

# Trade Show Executive

News, Views and Tools for Trade Show and Event Executives

June 2010

## BRUCE & JAI COLE

Canada's  
Entrepreneurial  
Power Couple



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# POWER LUNCH



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# BRUCE & JAI COLE

## Canada's Entrepreneurial Power Couple

*What started as a small commercial photography and design studio grew into one of Canada's most well-known independent show producers. Bruce Cole launched Plum Studios in 1977, and began providing photography for exhibitors and service contractors in Toronto. In 1984, he organized a photo exhibition and asked his wife, Jai, to help produce the event. Thus began their successful collaboration as Plum Communications, with Bruce Cole as president and Jai Cole as vice president. Together, they have produced over 100 events during the past 25 years, serving the information technology, digital communications, education, manufacturing, photography, graphic design and video production industries.*

*Plum Communications currently organizes the IT360 Conference & Exposition, Cloud Computing and the Asterisk & Open Telephony events in Toronto. Other clients and events include Koelnmesse, Inc., OutSource World NYC, Gordon Food Services, IT World Canada, CloudCamp Toronto, NEWCOM Business Media, Canadian Institute of Plumbing and Heating, Graphics Canada, OnTarget Education and the Ontario Hospital Association.*

*Bruce and Jai joined the Canadian Association of Exposition Management (CAEM) in 1984 and have been actively contributing to the group ever since. They are long-standing members of the Society of Independent Show Organizers (SISO) and recently joined the International Association of Exhibitions and Events (IAEE), where Jai serves on its CEM faculty, the Social Media Task Force and Green Committee. She also pens "A Greener Place for Face-to-Face" for the Center for Exhibition Industry Research (CEIR). In addition, the Coles are members of CanSPEP, the Canadian Society of Professional Event Planners.*

*Bruce and Jai created the trade show curriculum for five courses at George Brown College and taught there for several years. They refer to their company as "The little engine that could" and our interview certainly proved that adage.*

*By Bob Dallmeyer, columnist*

**>>Bob: As small business owners, what are the major challenges you face in this economy?**

**Jai:** The big challenge? Show cycles are shorter. Exhibit space and sponsorships are contracted up until the last minute. More attendees are registering on-site. These challenges have a more dramatic impact on small organizers in terms of cash flow, on-site services and long-term decision-making.

**>>Bob: On the flip side, a small company has inherent advantages.**

**Bruce:** Flexibility is key for us; we make changes or implement new ideas quickly. Also, by outsourcing, we pay for services only when needed and for the time required.

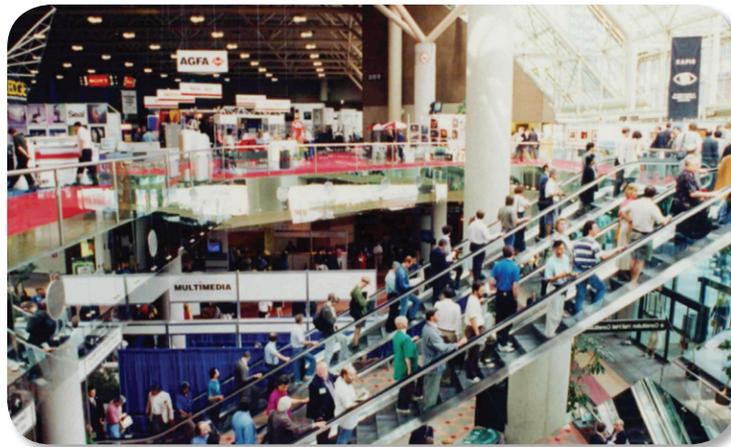
**>>Bob: What is the genealogy of the IT360 Conference & Exhibition?**

**Jai:** We launched the *Real World Linux* show in 2003 and sold it a year later to *IDG World Expo* and began working in partnership with their affiliate *IDG Canada*. It became part of the *LinuxWorld* global brand. We recognized the shift in the marketplace and changed the name to *IT360*. In an interesting twist two years ago, *IDG World Expo/IDG Canada* offered us the opportunity to buy the property back and we did.

**>>Bob: What social media is effective in promoting the event?**

**Jai:** We have Twitter accounts that target

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special sectors in the show and Facebook pages which target specific groups. We also use LinkedIn to focus on various sectors. Social media gives us the business intelligence to understand the needs of our exhibitors, sponsors and attendees and the means to communicate with micro-sectors.

**>>Bob: Any other tech offerings?**

**Bruce:** Mobile messaging is effective since more people are communicating on the fly. Electronic updates via our social media marketing drive people to our website. However, we enjoy great success in traditional marketing to our target audience – telemarketing, direct mail, magazine inserts, etc. Our conundrum is what works best when there are so many choices.

**>>Bob: What makes IT360 a “must attend” event?**

**Jai:** IT360 is the only full spectrum infrastructure and software IT event for professionals across all business and public sectors. We collaborate with the key trade associations and media to bring the leading and latest resources to them.

**>>Bob: Canada is highly focused on preserving natural resources, and green initiatives are especially important in your country. How are you reducing your carbon footprint?**

**Bruce:** We have an extensive array of green procedures: we work with the convention facility to reduce electrical usage by decreasing light use during off-show hours. The center uses green power and show managers have the opportunity to purchase green power for their events. We reduce vehicle idling time when delivering goods. Our event is held in a fully carpeted area, avoiding aisle carpet. All exhibitor and

**Fruits of Their Labor.** Crowded hallways show how Bruce and Jai Cole have grown Plum Communications from a single photo exhibition in 1984 into a thriving firm serving numerous industry sectors.

supplier communications are electronic. We do not use disposable beverage cups in sessions. Our venue is accessible by public transportation – an important aspect of greening an event. Signage is made from recycled materials, or is from materials that can be recycled. Signs are generic, thereby allowing multiple-use. Show information is shared mainly through electronic media transmission or print pieces using environmentally friendly inks and papers. Our conference proceedings are digital and downloadable.

