



Eric Wulf, CEO, ICA

Interview with *Eric Wulf*

CEO, International Carwash Association (ICA)

In October 2015, the very first European car wash trade show by the International Carwash Association was launched in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. What started only as an idea many years ago, became one of the most successful car wash trade shows ever hosted. This interview shares the approach, learnings and the success story of Car Wash Show Europe 2015.

MCI: What prompted ICA to launch a first event outside the USA? What were the strategic implications?

Eric Wulf: Our decision to launch an event in Europe evolved from simple observation to careful evaluation – and only then execution. We had attended European events that featured a car wash component for many years; usually these events were automotive aftermarket trade fairs. As we built networks with suppliers and operators, we came to see that these events did not sufficiently serve the needs of car wash operators – particularly independent operators. As we began to see the possibility of introducing a European version of our US event, we engaged a uniquely qualified consultant to evaluate and quantify the business opportunity. Based on that work, we decided to launch Car Wash Show Europe in early 2014 – approximately 18 months prior to our inaugural event in October 2015.

MCI: Why Europe?

E. W.: The US and European car wash markets featured some structural commonalities and established networks, which we were able to leverage in developing our concept. But perhaps most importantly, there was an identified need! With no other dedicated car wash event, and somewhat limited communication between operators in different countries, we saw an opportunity to deliver something unique and valued.

MCI: You expected 1,000 visitors which became more than 2,100. How did you get that done?

E. W.: There was nothing magical to our marketing and communications plan. We utilised social, digital, print, etc. The absolutely most important ingredient was partnering with a dedicated and talented team to lead the effort from Europe. In addition, we developed strong relationships with the national car wash associations in Europe, to ensure that they had input and visibility.

MCI: What did you fear the most in launching a new event in a new location?

E. W.: Staying put is always easier than taking a risk, and there was really no immediate necessity for us to take this step. We could have remained a US-centric organisation, as we have for most of our history. But, **as our industry (and all industries) have become more global – so must we in order to remain relevant.** So, there were absolutely financial, political and operational risks, but we felt that the strategic importance of participating in the global marketplace was more important.

MCI: How did having a local team make the difference?

E. W.: I would say that it was actually easier than I initially thought to find resources for a European market initiative. What isn't

easy to find, or evaluate in advance, is the commitment of the individuals that you'll be working with day in and day out. We did our due diligence in evaluating partners, but we were also very fortunate to have found the right people.

MCI: What do you value the most in the partnership?

E. W.: For us, culture is a prerequisite. We wanted to make sure that our partner held the same values and would treat our customers, members, suppliers and other partners with the respect that we treat them. Then, the most important criterion is performance. Early on, we established the criteria that would make the event successful – financially, statistically and strategically. Through it all, we kept our eyes focused on those metrics.

MCI: Where do you expect the European show to be in five years?

E. W.: I don't necessarily have an expectation for the headline statistics – net square metres, attendance or exhibiting companies. My greater hope is that Car Wash Show Europe becomes increasingly recognised as a source of information and networks to help car wash operators and suppliers prosper. If we do that, if we can help grow the professional car wash industry, I feel very confident that ICA will do just fine. ■

Insider's view



MCI: Can you describe MCI's scope of services for the event?

We were excited to bring a whole new experience to the European market with seminars, networking events and car wash tours. MCI was not hired just to focus on the execution of the trade show. We designed, together with ICA, the European version of the prestigious American show. With a clear sales and marketing strategy, a very specific look and feel and a different approach to the way we communicated with the stakeholders in the industry. We brought our expertise in the market, as simply copying the US show would not have been successful in Europe. We established a very strong relationship, not only with ICA but with the industry as a whole.

From vendors, to (inter)national media, other car wash associations and trade shows, and of course, the car wash operators, we truly became part of the ICA team and part of the car wash industry. Our sole goal was to design and launch a show "by the industry and for the industry".

Everything from conceptual design to the event architecture, external communication, marketing strategy and development, sales (exhibition and attendance), registration and execution of the event, was produced in-house, by ICA and MCI Amsterdam.

MCI: You have developed a specific sales approach for exhibitors, can you share more?

We first expanded the research into

the industry's stakeholders. Then we visited all other relevant trade shows in the sector and listened to each exhibitor or potential visitor. We focused on the return on objective and return on investment, and what their expectations would be for this first European show.

We made sure we implemented all the feedback we gathered, not just in the overall look and feel but also in the content of the show. And along the way, we built very strong relationships with all the stakeholders in the industry. We just wanted to listen to them, and as a result, they trusted us with their participation in the trade show, gave us their support and, most importantly, they became our ambassadors within the industry.

Our approach was based on trust, transparency, and a very open attitude towards their feedback, positive or negative. This resulted in 89 exhibiting companies, more than any other trade show in Europe with a car wash component, and 2,100 visitors, double the expected number.

MCI: Because it was a first-time event, what did you most particularly pay attention to?

A concept launch is always very challenging, and because of that, it's also full of opportunities. Our attention was mainly on cementing credibility and proving that we have a different mindset. This meant that one of the most important aspects we had to pay attention to was meeting and, most

importantly, exceeding the industry's expectations.

Every detail in the event architecture process was key; from concept development to sales, marketing, communications, logistics, registration etc.

MCI: How would you qualify your collaboration with ICA on this event?

ICA considered that we were part of their team from the first day we started working together.

The relationship we have built with the entire ICA team, and the Board Members is truly unique, and we're very proud to be part of such a professional and dedicated team.

MCI: Something you would have done differently?

Looking back, you always find things to improve. Which is why we look forward, as Car Wash Show Europe 2017 is "just around the corner" and the expectations are now extremely high, after the success of Car Wash Show Europe 2015. ■

Sophie Sanders

Trade Show Director for Car Wash Show Europe (MCI Amsterdam Office)

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