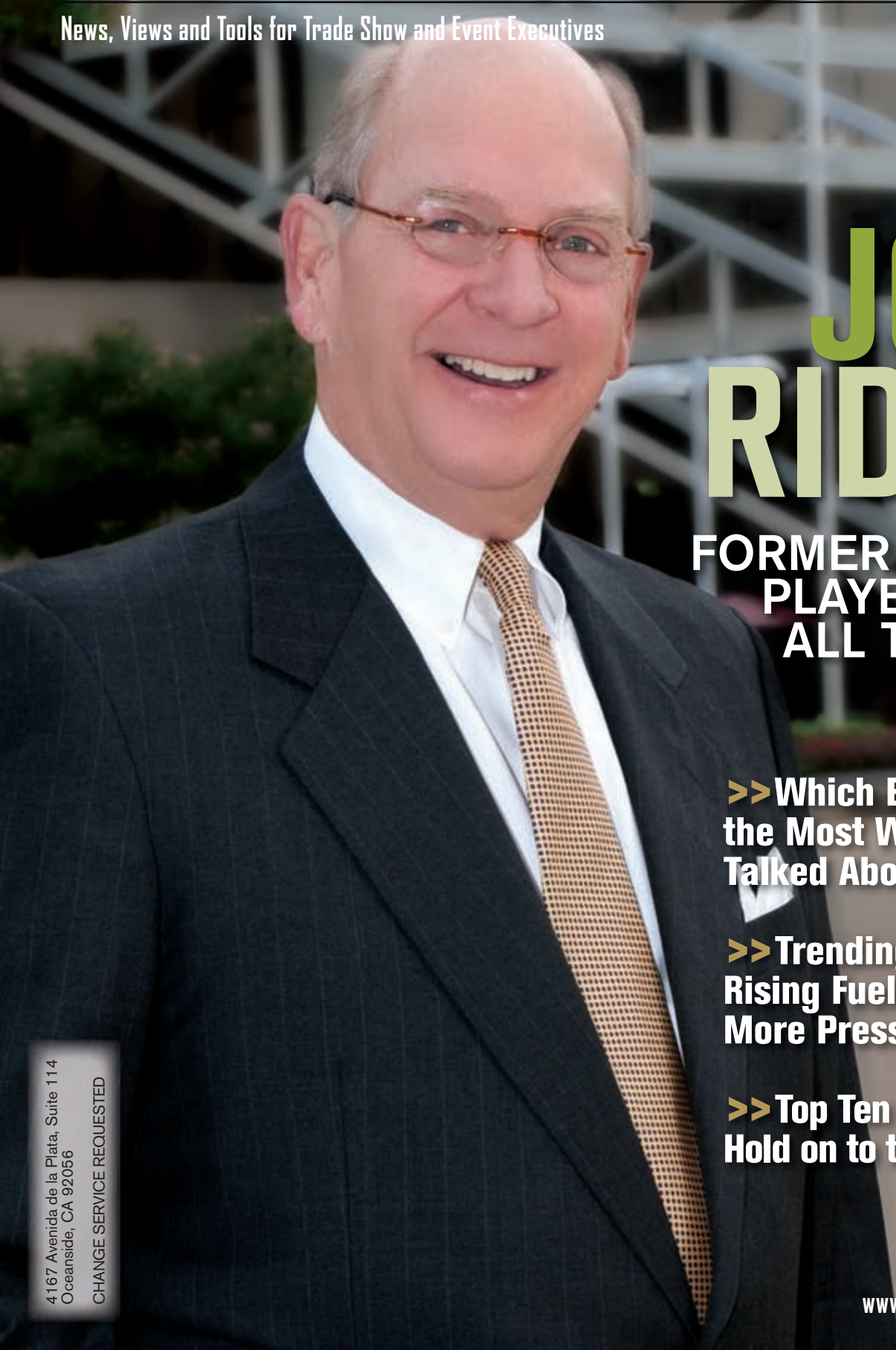


# Trade Show Executive

News, Views and Tools for Trade Show and Event Executives

August 2009

A portrait of John Riddle, a middle-aged man with glasses, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and patterned tie. He is smiling and looking towards the camera. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with a metal structure.

