

# Rebel With a Cause

Disenchanted with the typical trade show approach, Bentley Systems Inc.'s Huw Roberts defies conventions to build an unusual booth, reach for rough-hewn contacts, and generate \$4.5 million in show-related revenue. *By Brian Todd*



**G**rowing disillusioned. Bucking the system. Taking a risk. While these characteristics normally describe a rebel — think Marlon Brando in “The Wild One” — they aren’t often used to describe trade show managers. But after years of the same-old results from the American Institute of Architects national show, Bentley Systems Inc.’s Huw Roberts was ready for a change, bringing Brando’s “Whaddya got?” attitude to his exhibit program for the 2005 AIA show in Las Vegas.

At past AIA shows, Bentley, an architectural-software provider, showed up playing the part of the square rather than the rebel, with booth designs in line with the flat-screen-and-literature-rack exhibits common at the show. As Bentley’s global marketing director of building and structural, Roberts knew his company was satisfied with the same-old squaresville results, but like any rebel with a clue, he felt an itch for radical change.

Bentley’s previous trade show strategy emphasized high-quality sales leads.

Staffers had long talks with booth visitors, working to qualify prospects. The quality-over-quantity approach netted Bentley an average of 200 to 300 leads per show, with most attendees spending more than 20 minutes in the booth.

But Roberts had serious concerns regarding that approach. “I had fundamentally decided I was jaded on trade shows,” Roberts says. “They didn’t work.” According to Roberts, purchasing

Roberts felt the lengthy, hard-core, at-show sales pitches were premature, and were keeping Bentley from collecting a larger number of potential sales leads. With roughly 24,000 prospects attending AIA, Bentley was playing a losing-numbers game with its measly 250 leads. “That’s horrible,” Roberts says. “You’ve missed 23,700 people you’re not going to talk to next week.”

Based on that idea, Roberts saw AIA as an opportunity

Bentley’s software is not a casual decision that attendees are likely to make while they’re standing on a trade show floor. Because its software is a platform-level system, prospects need to have several intra-company discussions before responding to a full-blown sales pitch anyway. So why was Bentley wasting upwards of 20 minutes per attendee trying to convince them to buy? “Selling this type of product often takes a deeper engagement with the prospect. It takes lots of time,” Roberts says.

to collect not only sales leads, but marketing leads as well. According to Roberts, anyone remotely interested in your product is a marketing lead, as they’ve demonstrated a willingness to learn more about your company. A sales lead, on the other hand, possesses certain qualities that demonstrate not only an interest but a willingness to buy (a budget, a timetable to purchase, etc.). Roberts believed that by focusing exclusively on sales leads, Bentley was ignoring a significant opportunity to collect marketing leads at shows like AIA.

Heading into the 2005 AIA show in Las Vegas, Roberts had a simple plan. Rather than collect a couple hundred high-quality sales leads, why not roll the dice and collect less-qualified marketing leads by the bushel full? Gone would be the 20-minute sales pitches, which limited staffers to a maximum of three interactions per hour. Instead, Roberts hoped to collect leads through shorter interactions, then follow up

each marketing lead over the course of the year to see how many became sales leads and how much revenue was generated as a result of the show.

**Marvelously Mysterious**  
“Bentley’s past exhibits were pretty mainstream within the AIA exhibit hall: plasma screens, literature racks, obvious signage, and conventional construction. They were easy to pass by,” says Greg Ricciardi, partner and creative

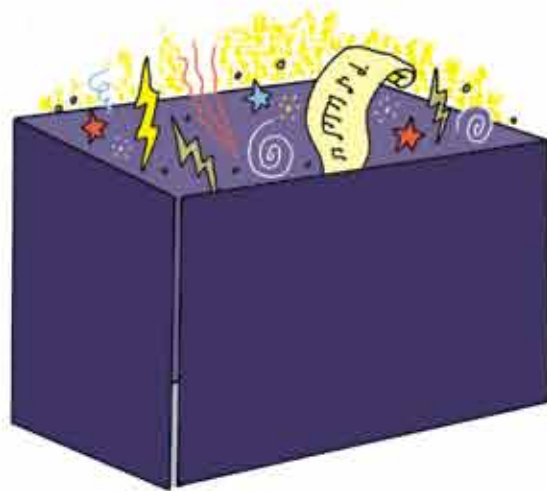
Kingdom, calls “marvelously mysterious marketing.”

