

Show Time!

Winter is the season for fly-fishing exhibitions, and you've been asked to tie flies for the crowd. Are you ready? Read this article, and you will be.

Al & Gretchen Beatty

Let's pretend that you are attending a fly-tying exposition, the kind many clubs organize as part of their fund-raising. You wander among the many tables with tiers demonstrating their expertise. Finally, you stop at a table, watch for a few minutes, and pull up a chair to sit down. Why did you decide to linger at that particular table after passing by several others?

After more than 40 years of combined experience appearing at tying shows, we are pretty sure we have the answer to what makes a really good fly-tying instructor: He shows his audience how good each of them can be when they return home to use what they learn at the show. There's really only one rule to giving a fly-tying demonstration: *It's your job to show the audience how good they can be, not how good you are.* How well you do that will determine how many people "pull up a chair" to spend time at your table.

Just look around a room filled with demonstration tiers. Sadly, some will have no one watching them, but another will have people stacked three deep around his table. You might reply, "But that guy is famous; that's why he attracts a large crowd." But how do you think he got famous? We bet he is adept at showing people how they can be better tiers and anglers, not at showing off his own skills.

Developing good communication skills is the first step to becoming a better demonstration tier. You may be thinking that this leaves you out, but that certainly doesn't have to be the case. Trust us: You can learn these. Just take the two of us, for example.

When Gretchen graduated from college, she went into the classroom as an English teacher. She honed her communication skills teaching all day, every day. On the other hand, Al worked for the power company, climbing telephone poles and splicing cable. He didn't have a job in which he could develop better communication skills. Al still remembers giving his first fly-tying demonstration almost 30 years ago; he was so nervous, he couldn't sleep for several nights before the show. By the time Al was on

deck, he was a basket case; he was sweating, couldn't talk, and broke his thread several times. At that time he had been tying commercially for almost 20 years, and was a very skilled tier. And that's the key word: he was a "tier." Yes, Al may have been a great tier, but he was a lousy communicator. Fortunately, he worked hard and developed his communication skills. You can do the same.

Be Prepared

Over the years, we've learned some of the nuts and bolts that make it easier to give a fly-tying demonstration. These are the things you should take when appearing at a show. We list them here in no particular order; they're all valuable, and if you use them, we think enjoy sharing your skills with fellow tiers.

TOOLS: We set up separate kits for giving fly-tying demonstrations. The tools in these kits are identical to those we have on our tying benches at home. It's a mistake to work with a tool you are not totally familiar with in front of a crowd. For those of you who will take your tool set from home, we recommend making a checklist so you don't forget anything. In addition to taking a lamp (don't depend on the auditorium having sufficient light to see your work), be sure to pack two extra extension cords, extra light bulbs, duct tape, zip ties, and an electric power strip.

For those of you who have participated in a few demos, let us ask this question: How many times have you arrived at a demonstration or show only to find the tables are next to impossible to fit with a vise or light? If possible, take a vise with both a C clamp and pedestal base; the same goes for your light.

You will be doing a lot of sitting at the show, so you might want to take your own comfortable folding chair. Al suffers with a bad back, and those miserable metal folding chairs often provided at shows can be a real pain in the back - literally. And we always make sure to have a few ibuprofen tablets in the first-aid kit tucked in our tying bag. Yes, we even carry a first-aid kit to shows; over the years we've learned to be prepared, and that includes items for personal safety.

CLOTHING: Think of two things when preparing for a tying demo: your comfort, and the public's ability to see you work. Wear a solid-colored shirt so people can easily see your flies. If you don't think this matters, try this experiment. Lay a checkered shirt on your tying table, place a fly in the vise, and view the setup from about four feet away. You'll see that the fly really gets lost in the checkered pattern.

Your comfort is another important consideration. We follow the same rule for giving tying demonstrations that we did when we were guiding customers on the Yellowstone River: dress in layers and be prepared for anything. Case in point. Last year we were demonstrating at a show in a convention center. There were about 50 tables of tiers

with Al situated near the middle of the room and Gretchen on an outside wall near a door. With the large number of people in the room, the temperature was getting rather warm, so the show organizers propped the door open. As a result, Al was suffocating from the heat and was glad the door was open while Gretchen was freezing to death and wanted the door closed. To get through the day, Al took off a couple of layers of clothing and tied in a short-sleeve shirt; Gretchen slipped a long sleeve shirt and down vest over her blouse. We both were comfortable because we were prepared and made the appropriate adjustments.

Help Your Customers Learn

Remember: Your job is to help the public (we'll call them the "customers") learn how to tie better flies. It's all about the customers, not about you. There are a number of simple things you can do to help your customers' learn.

We usually tie our patterns with a contrasting color of thread. For example, spinning tan dubbing on chartreuse thread allows people to readily see the relationship between the two materials. Just be sure to explain why you selected the thread color you did to avoid confusing your customers.

Selecting the right hook sizes is a very important part of conducting a successful fly-tying demonstration. Your customers will be at least three feet or farther from your vise, so size your flies accordingly. You might fish certain flies tied in size 22, but you should never demonstrate how to tie it using hooks that small. We seldom use hooks smaller than size 14, and tell our customers which flies may be tied smaller.

Two-way communication with your audience is very important. Try to engage people passing by your table with a friendly, "Hi. How are you today?" Some people indicate they are fine and keep on walking, but very often, though, they will stop to see what you are doing. Our standard follow-up question is, "Do you tie flies?" From there, we take the conversation in a direction based on the customer's answer. No matter what the customer's skill level may be, we make certain to explain what we are demonstrating in minute detail. Things like where you place materials, your fingers, your hands, and how much pressure you put on the thread are important to your customer.

