

Francesca Ash Reflects on Almost 40 Years of Licensing Expos

Whilst licensing activity carries on throughout every year, my overwhelming memories of years gone by in this industry are driven by some of the trade shows – and Licensing Expo in particular.

I am rather proud of the fact that I have only ever missed one show (1982 because I was heavily pregnant) and I was very much part of the very first show – at the Midtown Hilton in late May 1981. We had a little over 30 exhibitors and my highlight (or lowlight depending on which way you look at it) was being asked, at the last minute, to don the costume of one of the SEVEN DWARFS and march (if you can in a SLEEPY costume) down Sixth Avenue. If anybody reading this remembers the movie THE GRADUATE where Benjamin Braddock came out of his parent's house wearing a full sub-aqua suit and all he could see were his feet ... well, that's how I felt on that hot Mayday!



Las Vegas Licensing Expo

That show was just the first of a series of shows that somehow each year sheds light on the growing and developing licensing industry.

Within a few years of the first show, the exhibition had become a little short of a jamboree. It seems as if anything, and everything, could be licensed – and very often was.

Just imagine three grown men, dressed as oversized raisins, promoting the California Raisin Association, and walking the aisles of the show, for the full three days with a boom box playing “I Heard It Through the Grapevine”!

There are a few “special” memories that stand out above all others.

One, without doubt, was CHARMING BILLY.

CHARMING BILLY was an angelic-looking six-year-old boy whose mother decided was licensable. The poor child sat, smiling, on a chair on their booth for three full days. Strangely enough, that was their first, and last, appearance at Licensing Expo.

Fast forward a couple of years later, and animals were the order of the day. The movie company MGM felt their booth needed “animating” and brought a full-sized, rather beautiful, lion who yawned his way through the three days of the show.

Another animal in the form of a chimpanzee wearing OSH KOSH dungarees and expertly weaving his way down the aisles on roller skates created interest for the lion who roared hungrily at the chimp every time he passed the MGM booth.

That same year there were cats, there were dogs (not altogether house-trained) and a plethora of other furry pets all of whom were looking for their big break. Again, strangely, they failed to materialize the following year.

My final, but somehow most entertaining, memory is the year when THE ATTACK OF THE KILLER TOMATOES was being revived and licensed. As expected, there was a large tomato costume. Sadly, it was so large that it was unable to go up or down the escalator at the Hilton without becoming wedged between the handrails. It took three people to help pull it off the escalator – whilst creating hilarity amongst the rather puzzled show visitors.

Then, there was the story of signing in as an exhibitor at the Licensing Expo in Las Vegas. Upon my arrival at Mandalay after a long trip from London, I went to sign in and get my credentials. The very pleasant Advanstar person tasked with the responsibility of registering exhibitors started up a conversation with me, asking where I was from. When I told her, “London in the UK,” she seemed a bit perplexed, inquiring, “did I fly or drive here?” That, of course, left me speechless.