## JOHN RIDDLE

**FORMER BASEBALL  
PLAYER COVERS  
ALL THE BASES**

- >> Which Execs Will Be the Most Watched and Talked About in 2009?**
- >> Trending & Spending: Rising Fuel Prices Will Put More Pressure on Shows**
- >> Top Ten Millionaires Hold on to their Rankings**

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POWER LUNCH



# JOHN RIDDLE

## HOW THIS FORMER BASEBALL PLAYER COVERS ALL THE TRADE SHOW BASES

*John Riddle, president of Riddle & Associates, brings a diverse background to his Atlanta, GA trade show management company. John began his career playing professional baseball for six years in the Baltimore Orioles and the Chicago White Sox organizations. He also was named to two All-American teams as a collegiate player. After retiring from baseball, he moved to the Atlanta Braves front office to run the Atlanta Fulton County Stadium. This segued into the general manager position at the Atlanta Convention and Visitors Bureau, and from there into his own operation, Riddle & Associates.*

*John was once dubbed "Atlanta's Smallest Conglomerate" for his far-reaching portfolio that encompassed rodeo production, cattle breeding, retail stores, temporary seating and trade show support. However, in 1987, he abandoned that moniker and focused solely on exhibitions and events, ultimately producing one of America's largest trade shows: the biennial Clean Show, sponsored by six national textile-care associations.*

*John and I spoke just after the 2009 Clean Show ended and he headed to his North Carolina mountain retreat with his wife Judy and his three dogs for some needed R&R.*

**By Bob Dallmeyer, columnist**

**>>Bob: Trade show leaders have come from diverse backgrounds: publishing, the military, education and law enforcement, but you have to be the first one literally from the baseball field. How has this shaped you as a show organizer?**

**John:** In baseball, as in all sports, you have to have the discipline to practice. This translates to a strong work ethic in business. It has always been my feeling to never let anyone out-practice you, which means in business, that you don't let anyone outwork you. And perhaps most importantly, I learned that the best motivator is fear of failing.

**>>Bob: The buzz about your just-completed 2009 Clean Show in New Orleans is that your exhibitors were particularly successful. How did you achieve that in such weak economic conditions?**

**John:** In today's economy, it is critical for show organizers to manage exhibitor expectations. Before the event, we sent a note to our exhibitors assuring them that we would still have a strong show, but advised them to expect lowered attendance. We suggested they modify their expenditures accordingly and reduce their exhibit staff, if necessary. Attendance may have been down but we delivered quality buyers. The buyers came with the intent to do business, which they did. Our attendees have come to expect and want to see equipment operate. To afford them this, our show is a utility-intensive event. To further accomplish our goals, we built a steam system on the floor capable of running 100 laundries, so that all the machinery could actually operate. The fact that the buyers can see the equipment operating in the exhibits helps enhance and accelerate the exhibitors' sales process.

**>>Bob: Just how successful were your exhibitors?**

**John:** Nearly everyone reported that they had a good to great show. One exhibitor came to me and said, "John, we had such a great show that we will be able to keep our factory open another year." That's when you know in no uncertain terms that the show was successful.

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**Winning Team.** A staff of five produces the highly successful *Clean Show*. From Left to Right: Lindsey Hermelink, John Riddle, Paul Philips, Ann Howell, Bethe Scheuer.

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**>>Bob: Tell me about your package plan for exhibit space.**

**John:** We package all the major services our exhibitors need to run their exhibits. This includes show labor, drayage, furniture, hanging signs and utilities (electric, air, water, drain and steam). However, exhibitors must pre-order these services so the service contractor can plan in advance. This enables exhibitors to know before the show what their exhibiting cost will be. Their only other costs are staff requirements, telephones, Internet, florist, hostesses, etc.

**>>Bob: What is the space rate for this package plan?**

**John:** Our 2009 rate categories ranged upward from \$25.25 a square foot depending on amount of space purchased and sponsor association memberships.

**>>Bob: That's great, and equal to what some shows charge without all the services.**

**John:** That is another reason why our exhibitors are so happy. We're certain their costs are reduced by 30% to 35% using this method.

**>>Bob: How does the service contractor fare in this scenario?**

**John:** All the major contractors have bid on our show since we started this package plan in 1987. Over the years, we have used GES Exposition Services and Shepard Convention Services. They continue to bid, so they must be satisfied. (Although I'm sure they would rather have everything a la carte – particularly the freight – which was 3.7 million pounds this year).



**>>Bob: How in the world do you keep six sponsoring associations happy?**

**John:** It's easier than you would expect. We have earned their trust over the years by consistently doing what we say we're going to do. These associations represent all the elements in the textile care industry: the laundry managers, the coin-operated stores, the drycleaners, the industrial and commercial laundries, the distributors, textile rental services and the manufacturers. They create a synergy through which they all learn and prosper from each other. We've also been on target with our budgets, so their expectations of us are realistic. Finally, our mantra is that you can never over-communicate – this generally solves any issues that arise.

**>>Bob: What happened with your attendance this year?**

**John:** Pre-registration was 8,400, about 3,000 less than two years ago when we held the show in Las Vegas. I feel 30% of that decrease was a reduction in exhibitor personnel. However, our final numbers are not yet available.