What Should You Tie?

What to tie is a decision based on the purpose of the demonstration. We break down fly-tying demos into these categories: club, shop, show, and video theater. Each has a different purpose, so we structure our presentation to fit the situation.

We think of a club demonstration as the most fun because it is usually focused on education. This allows us to demonstrate a diverse group of techniques and patterns.

We've had clubs bring us into an auditorium for a day to demonstrate on a wide-screen projection television. This type of demo requires a lot of preparation, so we are not repeating patterns during our several hours "on camera." In this case, we prepare packets containing the materials to tie each pattern. Other club demos are like the one we did last week; we can tie whatever we want in the hour before the meeting starts. In other situations in which we are the featured speakers, we tie flies that best support our slide show.

Your purpose in a shop demonstration is to help the shop owner sell products. We make certain we demonstrate patterns using materials available in the store. In other words, we won't demonstrate tying a dry fly using Cree hackle when we know the store has none and probably can't get it from their supplier; instead, we'll use a mix of grizzly and brown hackle.

Demonstrating at a show is an entirely different animal. We have traveled to many shows and have learned it is better to go prepared to tie only a few patterns rather than every fly known to man. At the shows, we make it a point to know who else is there and what they are demonstrating. If we get a request to tie a pattern for which we don't have the necessary materials, we can send the customer to another tier who can serve their needs. Our job is education, and it doesn't make any difference which demonstrator answers a question, only that it gets answered. Perhaps you will be asked to tie flies in a video theater. In this case, you will probably be scheduled to tie flies for a specified length of time, usually an hour. We think it's important to show up a few minutes early so we are ready to clip on the microphone and go to work at the appointed hour. We always stop our presentation 10 minutes before the hour ends so the next tier has time to prepare.

We've shared with you what we believe are a few of the qualities of a good demonstration fly tier. They are definitely not everything you need to know, but it is a base on which to build. The most important point is to emphasize and explain in detail the function or technique you are presenting. Your audience will appreciate you for it.

Al and Gretchen Beatty travel the country giving fly-tying demonstrations. Al was the recipient of the Federation of Fly Fishers' Buz Buszek Award for excellence in fly tying.

Our thanks to the Winter 2007 issue of Fly Tyer magazine for this article

READ ON FOR MORE

MY EXPERIENCE

Bob Hazlett

After reading the above article, I changed my perspective on what demonstration fly-tying is all about. I became focused on a different set of important items that have more to do with producing a successful demonstration than with fly tying. Here is my preparation check list. Not every item applies to every situation, but no item should be dismissed out of hand. Every item deserves thoughtful attention.

CHOOSE FLIES

1. No more than two - preferably one
2. Easy to tie
3. Bright colors
4. Large hooks
5. Want a fly that can be easily seen from five feet away

PHYSICAL COMFORT

1. Wear a plain color shirt
2. Dress in layers
3. Seat cushion
4. Sack lunch
5. Thermos of favorite beverage
6. Locate restrooms upon arrival

BE PREPARED

1. Extension cord
2. Duct tape
3. Zip ties
4. Power strip
5. Tying lamp
6. Highlighter
7. Pedestal Base
8. Thin board and 2 large C-clamps (to deal with table thickness)

ATTRACTORS

1. From a distance (draw the passer-by from across the aisle to the table)
 - a. Want to catch the attention of the passer-by. I used a digital picture frame loaded with a slideshow of flies.
 - b. Something with flashing lights
 - c. Something with bright colors
 - d. Something with motion

2. From close-up (get the passer-by to stop)
 - a. Pictures
 - b. Food always works**

TABLE SETUP

1. Everything on the table is part of the display
2. Have only the tools and materials on the table for the fly you are working on
3. Spread out your tools and material in display fashion. To be really anal, lay each one on a 3x5 card with its name on it.
4. Lay out your finished flies so people can pick them up and inspect them
5. Spread handouts in an orderly manner so people can pick them up without having to reach across the table.
6. Consider an MVFF photo album
7. Move all unnecessary items and clutter under the table

HANDOUTS

1. Suggestions
 - a. MVFF Membership Brochure
 - b. MVFF Business card
 - c. Copies of latest Tightlines
 - d. Announcement of next meeting with speaker bio
 - e. Recipe for the fly you are tying
 - f. Brochures on related organizations, e.g., FFF, TU
2. Don't let anyone walk away without a handout
3. Always highlight the website and invite them to check us out.

CONVERSATION

1. When the passer-by stops at the table, treat them as if they were a guest at your home.
2. You speak first. Always with a pleasant greeting and a question, preferably one that cannot be answered with a yes or no.
Example: "Good morning. Glad to see you here. What do you think this fly I am tying is used for?"
3. Take the conversation wherever the guest wants it to go. Offer information about the club. Offer to send them more information and get their name and email address, but do not get pushy or longwinded. End the conversation with a sincere invitation to a meeting or other event.

MORE IDEAS WELCOME

** One of the tables near us at the Outdoor Summit had a good food idea that got people to stop and linger:

1. Graham crackers broken into small squares
2. Hershey bars broken into small squares
3. Miniature marshmallows
4. Several small sticks
5. A votive candle

People skewered a marshmallow on the small stick, roasted it over the votive candle, put it on the chocolate square and made themselves a S'more. After this, they were reluctant to be rude and rush off, so they stayed and listened to the presentation and engaged in conversation.