**>>Bob: Do you educate your exhibitors about green practices?**

**Jai:** We work with them to lessen their carbon footprint by encouraging the use of fewer handouts and sending sales information electronically while the attendee is in the booth or after the show. We provide them with suppliers that use green products. We give them information about green washing and how to buy carbon offsets.

**>>Bob: Impressive. What about “greening” your target audience?**

**Bruce:** We educate attendees to no longer expect a “goodie bag” full of printed inserts when registering. We encourage them to request digital, not printed information, and to take public transit. We also recommend using the separated waste management receptacles on-site and we include badge recycle bins.

**>>Bob: Would you like to eventually sell your company?**

**Jai:** We have enjoyed both sides of the fence – purchasing shows and selling

them. In 1991, we evolved our successful VICOM brand – a visual communications expo and conference held in Toronto – into MULTIMEDIA and then newMedia. We expanded into Western Canada, acquired Exposures, a successful Vancouver photographic show. The brand became the largest creative communications event in Canada, with a unique attendance of over 20,000 for several years. In 1998 we sold it to Advanstar. As we like to say, “We grow ‘em and sell ‘em.”

**>>Bob: Canada’s economy is dominated by the service industry, which employs about 75% of the workforce. Does this influence the kind of shows you launch and/or the kinds of shows that are successful?**

**Bruce:** To be successful, you have to have the numbers, and the service sector offers the biggest opportunities.

**>>Bob: International trade is also a large contributor to Canada’s economy. Do you or CAEM have any metrics on what percentage of attendees at the average show come from foreign countries?**

**Bruce:** Canadian industry is generally based on a distributorship model. This is especially true in the industries where we have organized events. Therefore, representation on the trade show floor is often by the distributor. As a result, shows do draw international participation, but not on a grand scale.

**>>Bob: How do you define a successful show?**

**Jai:** As an independent, for-profit

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show producer, a successful show is one that ultimately makes a profit. That said, a show has to connect people with people on the most human level possible. A successful show has constituents talking and listening, there's a buzz in the air, ideas are flying, and excitement and passion are mixed with debate. A show that provides this chemistry will be successful.

**>>Bob: Is Canada's traditional trade show model still relevant or is there a new paradigm?**

**Jai:** As with the previous question, shows are successful because of people. As long as people are learning and communicating, face-to-face is still the best model. The emerging new model is to extend the show to engage the market 365 days a year 24/7 with opportunities such as webinars, virtual events, online advertisements, delivering demographic-based ads, building community and more. I believe that the more actively involved the virtual community is, the more likely they are to attend the physical event.

**>>Bob: Has this been your experience so far?**

**Jai:** The new model is working for us, but we question is it really new or have we just embraced new tools to help what already works? These tools – electronic media, Web 2.0, mobile connectivity, social networking, electronic publishing, video-conferencing, virtual events and YouTube – have given the independents like us the means to play in the same sandbox as the media companies and the not-for-profit associations that already have a built-in community and engage with them throughout the year.

**>>Bob: Given that exhibitors and attendees are waiting until the last minute to commit for events, how do you communicate with them before they decide?**

**Bruce:** This is a problem, particularly for exhibitors, because by waiting to commit, they miss out on all the new media promotional tools we offer. We wonder if they understand that their delayed

“A successful show has constituents talking and listening, there's a buzz in the air, ideas are flying, and excitement and passion are mixed with debate. A show that provides this chemistry will be successful.”

decision-making is costing them more in promotional opportunities, expanded awareness and reach. However, we believe that by employing these new technologies and “sticking to our knitting,” we can be successful and engage with our constituents fluidly from one show to the next.

**>>Bob: Must a trade show grow to be considered good?**

**Jai:** A better question is: How do we change the fact that trade shows are held to a higher standard than other marketing vehicles? Many of today's exhibitors/sponsors want hard evidence to deem a show successful and that this value comes from closed sales. Our experience is that obtaining qualified leads, or gaining valuable visibility and marketing awareness, require a longer window to determine financial success and are considered soft value. Trade shows today are being measured by sales whereas other media are measured by metrics and clicks.

**>>Bob: Who were your mentors?**

**Bruce:** There were many people along the way who contributed to our success. However, between the two of us, we agree that we have mentored each other. We are partners in marriage and business, and that gives us a solid foundation. We each have different strengths and therefore different responsibilities in the workplace.

**>>Bob: What skills should the next generation of trade show leaders possess?**

**Jai:** Strong business skills are important, but good people skills are equally important. To be an effective leader, you need to have good listening skills, the desire to learn, and the passion to see a project through to the end. You should participate in trade associations and give back to the industry. There are no real business secrets – we can

all find out how something is done – but not everyone has the skills required to do it and do it well.

**>>Bob: What keeps you awake at night?**

**Bruce:** TMI, or Too Much Information – too much clutter. How do we get through all the clutter to convey the value of our events? How do we spark someone's interest in 140 Twitter characters? How do we capture the attention of someone who is multi-tasking 25 things at once? These keep us awake.

**>>Bob: Any parting thoughts?**

**Bruce:** We often say that if you can launch a show in Canada successfully, you can then take it anywhere and it will be a success.

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Bob Dallmeyer

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