**>>Bob: Will we ever be able to get away from raw numbers and talk about attendee quality as the measure of success?**

**John:** I have felt for a long time that the trade show industry has done itself a big disservice over the years by predicating success on a number. You don't need 100,000 people to have a successful show; we've proven that. You need key buyers meeting with exhibitors – that's far more successful than making your exhibitors sort through the tire-kickers to qualify serious buyers. To that point, one exhibitor at this show said he didn't have to spend his time explaining the difference between a washer and a dryer. I call that a successful event. Then there are the "big box" owners who often represent 90% of the buying power in a particular industry – when they are on the show floor, they bring the ultimate attendee quality to the exhibitor.

**>>Bob: Are you using social media to promote your show?**

**John:** We're partly engaged in this, but our industry demographic is the 45-plus age group. In the beginning, getting our industry to respond to our Internet presence was slow. We have so few younger people in this business that much of the popular media, like Twitter, isn't relevant. But I know that will change, and we will adapt as needed.

“The trade show industry has done itself a big disservice over the years by predicating success on a number. You don't need 100,000 people to have a successful show.”

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**A Clean Sweep.** Attendees from 72 nations participated in the 2009 Clean Show

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**>>Bob: What is your current “hot button”?**

**John:** The official name of the show is *The World Educational Congress for Laundering and Drycleaning*. Global education is an imperative. With attendees from 72 countries at *Clean '09*, we tried to offer education relevant to all attendees. To accomplish this, we invited other associations, including international ones, to offer educational sessions in conjunction with those provided by the show's sponsors. I have always believed that the trade show floor is any industry's largest classroom.

**>>Bob: How was New Orleans as a host city?**

**John:** It was just great. They have a great facility and their operations department did a fantastic job of planning and executing their plan. It could not have been better. Last year, we hosted 30 of our key exhibitors and several in the media to experience the city and report on it. Without exception, the results were very positive.

**>>Bob: How big is your staff?**

**John:** We have five people on staff and I believe they are the best in the trade show business. We do the housing, registration, sell the space, do the production, design the look of the show and its collateral materials, and pay the bills. What other show does what we do with five people? They constantly amaze me with their commitment and results, and each one is fanatical about customer service.

**>>Bob: Tell me about some of the other things you do.**

**John:** We have worked with many shows over the years. Currently, in addition to the *Clean Show*, we provide on-site management for the *International Wire Expo*, but we do not sell the space. Also, I started in the trade show business in 1977 with the *NAMM Show* when it was in Atlanta and have worked with NAMM ever since.

**>>Bob: Any thoughts on the recession?**

**John:** For the trade show business, this recession is worse than the one after



9/11. However, I think it has started to turn around, based on the experience we had at the *Clean Show*.

**>>Bob: Tell me about the Internet services you've worked on.**

**John:** We are big believers in the potential of the Internet. About 12 years ago, 1997, we sold five companies on our virtual trade show concept. In real time, you could walk down the aisles of the *Clean Show*, visit any of those five companies, click on any product and immediately download that product's information. At the same time, your name and interest were registered with the exhibiting company and their regional sales office. I almost went broke developing that program, and while it was a super concept, we could never sell it. It obviously was an idea that was ahead of its time. Next, I was an integral part of Third Millennium that developed ExpoExchange. Our staff contributed to the development of the ExpoExchange product. My goal is to keep the *Clean Show* as close to the cutting-edge of technology as financially possible.

**>>Bob: Any other Internet applications?**

**John:** We are big believers in research. We spend a great deal of time trying to determine what attendees are looking for and try to find exhibitors that meet those needs. When people come to any show and they don't find what they want, they won't come back.

**>>Bob: What do you feel is the main challenge for this industry?**

**John:** We have to control exhibitor costs to make exhibiting a more affordable experience.

**>>Bob: Who were your mentors?**

**John:** My parents, and Howard Bailey, former executive vice president of Freeman, was one of many I learned from. And the workers on the trade show floor – they taught me the most about this business.

**>>Bob: What advice would you give a young entrepreneur starting out?**

**John:** They should understand the seriousness of this business and the role we really play in the marketing mix of industry and commerce. You have to understand your show better than your contractors. You need to try new things and not be afraid to make mistakes. Change gives you an opportunity to grow, as opposed to maintaining the status quo.

**>>Bob: What keeps you awake at night?**

**John:** My constant search to do things better – in my life, in my work and in the world.

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Columnist Bob Dallmeyer, CEM, has been chairman of both the International Association of Exhibitions and Events (IAEE) and the Trade Show Exhibitors Association (TSEA), as well as a former director of the Center for Exhibition Industry Research (CEIR). In 2006, he was inducted into the Convention Industry Council's "Hall of Leaders" and received IAEE's Pinnacle Award in 2008. Contact Bob at (323)934-8300 or [bdallmeyer@tradeshowexecutive.com](mailto:bdallmeyer@tradeshowexecutive.com)



**Bob Dallmeyer**