In his article for Harvard Business Review, “Torment Your Customers,” he says, “If it engages the customer in even just a moment of consideration — ‘What could it be?’ or ‘Why is it so hush-hush?’ — secrecy helps to sell.”

Being a rebel, Roberts decided not to run his plan past Bentley’s top management. “When you get into decisions by committee, it

of the campaign. Keeping Bentley’s management and sales staff out of the loop guaranteed his idea would remain a secret until the show opened.

To bring his brainchild to life, Roberts told Ricciardi to design a booth that showcased Bentley’s product, but focused more on gathering names rather than building relationships. He wanted increased booth traffic that could be controlled, allowing staffers to



and qualify them after the show, rather than wasting valuable time in the exhibit. Furthermore, by collecting a larger quantity of marketing leads, Roberts planned to convert a portion of them into sales leads over time, ultimately increasing the revenue generated as a result of Bentley’s presence.

With that in mind, Roberts hoped to gather 2,000 marketing leads — nearly 10 times previous lead totals — at AIA 2005, and then follow up with each prospect through a series of promotional touch points, all the while tracking

director for 20nine Design Studios LLC, the firm that designed Bentley’s 2005 AIA exhibit. The plan was to design a unique, surprising exhibit — but to keep it a secret. Roberts hoped the mystery would generate the increased buzz he needed to make his quantity-over-quality strategy a success.

While Roberts’ secretive approach might seem backwards — if you want to generate attention, why keep it a secret? — it’s what Stephen Brown, professor of marketing research at the University of Ulster in Newtonabbey, United

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can water down stuff and make you less decisive,” Roberts says. Since he had already decided that the key to building buzz was to do something surprising on the show floor, keeping the booth a secret to ensure shock and awe was an intentional, and integral, part

register every visitor as a marketing lead. And, most important, Roberts wanted to build buzz and create a heavy flow of traffic to his redesigned rebel booth. “We wanted to stand out in the crowd,” Ricciardi says. “We wanted people to say, ‘What the hell is that?’”

