



Susan Ratliff

PRESIDENT, EXHIBIT EXPERTS, PHOENIX

Susan Ratliff entered the trade show arena by accident. She worked for two years in real estate, and in 1989 she created her own line of personalized children's books that she sold at swap meets. She quickly learned from her own mistakes what doesn't work when selling from a booth.

"I call them big booth blunders," says Ratliff, 52. They include: talking too much; offering too many products; not training your booth staff; no customer benefit. It led her to write the self-published book, *How to Be a Weekend Entrepreneur*. Now she trains others to succeed in event marketing.

In 1993, Ratliff launched Exhibit Experts, with the telecom company that is now Qwest as her first client and the bank that is now Chase as her second. "We provide all the tools to give a "wow" factor," she says of her company's focus on providing every-

thing (even training, if needed) for trade show booth displays and staffing.

Ratliff's company frequently adds wireless Internet capabilities to trade show booths so sales staff can send a follow-up letter to the prospective client by e-mail via the home office, so it's waiting for the client before she returns home.

Long hours and late nights come naturally to Ratliff, whose father started a fence company and had a "work ethic like no one I know." Ratliff was driven to succeed, too, and learned to ride out the rough times. Her first event business shut down when a partnership dissolved, then she went to work for the competition, bought out the business, and reopened on Sept. 1, 2001.

Her key insight about exhibits: "The sales staff must engage the customer," she says. "People buy from people they trust."

INSPIRATION: Her son Garrison, now 18, inspired her children's books, which led to her current career. **PRIVATE PASSION:** "I am a roulette junkie," she says. "I go to Vegas to relax." **ON THE HOME FRONT:** For Valentine's Day her husband custom-designed her gift of a tanzanite and diamond ring.