Most people in the trade show industry know about the end of COMDEX because it happened six years ago and there was so much written about it but what many are not as familiar with is the beginning of COMDEX. Within 10 years of its launch, COMDEX Fall became the largest trade show in the US. At its peak, the show attracted more than 200,000 people. COMDEX was eventually sold in the mid-90s with other shows by its original owner, The Interface Group, for $864 million (at the time the largest trade show sale ever). There is much that can be learned from COMDEX’ early years. As a COMDEX alumnus (I worked for the COMDEX Show Director from 1988 - 1990), I thought I would share a few thoughts with you on this global technology mega-event on the 30th anniversary of its debut in Las Vegas.
In 1979, when Computer Dealers Expo (COMDEX) was launched, it created a new marketplace for the emerging personal computer industry, facilitating the ability for computer manufacturers and resellers to connect with one another. It offered a compelling value proposition that was different from anything else out there. The timing was right... and as the computer industry exploded so did the show. COMDEX was the right product, for the right market, at the right time. Sure, there were other factors along the way that helped fuel the success – but these factors laid the foundation on which the house of COMDEX was built.

Why look back on this show now when the world is so different? That is specifically the reason that I have chosen to reflect on COMDEX. The core drivers behind COMDEX’ success are timeless. With so many more distractions these days, it is more important than ever that we focus on the basics.

When I started at COMDEX, there was no Internet (at least as we know it today), no email, no web sites, etc. The world is much different in 2009. Google. YouTube. Facebook. Twitter. iPhones. BlackBerrys. RSS. Texting. Blogging. Podcasting. Webinars. The number of media channels has exploded. Media habits change quicker. Markets are more fragmented. Consumers have many more choices. Shows face a more aggressive competitive environment. Event marketing strategies are more complex. However, as much as things have changed since the years I worked at COMDEX, what makes a show successful has not... the ability to bring buyers and sellers together is still paramount.

For those of you who are Encore clients, have heard our presentations at SISO, IAEE or other events or have attended our private training programs, you know our “Upstream vs. Downstream” philosophy and relentless focus on the value proposition, differentiation and being in sync with the marketplaces you serve. The key point here is that as show marketers we must focus on the most important value drivers – the ones that will move the needle – and not get distracted by fads, emotions, vanity initiatives, the “technology du jour” and insignificant technical issues.

We must in 2009, just as COMDEX did many years ago, be a market-maker.