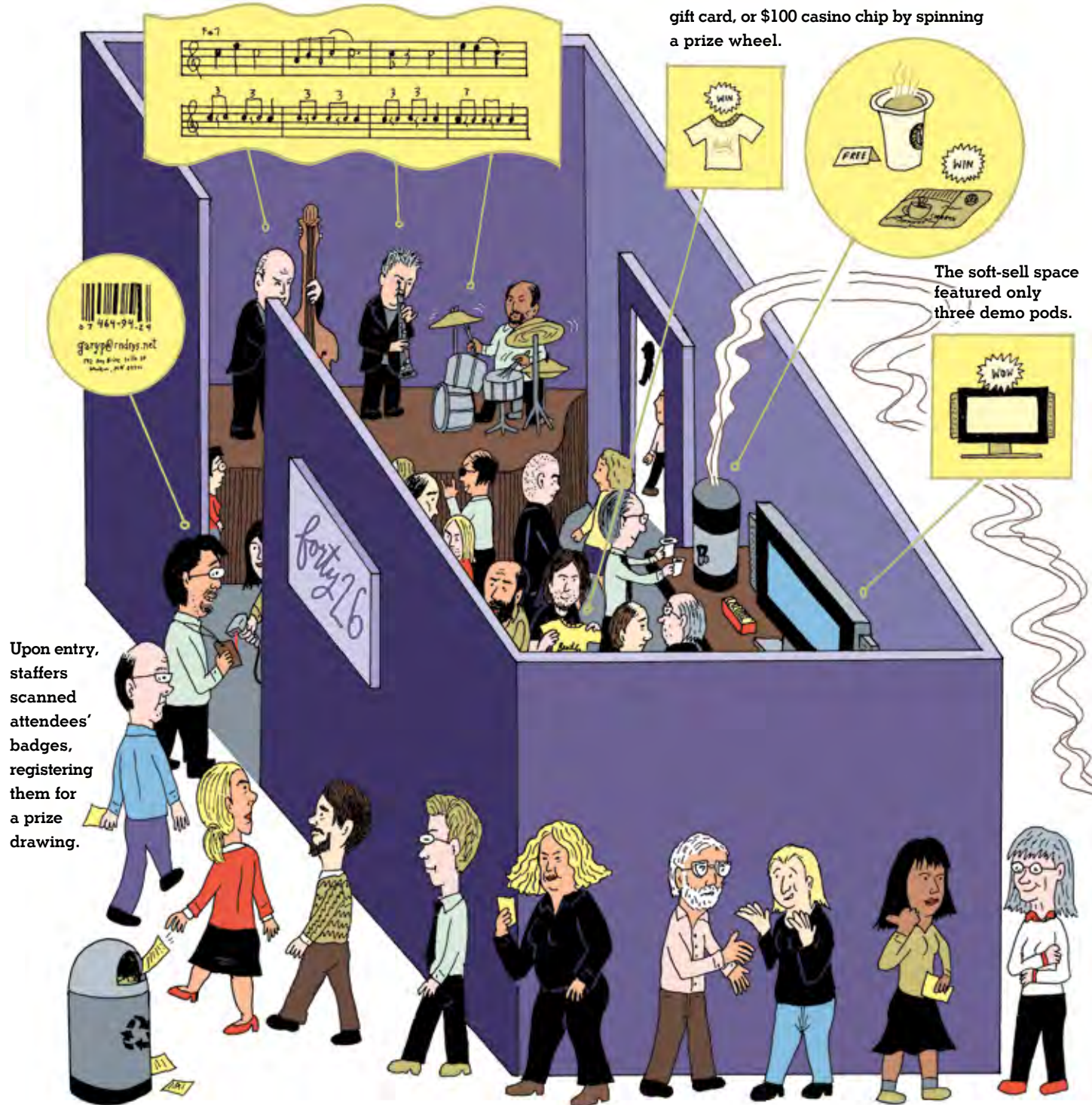
**It's All Inside**

Bentley Systems Inc.'s unusual 20-by-30-foot exhibit was surrounded by 16-foot-tall dark-purple fabric walls, leaving two small openings for attendees to enter and exit. The exhibit featured a "forty26" logo but no sign of Bentley's name on the mysterious exterior, luring curious attendees to the booth to find out what was going on inside.

A live jazz combo inside the booth created the atmosphere of a high-end jazz club.

In addition to free java at the in-booth coffee bar, each attendee won a T-shirt, gift card, or \$100 casino chip by spinning a prize wheel.

The soft-sell space featured only three demo pods.



Upon entry, staffers scanned attendees' badges, registering them for a prize drawing.

## The Box-like Rebellion

Ricciardi describes AIA as a massive “meet and greet” show where it can take a whole day just to walk the entire show floor, with Bentley occupying a speck of space in the corner.

After several months of planning, Roberts got to see the first reaction to the exhibit the night before the show opened, having kept the secret of these radical exhibit plans from Bentley’s sales team until the pre-show booth-staff meeting. The shock on the faces of the Bentley staff members was just what Roberts

expected to see. “For the most part, there was a lot of concern among the sales-people that this would be a disaster,” Ricciardi says.

The new exhibit featured limited entrances and exits, high walls obscuring what lay inside, and a plan to swipe badges and keep conversations and sales pitches to a minimum — all of which deviated from the safe routine Bentley’s staffers were used to at trade shows. “Their reaction was, ‘Oh my gosh, what the heck is this?’”

Roberts says. “It didn’t fit their preconception of a trade show booth at all.”

The 20-by-30-foot structure was like nothing else on the show floor. Traditional exhibit-design logic says that exhibits designed with hopes of generating increased traffic should be open, with few walls and multiple entrance

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points. Roberts scoffed at tried-and-true logic. Dark-purple fabric walls 16 feet high and running the length of the booth on all sides except two entry points kept out the casual passersby, and ambiguous signage left many outsiders wondering just what lay hidden inside the exhibit.

Roberts hoped the marvelously mysterious structure, along with the promise of freebies such as Starbucks gift cards and T-shirts, the lure of free Starbucks coffee served in the exhibit, and the sound

of live jazz wafting from within would land Bentley the top spot on attendees’ must-see lists.

Signs at the registration area touted free coffee and casino-chip giveaways at booth “forty26.” Bentley staff members handed out fliers in the exhibit hall with the same message: Come to booth forty26 for

free coffee, prizes, and a chance to win a flat-screen TV. A distinctive forty26 logo provided a unique way to ensure attendees would remember Bentley’s booth number.

This minimalist pre-show marketing — essentially just the fliers and the sign at the registration counter — purposefully avoided mentioning Bentley by name. The hope was to intrigue attendees with a sense of mystery as they filed onto the show floor. But if vague fliers and the

promise of freebies did not intrigue the attendees, the sight of booth forty26 certainly did.

