

Jumping the line

Online ticket sales for NY Auto Show broaden the audience and shorten the wait to get in

By Cathy Chatfield-Taylor

Wait in line at the box office, then wait in line for the ticket taker. Or buy a ticket online and go to the head of the line. We're not talking about an evening's entertainment. We're talking the New York International Auto Show, where 1.3 million auto enthusiasts, industry reps and media works converge to see the latest concept cars, production vehicles and new debuts.

"Going to electronic tickets was another way to get tickets to the public and to ease the lines — very long lines," says Candida Romanelli, Show Director and Vice President of the Greater New York Automobile Dealers Association, Whitestone, NY. "Now they only have to wait in one line, and that line goes very quickly because tickets are scanned."

Here's how it works: Go to www.autoshowny.com and click "Purchase E-Tickets." Fill out the short registration form, which asks for a few demographic details, submit your credit card information on the secure server, then print your own admission ticket. (An e-mail confirmation includes a link to reprint your ticket, in case you lose it.) Go to one of the two short lines for e-ticket holders, present your ticket to be scanned and validated. Enter the show.

Each e-ticket has a unique bar code. If it's valid, the scanner emits a friendly beep. If it's been used before, a distinctly unfriendly beep alerts the ticket taker to turn away the would-be cheater. "We have very few of those," Romanelli says. For every 10,000 sold, only about six are invalid.

Before introducing e-tickets, the NY Auto Show sold tickets to the public in the usual ways — on site, in advance to groups of 10 or more, or through exhibitors who gave them to clients. The process worked, but it created a bottleneck at the gate.

The idea for advance sales online came from Electric Arrow, a Seattle-based provider of interactive ticketing technology. In 2002, the company set up the system about a month from opening day. Even with just the Web site promoting sales, they sold 20,000 e-tickets. In 2003, they promoted online sales in the show PR and advertising and increased sales by 10,000. In 2004, Romanelli expects to sell more than 50,000 tickets online.

The system costs less than



\$25,000 to set up, including four scanners (two per entrance), rolling kiosks and laptop rentals.

After the event, Electric Arrow collects 75 cents for each ticket sold to cover the cost of sales and customer service. And there are additional charges from the credit card companies. The total cost — about \$1 per \$10 ticket — is more than covered by the sale of an exclusive sponsorship. Each ticket prints out with the sponsor's message and logo.

An added benefit of selling e-tickets is collecting data about the consumer audience. Real-time reporting on sales activity reveals how many of each type of ticket have been sold (adult, child, senior, etc.), and where the purchasers live. Online sales reach more out-of-state and international visitors.

"We get people from all over the world," Romanelli says. "They plan their trip to the Big Apple, search the Web for things to do in New York, and the New York Auto Show comes up. So they buy their tickets online." (About 7 percent of tickets sold online are never used — a tidy little money maker.)

Romanelli uses the online interaction with customers as an opportunity to collect e-mail addresses for an opt-in e-newsletter. Now circulating six to eight times per year to about 30,000 people, the newsletter announces upcoming show dates, hotel availability, special events and other news.

For the 2004 public show days, April 9–18 at the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center, Romanelli plans to open more e-ticket entrances. "The more we sell, the longer the lines, and we want to keep the lines moving," she says. "We promote online sales because you won't have to wait in line. That's something we want to keep true."

Cathy Chatfield-Taylor is a freelance writer/editor. E-mail cathy@cc-tunlimited.com.

NY AUTO SHOW'S STRATEGY

- Goal:** Shorten gate admission lines.
- Objective:** Sell electronic tickets to the public in advance.
- Strategy:** Pay 75 cents per e-ticket to outsource sales processing and customer service.
- Tactics:** Promote advance e-ticket sales through the Web site, advertising and PR.
- Results:** In 2003, the show sold 30,000 e-tickets online. In 2004, they expect to sell 50,000.