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Entrepreneur Expo attracts 2,100 seeking edge amid recession

BY JOHN AUSTIN

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FORT WORTH — Everybody was trying to cook up some business at the convention center Wednesday.

Toncie Lampkin, owner of My Mama's Cakes, was starting from scratch.

"It's just me," said Lampkin, who talked about her baking startup while handing out pound-cake samples at the annual city-produced Entrepreneur Expo. "I love to bake."

Lampkin was one of 261 exhibitors at the event, including chambers of commerce, chiropractors, the U.S. Small Business Administration, banks and other ventures, large and small, who were looking for ways to meet and make contacts in a recession.

"Attendance is up about 30 percent," to about 2,100 attendees, said Dorothy Wing, who ran the expo for the Fort Worth Business Assistance Center. "The new thing this year was the counseling zone. It's our version of speed dating."

The counseling sessions gave visitors a chance to sit down for 15 minutes with a business expert. It's a mini version of one of the center's ongoing services.

Bryan Malatesta figured that the \$300 booth rental fee was worth the investment. He and his wife are licensees for an Internet-based medical-billing company, American Business Systems.

"We've talked to four doctors walking through the expo who want us to do their billing," said the Cleburne resident, who called medical billing a recession-proof business. "We make one sale, we're totally in the black."

Not that everyone was a booster. Consultant Isabel Menendez has been to past expos but said she wasn't getting any results this time out.

"Over the years it has become a place to sell purses and candy," the Carrollton resident said. "Where are the 50- and 60-person companies? Those are the people who need me, and they aren't here."

"Most of the people are here to sell you their stuff," Menendez said, adding that she could have also done without the luncheon speeches.

Attorney C. Russell Riddle, however, was enjoying himself. He works for the Phillips & Reiter Law Firm, which bills itself as "the outsourced general counsel."

"I get a lot out of it," said Riddle, who practices in Dallas. "I've got some hot referrals."

Fort Worth Library representatives were also on hand to remind visitors that it provides a host of business tools and resources, including Reference USA, a searchable database with phone numbers and addresses of some 12 million businesses. There are also free computer classes.

Meanwhile, Lampkin was cranking out cake samples. She had plenty of willing takers but acknowledged that getting started wasn't a piece of cake, even with time-tested recipes from family members and a love of baking.

"I'm not sure where God is leading me right now," the one-time seminarian said. "I can definitely use some startup money."

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