



"My whole life has been being in the **right place** at the **right time.**" —Susan Ratliff

## Trade Show Tenacity

Susan Ratliff, 49  
President, Exhibit Experts  
Phoenix

**Career highlight:** Being able to "buy the [exhibit display] business and actually own my own storefront."

**Business philosophy:** "I will always find the solution or find the opportunity."

Articulate and eager, the words spilling out of her, Susan Ratliff calls herself "one of the luckiest people I know." An unexpected assessment from someone whose business partner took a showroom of merchandise and high-tailed it for California, and who had just completed a calculated expansion when the post-9/11 shut-down of travel effectively

closed the trade show circuit on which her business is based.

What kept her going? Belief in the strength of the business and confidence in her own abilities as a salesperson.

Citing the current trade-show industry figure of \$90 billion in annual business and a prediction of \$251 billion by 2008, Ratliff observes, "Every aspect of business uses exhibit marketing." Customers for her portable trade show booths range from small mom-and-pop businesses to Fortune 500 companies. Even in the post-9/11 doldrums, she "knew it wouldn't go away."

"I'm excited to teach a company how to make money," she says, noting that the selling environment of a trade show differs greatly from that out in the field. The merchandising expertise she offers up to customers is the result of her experience in the trenches, selling

personalized children's books at trade shows, swap meets and craft fairs.

The first distributor in Arizona for About Me Books, she chose that business because it allowed her to work and still take care of her new baby; she soon became second in the nation in sales for her company. Her book, *How to be a Weekend Entrepreneur*, published in 1991, came out of her daily notes about what brought people to her booth, and set her on her way in the business of portable trade show display.

Her first exhibit client, she recalls, was U.S. West (now Qwest). At a trade fair in 1992, Ratliff was approached by a U.S. West representative who had read Ratliff's book and wanted her to help with the company's booth. Ratliff conceptualized an idea almost immediately, then went to the library to do research on writing a proposal. At that point she had no connections with vendors, but she found sources to supply the elements she needed.

The experience crystallized into a realization for Ratliff—this could be a lucrative field. U.S. West continued to use her services, and she acquired another big client: BankOne. Her timing was good, she explains; this was the early '90s, when companies were eager to do business with women.

Timing proved fortuitous on other occasions as well: considering putting her trade show notes into a book, Ratliff sought publishing advice from someone who, it turned out, had just begun publishing sales and marketing "help" books; her mother just happened to have \$5,000 she was getting ready to roll over in her IRA when Ratliff's employer gave her a final opportunity to buy his business. Coincidences such as those explain why she calls herself "lucky."

But luck doesn't "just happen," Ratliff made it a point to position herself for opportunities by being in influential situations. With Exhibit Experts projecting sales of over \$600,000 this year (finally recovering to pre-9/11 figures), Ratliff notes that she has built her entire business on strategic networking. "My whole life has been being in the right place at the right time," she says. ☛

▶▶ Intrigued? Learn more on these businesswomen at [bizaz.com](http://bizaz.com)

Magazine editor turned freelance wordsmith, RoseAnne Marsh ([raemarsh@cox.net](mailto:raemarsh@cox.net)) works with publications and businesses throughout the Valley.

## THE NATURAL ADVANTAGES OF WOMEN

When asked whether today's working women still face the glass ceiling, Michele Miller, the Scottsdale author of *The Natural Advantages of Women* responds—immediately—with a firm "absolutely." But that doesn't mean Miller has a glum view of the matter. Quite the contrary. In her new audiobook, 42-year-old Miller, a partner in Phoenix-based Wizards of Ads, Inc., explores the womanly values of intuition and instinct, among others, which help women break through barriers to success in the business world. The one-hour CD is not a typical man-basher, but rather a callout to women and men about new studies on the differences between how men and women think, perform and handle situations.

By listening to the CD and reviewing the handy transcript, the idea of "women's intuition" should cease to be a mystery. Miller believes intuition is one of the greatest advantages that women have over men in business. "Recent MRI studies provide absolute proof that women have a specially wired 'crossover' brain power—they rapidly link and process information on both sides of the brain," says Miller. "By combining logic with the ability to read body language and tap into the right brain of emotional memory, experience and imagination, women have tremendous advantages in the business world." With that in mind, all genders better grab a copy. Look for a follow-up full sized book in the near future. \$10; available at [wizardacademypress.com](http://wizardacademypress.com). —Jaime Leigh Tischler

