

# Trump card

Betting on a new consumer show, Christine Reed Fletcher comes out with the winning hand

By Dawn J. Grubb

“Life is not a matter of being dealt a good hand but rather playing a poor hand well.”

Christine Reed Fletcher looks to these words — taped to her computer monitor — every day for inspiration. Although she doesn't know where they came from, they've helped the Dallas-based entrepreneur beat the odds over the years.

Executive Producer of Encore Event Management, Fletcher took a gamble this past year and launched a new consumer show during

one of the ugliest bear markets this country has faced. Lady luck was on her side. Fletcher's Midwest Baby Fest proved to be a winning hand — and could take even more during the next round.

“I love the challenge of taking a concept and breathing life into it,” says Fletcher. “I get all fired up about starting a new project, whether it's at home or creating an expo.”

Call her an overachiever. Fletcher stumbled upon the Midwest Baby Fest idea in 2001 while conducting research for a client. She found larger markets like Los Angeles and Dallas were inundated with baby shows, while mid-size markets like Kansas City, MO, and St. Louis were overlooked. Post-9-11 birth rates had jumped 15 to 25 percent. Some 30,000 people in Kansas City were having babies, and some 35,000 people in St. Louis were doing the same. The numbers proved the markets were an ace in the hole; enter Fletcher.

She lined up big-name sponsors like Babies R Us, Saint Luke's Health System and Dr. Brown, a St. Louis pediatrician who'd gained national fame with his new baby bottle design. Then she approached exhibitors. It proved a challenge to convince mom-and-pop businesses — such as crafters and doulas (professional labor coaches) — to close up shop for a weekend. “They were a hard sell — money was

tight and they'd have to buy booth space and rent a van to transport products. But I emphasized that they'd meet more people in one day than would visit their stores in a month,” says Fletcher, who tapped her skills as a certified mediator and arbitrator with the State Bar of Texas to win them over. “You can't persuade everybody to take a risk, only throw out a line and see if they bite. I knew after one show, they'd realize the potential.”

Fletcher fulfilled her 100-exhibitor goal and succeeded in making Midwest Baby Fest a one-stop-shop for everything young families need — from baby burpers and buggy bags to formula and furniture. And despite poor timing (see sidebar), she met her attendance objectives. In St. Louis, 5,000 turned out March 22-23, while the Overland Park, KS, show April 12-13 drew 11,000. Blame war for the contrasting numbers.

“We were two blocks from the St. Louis Arch where reporters had congregated to warn that it *could* be a *potential* target. We lost all of our TV advertising to 24-hour war coverage. It had a huge impact on people's psyche,” says Fletcher. She overcame the challenge, however, and now is hoping to expand the show in other Midwest markets. Not bad considering she started Encore Event Management just two years ago with partners: husband Derek and a silent investor. Before that, she contracted within the high-tech, dot-com and telecomm industries as a



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trade show consultant. With North Dallas — the “Silicon Valley of the South” — nearby, Fletcher is eyeing other consumer show opportunities.

She developed her entrepreneurial flair at Baylor University, earning a bachelor’s degree in marketing and entrepreneurship in 1992. Upon graduation, she was back on campus and at trade shows pushing MBNA credit cards. “I was one of those annoying people who gets you to sign up for a credit card and then gives you a free T-shirt,” she admits.

Fletcher eventually landed at the now-defunct WAP Forum, a wireless industry association, where she broke into event planning. The year-long contract job demanded she travel all but a few days every month. Call it divine intervention: One Sunday while not on the road, Fletcher attended church and met Derek. The duo complement each other. He’s an attorney and CPA who handles the behind-the-scenes details while she moves full speed ahead onto the next project. “I exhaust him,” she says. “I’m always saying, ‘Honey, I have a new idea.’”

When not working, they spend time with two-year-old Grant at the lake or are involved in other outdoor activities. And during those rare moments when she has time to herself, Fletcher curls up with a murder mystery or catches the latest CSI offering on the tube. “I have a morbid fascination with forensic science,” she admits. “If I had to do it all over again, I’d definitely pursue forensic science as a career.”

But don’t expect Fletcher to give up show management any time soon. She’s perfectly content playing the hand that she’s been dealt.

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CHRISTINE REED FLETCHER

## Overcoming a crisis

Christine Reed Fletcher launched Midwest Baby Fest in St. Louis March 22-23 — the same time the United States launched the war with Iraq. Instead of letting the timing spoil her show, Fletcher was armed with a game plan. Here are her five tips for overcoming a crisis:

**1. Keep an open mind regarding nontraditional solutions.** With war threatening to deter show attendance in St. Louis, Fletcher quickly drafted a press release announcing free admittance to Midwest Baby Fest for all military personnel, their dependants and such civil servants as police and fire fighters. “We were able to get last-minute publicity and build goodwill in the community,” says Fletcher.

**2. Anticipate obstacles and be prepared.** When President Bush extended his deadline for Saddam Hussein to surrender, it moved closer to coinciding with Midwest Baby Fest’s launch date. With no time for a hard-hitting direct mail campaign, Fletcher scrambled and purchased additional radio, newspaper and cable TV ads one week out.

The last-minute advertising blitz helped offset the critical TV promotional opportunities that were lost to 24-hour war coverage and helped Fletcher meet her attendance goals.

**3. Re-evaluate factors that can solve or relieve the problem.** With the prominent St. Louis Arch just blocks from the expo center, overall safety and the potential for terrorist attacks weighed on many people’s minds.

“I was trying to put on a happy event for people pushing strollers and those getting ready to bring babies into the world — I didn’t want people thinking about the Arch being attacked. I wanted our exhibitors and attendees to feel safe,” says Fletcher. She added 24-hour security guards and increased EMT personnel, giving attendees assurance they’d be taken care of in case of an attack — or even an unexpected birth.

**4. Make the problem work for you.** Instead of letting poor timing win out, Fletcher put a parental spin on the war situation. She invited local military personnel and psychologists as keynote speakers to address “How to talk to your children about the war.” As it turned out, the timing couldn’t have been better.

**5. Always have a Plan B.** Although Fletcher started planning Midwest Baby Fest prior to 9-11 and the war, she padded her budget for an emergency. The additional dollars came in handy for last-minute advertising. In addition, she created a unique promotion three months out that garnered “free” advertising and created a Midwest Baby Fest buzz. In January, Fletcher and Babies R Us sponsored a Billboard Baby contest, asking St. Louis parents to submit photos of the baby who’d become the “face” of the event. The 350 submissions were narrowed down to 13, who received private photography sessions. Then five judges from the community narrowed those down to three. Fletcher chose the winning baby and used the runner-ups in the show’s marketing materials. “The contest really piqued a lot of interest and, looking back, we would have been lost had we relied solely on traditional advertising,” says Fletcher.