Connect2One (C2O), a division of Nebraska Book Co., is a buying group that serves the needs of its independent store members to ensure that they have the resources to be more profitable, effective and important to the college or university each member serves.

Its mission is three-fold: provide the best products on the most favorable terms, along with marketing support that helps member stores maximize sales; support the independence of institutional bookstores by launching a national advocacy program; and offer the best technology for online retailing and store management.

One of the most important events on the college bookstore calendar is Campus Market Expo (CAMEX) 2011, which takes place Feb. 25-March 1 at the George R. Brown Convention Center in Houston, Texas. This year's event marks the 10th year that Connect2One has colocated with the annual show produced by the National Association of College Stores (NACS).

"We are very committed to this," said Mark Palmore, executive director of Connect2One. "This is great for our membership. It's great for our vendors, and it's certainly great for Connect2One. It gives us the opportunity for our attendees and vendors to not have to attend one additional show. It's travel savings, but it's also the time savings, the 'time-away-from-the-store savings.'

"Over the years, it has really brought us great exposure to the larger body of college bookstores/attendees at the NACS show," added C2O Program Director Paula Haerr. "It has also been very economical for our vendors. They don't have to attend an additional show to kick off the back-to-school buying season.

"It's had a very positive impact. We're very thankful for NACS in working with us every year over these last 10 years."

EDUCATION DAY

Each year at CAMEX, Connect2One hosts education day for attending members. Education day features a full day of education sessions that are held prior to the CAMEX trade show. This year's education day is Thursday, Feb. 24, from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

Palmore outlined three substantial changes to Connect2One's events for its members at CAMEX this year.

First, Connect2One will host a New Attendee Orientation on Wednesday, Feb. 23, from 6-7 p.m., the night before the education sessions begin. Palmore explained that the orientation is for those members who are attending Connect2One's education day for the first time.

"The purpose of this is to give them an idea of what to expect the next day," he said. "It's not going to be information oriented, as much as it is going to be a layout of exactly what they're going to learn. It's an overview of the services that Connect2One provides, and gives them an opportunity to hit the ground running the next day.
“They’ll learn all about the various tools that they’ll have to use, and the benefits of those tools during the course of education day, which prepares them for the CAMEX trade show and to buy at CAMEX,” Palmore also noted they vendors point out how Connect2One members are among the best prepared when walking the show floor to buy.

The second change to education day is a new session entitled, “There’s More? You Bet!” from 12:45-1:30 p.m. Palmore and Haerr will present the session that says there is more to Connect2One than apparel and supplies. They will provide an overview of other C2O programs and open up the floor for a question-and-answer session.

Palmore noted that other Connect2One programs that will be discussed include a freight program; credit card processing program; magazine rebate program; book programs; shopping bag programs; catalog services; and C2O’s Facebook initiative that launched in May 2010.

Haerr added that topics addressed during the question-and-answer session could include “new developments at Connect2One, things that people might want to see from us in the future, and any kind of questions that members have about just about anything.”

She noted that Connect2One will also have the opportunity to answer any questions that members may have at a lobby booth located near the rooms where NACS education sessions take place on Friday, Feb. 25, and Saturday, Feb. 26.

The third change to education day is a new round-robin format introduced this year – replacing the round tables from previous years – to provide informal networking opportunities between C2O members and vendor partners on a 10-minute rotation. Topics related to store operations, store services, course materials and more are expected to be addressed during this networking session.

“Rather than people coming in and sitting down and attending a session that they want to, there’s going to be an opportunity for them to see all the vendors during that period of time,” Palmore explained.

Approximately 8-10 vendors are expected to participate in the round robin, and Haerr noted that these vendors are “out of the norm from Connect2One’s apparel and supply programs. These 8-10 vendors will have an opportunity to speak to everyone in the group during this timeframe.”

Palmore added that the vendors will rotate every 10 minutes, rather than the C2O members. “Rather than the attendees moving, the presenters will move,” he said. “We think it’s a really important one for us.”

The performance category in apparel is one of the largest-growing categories in the college market, Johnson said, noting that performance has had a presence in the market for three or four years now.

She noted that a lot of stores in the past tended to shy away from performance apparel because the prices were quite high, but even small stores have sold it through “very, very well.”

Brand names continue to have a strong presence in the apparel category, along with other vendors that offer lower-priced performance garments.

“There’s a great selection,” Johnson said. “You can really merchandise your store with some opening price points and some higher price points, and give a great selection to the customer.”

Top-selling performance garments include a basic T-shirt, a basic short and a polo shirt. Other performance garments that sell well in bookstores include hooded sweatshirts and sweatpants, as well as outerwear.

In regard to color, Johnson said that apparel is “school-color driven,” with fashion colors, such as pink, also among the more popular choices in the college market.

In the T-shirt category, the trend is a much lighter-weight T-shirt. “An average T-shirt is 5.5 ounces, which represents the weight of one yard of fabric,” Johnson said. “Four-ounce T-shirts are also very popular, as well as ring-spun T-shirts, which are much lighter weight and have a much softer feel to them.”

Another popular T-shirt is the burnout tee, which is a T-shirt that has a tone-on-tone pattern imprinted on it.

Sublimation is a new graphic treatment in the college market, in which ink is transferred to the T-shirt using heat, instead of imprinting. “You cannot feel the ink on the front of the shirt,” she noted.