The wall near the exhibit’s entrance featured the forty26 logo and an image of a jazz singer at a microphone. Seeping from inside the enigmatic walls was the sound of a live jazz combo. Ricciardi says the goal was to create the exclusive feel of a high-end jazz club only “cool” people could get into — the kind of place where you might have to stand in line for hours if you’re not “on the list.” And judging by the constant line of attendees waiting to enter, that effect was successfully achieved.

“By the second morning, we had a huge line running down the aisle,” Roberts says. “Who could imagine, people waiting in line to get inside your trade show booth?”

Once attendees reached the front of the line, their experience at the Bentley booth was brief but memorable. A Bentley staffer swiped attendees’ badges at the entrance to the booth, automatically entering



them into a drawing for a 30-inch flat-screen TV. Staff then ushered attendees into the booth where a prize wheel awaited. Everyone won a prize, either a T-shirt or a Starbucks gift card, and every hour Bentley upped the ante and added a \$100 casino-chip slot on the wheel until someone won the chip.

towering walls, attendees were exclusively focused on Bentley during their average five-minute visits.

From the coffee bar or jazz band, attendees moved toward the exit, which was opposite the entrance. For Bentley, getting the crowd in, then moving them out was the key to success. "Our philosophy was,



**"Even people who did not see our signs or cups stopped by. You couldn't walk past without noticing. It was like this thing dropped down from Mars right onto the trade show floor."**

After spinning the prize wheel, attendees were free to walk around the booth. There were chairs set at three demo pods for anyone interested in giving Bentley's software a trial run. The sales pressure was kept low and the enjoyment factor high. If someone stopped to try the software program or watch one of the scrolling presentations, a salesperson might ask the attendee if he or she had any questions, but generally the sales pitch was so soft it was practically nonexistent.

After walking past the demo pods and video presentations, attendees relaxed at the coffee bar or listened to the jazz combo, which occupied the two corners nearest the entrance. Surrounded by the

'Once you've scanned in, you can leave whenever you'd like,'" Roberts says.

When attendees left, they carried the viral buzz of the rebel booth with them. Coffee cups from the booth carried the booth number and a message touting the giveaways, the free coffee, and the chance to win casino chips. As evidenced by the growing crowds as the show progressed, attendees told their friends about booth forty26. "Even people who did not see our signs or cups stopped by," Roberts says. "You couldn't walk past without noticing. It was like this thing dropped down from Mars right onto the trade show floor."

During the three-day show, Bentley swiped 3,500

badges, collecting nearly 14 times as many leads as in 2004. Of those 3,500 marketing leads, Bentley immediately classified 250 as sales leads. While 250 sales leads would have been impressive at any other AIA show, Bentley now had an additional 3,250 marketing leads to follow up with in hopes of converting some to sales leads.

#### **The Rebellion Continues**

Marketing leads are not sales leads, and for AIA to become a success by Roberts' standards, he knew the real work had only begun.

After the show, Bentley's marketing team kicked into high gear. They sent attendees a postcard mailer that resembled the main outside wall of the booth featuring the forty26 logo and the image of the jazz singer and the microphone. They followed up the mailer with a pair of e-mails reminding attendees of their visit to booth forty26 and offering more information about Bentley's products.

"Our first two e-mails were transitional," Roberts says. "We sent messages saying, 'Hope you enjoyed the coffee and music,' and 'Have you had a chance to think about our products?'" Between the two e-mails, Bentley sent its marketing leads a copy of its custom magazine, a regular publication featuring what's new at Bentley. The Web site, e-mails, postcard, and magazine were all designed

to provide touch points for prospects after the show.

The e-mails also served as filtering mechanisms that helped Bentley identify which of the marketing leads had the most potential to become sales leads. A link within the e-mails sent recipients to a custom-built Web site designed for AIA attendees. If a marketing lead clicked on specific links in the e-mail or visited the Web site, the activity was tracked by Bentley staff and alerted the team that the lead had a high interest level in Bentley's products and was ready for a sales pitch. Those "clicked" leads were then moved from the marketing department to the sales department, where a sales rep followed up with them and offered additional information. Conversely, if the marketing leads did not respond to any of the touch points, Roberts felt those leads were lost, and stopped sending them marketing materials relating to the show.

