

More than 1,000 businesspeople network at trade show in Lewiston



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LEWISTON — Drew Desjardins pointed to the snoozing, 40-pound, 6-foot, 39-year-old red-tail boa curled beside him.

Locked case, no worries.

Desjardins, who does parties and events for hire, said he picked the Androscoggin Business to Business Trade Show to get the word out about his new company, Mr. Drew and His Animals Too!

He was the only one at the Androscoggin Bank Colisee on Thursday with a cockatoo on his shoulder.

One aisle over, Kevin Cunningham handed out Country Pork Pate, slivers of pork, bacon, pistachios and spices on a crostini, his way of introduction.

"It's the most involved, biggest chamber," said Cunningham, executive chef at The Inn at Brunswick Station's Tavern restaurant. "We really want to make sure we're connecting with a city and a group of people that are just 20 minutes down the street."

For the eighth year, the trade show sold out of exhibitors' booths. It drew an estimated 2,500 people. Vendors came from more than 60 industries, including food, high-tech, banking and arts, and from as far away as California.

Adam Bouchard of Meru Networks out of California works all of New England. The event was a chance to meet people looking for commercial wireless service, he said. Colby College is already a client.

"We provide a wireless connection across the entire campus," Bouchard said.

Kari Grant-Gagnon of Grant's Bakery in Lewiston passed out platter and lunch menus and encouraged attendees to enter a photo contest posing with cupcakes. Wrap yourself in a feather boa, or don a tiara, take a bite.

"We're trying to grow the business," said Grant-Gagnon. "Not everyone

knows we offer stuff other than sweets. I think we have potential to reach out into that other market, too."

In a booth brimming with stuffed toy cats, dogs, pigs and giraffes, Elizabeth Hoover of Noah's Ark Animal Work Shop in Bryant Pond was also at the show for the first time.

Noah's Ark is a home party chain, like Tupperware, "only we party with children," Hoover said.

She's the only outlet for the company in Maine.

"It's a good way to make connections," she said. "Several businesses that do events have taken cards to give to people who book events at their spots."

Calvin Rinck, spokesman for the Lewiston-Auburn Economic Growth Council, the trade show organizer, said 66 of the 192 exhibitors were new from 2012. Nearly one in four came from outside Androscoggin County.

Admission to the event was free in exchange for a business card. Attendees preregistered for name tags from as far away as Tennessee.

Once inside, they went swag happy: whoopie pies from Sam's Italian Foods, fishing bobbers from Airgas, hacky sacks from Central Maine Medical Center's Health and Fitness Center.

Carl Sheline greeted each attendee with a free toothbrush. The office manager at Center Street Dental had more than 2,000 on hand.

"We're obviously on message here," he said with a smile. "A lot of people are using their toothbrushes longer than they should."

Desjardins gave out Twizzlers.

He had snakes, a frog and a lizard at his booth, all in cases. Most had been unwanted or abandoned at one time.

"She's my clown of the show; we've had her 23 years," Desjardins said, gesturing to Wendy, the Griffin's cockatoo on his shoulder.

When he pretended to shoot, the bird went limp. When he said her name, she craned her head to look up.

"Wendy, dead birds don't move," Desjardins teased, and she went limp again.

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