to one another. Finley had an idea for an urban antique market and was looking at the St. Louis area. Years before the current Antique Market, Schwartz had developed and ran outdoor antique markets in Chicago, the last one near where the Chicago River emptied into Lake Michigan. But a vicious windstorm and eventual sale of the land put it all to an end.

The two women found like-mindedness and shared similar ambitions. “It was like ‘bam’ we’re going to meetings, and then we spent a year walking every show in the Midwest,” said Schwartz “It was just selling, selling, selling,”

There weren’t enough dealers from the earlier Chicago shows and both women sought a new influx of dealer creativity.

“We had to literally go to them and show the urban market material, tell them of our plan, our tie-ins,” said Schwartz.

“These are very shrewd people,” added Finley. Some wanted free space to give it a try but “We couldn’t afford that. Then others would hear ‘downtown Chicago’ and sign up for all six (months).”

Dealer Don Colclough, a k a “Mr. Modern,” wasn’t apprehensive. “I have 25 years going to shows.” Colclough, who focuses on the 1950s, has sold in California, Nebraska and New York, and moved to Chicago eleven years ago.

“It’s like 26th Street in New York,” he said of the Chicago Market, “an old, classic intercity market. I use to do it in the early 1980s.”

Colclough and his friend Lisa Polito told other dealers such as Curt Ames of Elgin, IL.

“This is the best show,” Ames said. “There seems to be an interest in the merchandise I have.” Ames is into industrial, selling such things as columns, wooden storage boxes and wooden college pennants that seem to have come from a long-gone bar



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Positive word of mouth helped Schwartz and Finley with dealers. But there were two other balls in the air.

Finley said, “We had to commit financially before we could sell the space not knowing how well it would sell. And we had to contractually commit to the dealers before we technically had approval from the city. It was very risky.”

The dealers, finding a venue and getting approval from the city all were interlocking. The women asked for commitments from dealers “for the whole season,” said Schwartz, before they got city approval.

“The (other) challenging thing about starting an urban market is finding a landlord whose willing to commit their property once a month for thousands of people to come through for years on end,” Schwartz said.

With signed dealers, a willing landlord was found and after jumping through the bureaucratic hoops, they got city approval.

In 2003, the Chicago Urban Market opened in space on W. Randolph — now an athletic club — and onto the street.

The next year got better. The Plumbers Union, Local 130, owns the Plumbers Building, which faces West Washington Street across the street from the W. Randolph spot, agreed to let the women use their historic building. “They saw that it would be successful, that we would be able to pay them month after month,” said Schwartz.

Leaders of the Local 130 had to “see us do it,” she continued. “They like the clientele. (And now) there’s a definite respect and appreciation from the people who come through the building. It’s exciting...

“And great PR for their building,” Finley added.

Schwartz and Finley praise their relationship with the union. “They’re the loveliest people in the world, the staff is great,” Schwartz said.

Built in 1927, the Plumbers Building and the Antique Market are near an area that was the site of the Haymarket Riots in 1886. A bomb killed eight policemen, and eight supporters of the union movement were arrested and brought to trial. Four were hanged, one committed suicide and three were pardoned in 1893.

Still in their third season (through October), the Chicago Antique Market uses the two floors and balcony of the elegant 25,000-square-foot Plumbers Building. Seventy-five to eighty dealers set up inside, another 150 dealers show their wares outside in the parking lot and on a two-block stretch of W. Randolph.

Creating themes

With dealers creating a buzz among themselves and the venue locked in, the next challenge was “How are we going to market this thing to get people through the turnstiles?” said Finley.

With marketing, both women felt more in their element. They knew they wanted to expand the demographic and create an identity.

“It’s an marketing issue because the word ‘antique’ connotes — for people who don’t know — old and smelly,” said Schwartz.

“But when they hear the word ‘retro’ or ‘vintage,’ young people get excited because that’s what is very hip right now. Movie stars are carrying vintage handbags and dressing in designer clothes from the ‘60s and ‘70s.”

Schwartz added that young people are into labels and are picky in the face of being “inundated” with marketing.

“I think they want to buy something that’s made really well,” Schwartz continued. “I just think this young generation is really savvy; they don’t want to be marketed to by these big-box retailers.”

The strategy is straightforward. To have “a different look for a different audience.”