Over the year, the results made Roberts look less like a rebel and more like a visionary, with Bentley converting roughly 350 marketing leads into sales leads, bringing its total from AIA to 600 sales leads, which amounted to \$4.5 million in revenue. While Bentley had not measured the revenue from AIA in previous years, the company estimates the

leads brought in nearly 18 times the amount of revenue generated at the 2004 AIA show.

In an act-first-ask-permission-later move, Roberts didn't actually present his quantity-over-quality plan to management until after the 2005 AIA show closed. Surprisingly, his biggest supporters were the sales staffers who panicked on the eve of the show. "Two hours into AIA, they were already on cloud nine," Roberts says. "They got it."

### Thinking Outside the Box

With the plan of gathering bucket loads of leads working so well in 2005, Roberts looked for ways to improve upon his plan in 2006 and beyond. He maintained the enclosed-booth approach

quest for marketing leads led Roberts to ask himself, "How do we capture attendees who might not make it to the booth?"

The answer? Build a second booth. In addition to Bentley's main booth, Roberts set up a 10-by-10-foot booth on the other side of the show floor. The simple 10-by-10, devoid of Bentley's logo, featured signs that encouraged attendees to swipe their badges to register for a drawing to win a free iPod. A staffer at the 10-by-10 simply scanned the badges of any attendees interested in registering for the prize. No qualifying, no product pitches, and no mention of Bentley's key messages.

While the new version of the main Bentley booth did

the bare-bones 10-by-10. Roberts says the outpost booth netted roughly 3,000 marketing leads at AIA in 2006, about two-thirds of which were unique, meaning the simple 10-by-10 nabbed contact information from nearly 2,000 attendees that Bentley would have otherwise missed.

In fact, Bentley booth staff collected so many marketing leads in the electronic lead-capture machines that it created a traffic jam after the show. "While most exhibitors took a minute or so for their data to dump from their lead machines, Bentley clogged up the line," Roberts says. "The people behind us were

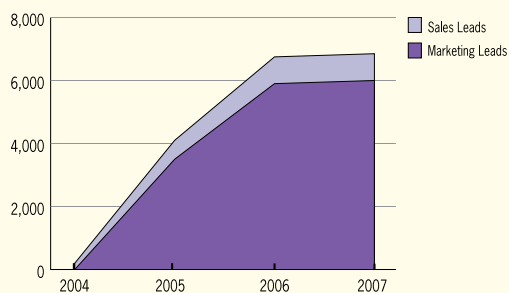
10-by-10 booth to collect attendees' badge information in exchange for a chance to win a premium prize, and again Bentley's main booth featured high walls, controlled access, high-energy music, and free treats — this time soda, popcorn, and candy.

Roberts said the number of scanned badges in 2007 was similar to the numbers Bentley saw in 2006, just short of 4,000 badges scanned at the main booth, 3,000 badges at the 10-by-10, with two-thirds of the 10-by-10's scans unique. And Bentley again saw sales leads from each site — about 600 from the main booth and 250 unique sales leads from the 10-by-10 in both 2006 and 2007.

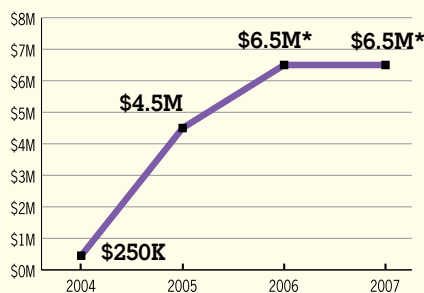
Though Roberts' rebel plan may have initially scared the timid sales staffers, and needed to be snuck past the by-the-book Bentley executives the first time out, his radical quantity-over-quality strategy has become a model the company continues to use.

Listening to Roberts tell his story, you can practically hear the echo of Brando's Johnny Strabler: "Nobody tells me what to do. You keep needlin' me, if I want to, I'm gonna take this joint apart, and you're not gonna know what hit you. **E**"

### Sales and Marketing Leads



### Show-Related Revenue



\*PROJECTIONS BASED ON LEAD COUNTS AND CONVERSION RATES.

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in 2006, with a few minor modifications. The coffee, jazz, and dark walls were replaced by ice cream, techno, and white walls washed with color-shifting lighting effects. But the

see an increase in badges swiped — a bump to 3,900 vs. 3,500 in 2005 — and a proportional increase in sales leads, the real radical change in Bentley's numbers came from

asking, 'Is it broken?' Meanwhile, there were people running to get more printout paper just for us."

That traffic jam was repeated in 2007. Bentley again set up a rogue

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