Other top sellers are men’s and women’s sweatpants, which have had “phenomenal” success with the number of units sold in college bookstores, and shorts, whether they are performance shorts, mesh shorts or jersey shorts. “You can sell a tremendous number of units of these styles of shorts and pants,” Johnson pointed out.

In the bag category, backpacks, tote bags and tech bags are top sellers with one common element – they are designed to hold laptop computers. Where to place these bags in the stores could become an issue, and Johnson encouraged buyers to merchandize the bags in both the gift/bag area and the computer area of the store to maximize sales. Prices range from $10-20 for tote bags to $30 to $50 for backpacks.
going to be a great format because it's going to give the people an opportunity to get exposed to all of these vendors that are involved in the round robin. It also gives vendors the opportunity to see all the people in the room."

Vendors participating in the round robin will represent areas including textbook rentals, health sciences, graduation and freight programs.

Another revision to Connect2One's schedule at CAMEX is that in previous years, NACS invited C2O to present a “What’s Hot” session during NACS education days. Due to the popularity of the session, it has been taken out of NACS education days, and Haerr will present the “What's Hot” session as a webinar that will be available on the NACS/CAMEX website beginning Monday, Feb. 7, in time for buyers to prepare for what they will see on the trade-show floor.

Haerr noted that the “What's Hot” webinar would focus on merchandise categories, not just products, but also ways that stores are promoting products.

She noted that the webinar would be open to everyone in the college bookstore industry.

IN-DEPTH REVIEWS, IDEA EXCHANGE

Connect2One will host its annual in-depth reviews on apparel; supplies; and gifts, bags and souvenirs on education day.

Michelle Johnson, program director for apparel, backpacks and souvenirs at Connect2One, will present the “Apparel In-Depth Review” session from 8:30-10 a.m. She will highlight the best buys from Connect2One's apparel programs, with a focus on the latest trends in garment styles, graphic designs and new products. (see sidebar)

Haerr will conduct the “Supplies In-Depth Review” from 10:15-11:45 a.m. She will highlight supply vendors, with emphasis on the top commodity comparisons, national trends, new products and the popular “Paula’s Picks.” (see sidebar)

That afternoon, Johnson provides the “Gifts, Bags and Souvenirs In-Depth Review” from 12:45-1:30 p.m. She will review Connect2One's gift and souvenir programs, with special emphasis on bags and backpacks.

Connect2One wraps up education day with its popular Idea Exchange from 3:30-4:30 p.m. C2O buyers will share the latest styles, graphics, color trends and fashion influences. Members are also encouraged to bring or discuss an item that is a top seller in their store.

Palmore noted that members are not required to attend all sessions during Connect2One education day. “Throughout the course of the day, there are options for sessions for people to attend,” he said. “It’s not just simply a one-track type of presentation all day long.

“We designed this education day for all levels of stores. There's something for everyone.”

Last year, Connect2One hosted its daylong education program for member stores at the Orlando Rosen Centre Hotel neighboring the convention center in Orlando, Fla.

This year, it will be a little easier for C2O members who travel to Houston as the education sessions and CAMEX trade show both take place in the convention center.

“That's really nice; we're really happy about that,” Palmore said.

Also last year, NACS revised the CAMEX 2010 schedule by reducing the event to four days from five, and NACS educational programming was shortened to a day and a half from the traditional two days.

CAMEX returns to its original five-day format this year. Attendees will be offered two full days of NACS educational opportunities in addition to three days on the trade-show floor. Trade-show hours are 9 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. on Sunday, Feb. 27, and Monday, Feb. 28; and 9 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. on Tuesday, Feb. 29, through Thursday, March 3.
a.m. to 3 p.m. on Tuesday, March 1.

**PROGRAM CATALOG**

Connect2One introduces its annual program catalog early each year prior to CAMEX, giving member stores time to research buying decisions and save money when placing orders on the show floor.

Haerr noted that buyers would receive the program catalog the first week of February.

“Catalogs contain all the negotiated pricing, as well as commodity comparisons, so they can look across the grid on what the cost of a T-shirt might be from any of our vendors, or the price of a notebook,” she explained. “We simplify the information that is in the catalog.”

The catalog also includes the Connect2One/CAMEX show specials, so buyers can be prepared ahead of time to write those orders when they get to the trade show, knowing that they are going to get even better deals at CAMEX."

In addition, Connect2One reviews the program catalog with its members during the three “In-Depth Review” sessions on education day.

“We talk about every single vendor in our program,” Haerr explained. “We talk about what the best deals are with each vendor, what the basic trends are, and some of the picks and best buys they should be looking for, once they get to the trade-show floor.”

Haerr and Johnson also place their popular “Paula’s Picks” and “Michelle’s Best Buys” ribbons on garments/products they select as being really special from each of Connect2One’s vendor partners, whether it is a new trend or a hot price.

**ATTENDANCE**

There is no cost for Connect2One members to attend the education day. In regard to member attendance, he noted that 375 members participated in last year’s Connect2One education day in Orlando, an increase of about 6 percent from the previous year.

This year, member registration is going very well, with Palmore noting that registration was up about 8 percent from last year as the RSVP deadline of Jan. 28 approaches. “We’re very optimistic that we’re going to have a great, great attendance, and that Houston will be an excellent venue for us,” he said. —CSE