Part of the approach means spreading their advertising dollars beyond the trade publications. The Antique Market also advertises in local news and entertainment weeklies catering to a young audience. With those ads come new phrases that avoid overworked terms — descriptions such as “retro spectacle” and “vintage glamour.”

The women also seek public relations’ tie-ins with what the city of Chicago may be promoting whether it be part of the Silk Road Chicago: Summer 2006, the citywide celebration of the city’s multicultural legacy, or the city’s upcoming Fall Fashion Week.

“The biggest challenge is that there are so many things for people to do,” said Schwartz. “When you live in a smaller town, you do something big and everybody notices it. When you’re in a town this big, it’s very hard — there’s a million things to do. It’s not unlike any show promoter...just getting people here.”

Having a theme each month brings people to the Chicago Urban Market. “It’s something different to have the media talk about other than ‘Here’s the market again,’” said Schwartz.



In July, the theme was “Travel Souvenirs” to “showcase priceless antiques brought to Chicago from all corners of the world,” read the press release. “We had everything from vintage TWA posters to carry-on cases,” said Finley.

“The one thing that makes it work here are the young buyers,” said Elgin, IL dealer Curt Ames.

In August, the Market will repeat it’s most successful theme — “Dog Days of Summer.”

“It’s coming back for the third time,” Finley said. “This is very European — we get tons of dogs down here and the dealers bring in antique and vintage dog items, and we have a doggy adoption.

“It’s the kind of collecting theme that we can bring to life for the press.”

“Mr. Modern,” dealer Don Colclough, likes the theme approach. “People who come to this (a theme show) know what to expect more than a general antique show,” he said.

Parents with kids in tow are welcomed. “Everybody is inclusive, all ages,” said Schwartz.

Young kids can play a treasure hunt game at the Kid Collectors Corner. A child gets a map asking for specific things, finds them and has the dealers sign off on the map. The child returns the map and gets a prize from the “treasure chest.”

The Indie Designer Fashion Market, within the Antique Market, aims directly at young, urban singles. On display are creations by Chicago designers Monika and Erika Simmons of Double Stitch and hats by Eia Millinery Design. Such designers specialize “in blending old traditions and fresh, new designs,” stated the August press release.

“It works really well because people coming here to buy antiques and collectibles are people who have great tastes; they just don’t like old and they just don’t like new, it’s the mix of quality they are looking for,” said Schwartz.

“(And) it brings all these young people who could care less about antiques but once they’re here, it’s ‘Oh, that’s antique? Wow, that’s cool.’”

Dealers’ choice

Both Finley and Schwartz know the ultimate gauge of coolness rests with the dealers. Both women casually call their dealers “artists.”

“You can just tell when you talk to them,” said Finley. “They see something you wouldn’t see; they are creating second lives for items. And the clientele in this city want that kind of edgy thinking from a dealer.”

But the preference goes beyond the artistic. “We like experts...like them to really be experts,” said Schwartz. “(And) they have to know how to sell. They really have to be good at what they do.”

Gone are the days when the women had to “sell” their Antique Market to dealers. Dealers are now calling them.

“(Still) we do look and get as many different things as possible because it just makes it that much more interesting,” said Schwartz.

“But we want people to come here and make money. A lot of them feel they can’t make money unless they go to a specialty show. We don’t try and persuade them out of what they think makes them successful or how to make money. But we don’t need to give the space away

“If I had customers coming in and saying, ‘I really thought I could find this here and couldn’t’ then we would start thinking maybe we’re not getting the kinds of dealers we need.”

Changes at the Antique Market don’t come solely from the top down. “When we make major decisions about a change in anything, we weigh in with the dealers; we do our little focus groups,” said Finley.

The dealers seem happy. The \$10 admission guarantees there are serious potential buyers coming through the gate.

“This is a great idea,” said Mark Fisk, a dealer from Cincinnati, who with his wife, Missy, owns Mainly Art in that city. They’ve been with the Chicago Antique Market since the second season.

“What’s being bought here is from the very expensive for decorators to average people buying things that they just collect,” said Mark Fisk. “People here are a savvy urban crowd, which is what you want as a buyer.”

The Fisks, like Colclough, are into mid-century, modern 1950’s items. “Mid-century is engaging more young people into collecting,” said Fisk.

Curt Ames, the dealer into industrial, agrees. “The one thing that makes it work here are the young buyers. The young generation seems to be what’s here,” he said.

For more information on the Chicago Antique Market, call 312-951-9939 or visit www.chicagoantiquemarket.com.



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