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By ROBERT PIERCE • Leader & Times Southwest Kansas is known for its windy days, and now, one of its residents is on her way to another place known for its breezes – Chicago.

In April, Liberal's Morgan Bartel will head to the Windy City to speak at a national convention for jewelers.

"It's called the 'Smart Show,'" she said.

The show is put on by INSTORE Magazine, the leading publication for the jewelry industry, and Bartel, who works at Collins Diamonds in Liberal, said the show began soon after the local business was given a national award by the magazine.

"The same magazine that we won our 'America's Coolest Store Award' started doing a buying show and an educational convention twice a year," she said. "They started doing it about three years ago."

Bartel will join prominent leaders of the jewelry industry in speaking at the Smart Show.

"Pretty much anybody that's anybody in the jewelry industry speaks at these," she said.

Bartel, who also promotes Collins through its Facebook page, said she was understandably surprised by the news that she would speaking at the national event.

"It was kind of shocking when they contacted me to see if I would help out with the social media part," she said.

Bartel said she also had a high level of excitement after receiving the call to speak at the convention

"I know I jumped up and down for a while," she said. "I immediately called everyone in my family, including Carla and Audie, to share the big news. I don't know if anybody understood what I was saying half the time. We'll just say I was very excited. It was beyond cloud nine for me."

Bartel said about 300 to 400 vendors set up at the convention for people to go shopping in addition to the show itself.

"There's about three days worth from about 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. of educational seminars and classes for everyone to take," she said. "It's kind of the second biggest show right now – the comfy shoe kind of show."

The show officially kicks off April 13 and ends April 15, and Bartel said some activities could begin as early as the evening of April 12.

With her birthday falling on April 15, Bartel said speaking at the Smart Show was a "pretty good present."

"I like to talk, so it kind of helps that someone else is letting me talk," she said.

Bartel said winning the America's Coolest Store award secured Collins' position at the convention.

"They pretty much asked all the cool stores if they would be interested in helping out with the show in different realms, even down to being part of the welcoming committee," she said. "Our store signed up a long time ago stating that we'd love to help out if we could. We got approached about that."

Bartel admitted she does have an obsession for INSTORE Magazine.

"I'm one of those that reads it cover to cover, everybody's articles," she said. "I know everybody from the editor in chief all the way down to the fashion creative director."

She called being asked to speak at the Chicago show her "biggest accomplishment."

"It's neat to see your own obsession with the social media and marketing kind of pay off in the fact that I got to see the speakers list already and see who all's on it," she said. "I'm on it with some of the people I hold so high."

Bartel said she will be speaking on how to utilize social media such as Facebook for small business marketing and using it to build genuine connections with customers. She said social media has completely revolutionized the jewelry industry.

"It has expanded the way we as retailers can connect with our customer base," she said. "Our store has customers all over the globe, and what is fabulous is that through social media, we have been able to truly build one on one relationships with numerous customers."

Bartel said social media likewise allows jewelers to connect with the people whose decision matters most – customers.

“Before we invest in purchasing certain products we will share images, videos and information and because of how amazing a social media family is we get tons of feedback,” she said.

Bartel said Collins Diamonds has purchased jewelry pieces based solely on the amount of “likes” a picture of the piece received on Facebook.

“We have a 70 percent-30 percent rule we hold firm to though,” she said. “70 percent of our social media marketing is strictly business related, and then 30 percent is more personal.”

Bartel said social media has also helped show people what kind of company Collins is.

“We are a family run business, and we want everyone who not only walks into our store but those who interact with us online to feel like they are a part of our crazy family,” she said. “Social media is more than just a place to gain prospective customers but it's a fantastic place to really learn what can and will make you better not only as a person but as a successful business as well.”

Bartel has spoken at other conventions, but she said none of those compare to the level of the Chicago show.

“I've done that for about two years. In August, I spoke at the RJO event, which is Retail Jewelers Organization. I spoke on the same topic matter, but nothing this big.”

Bartel said she hopes speaking at those other events has been good practice for her as she prepares to talk at the Smart Show.

“We shall see,” she said. “Time will tell.”

Bartel said she feels being at the show is not necessarily a promotion for Collins, but it does publicize the hard work of store employees. She added being from a small town is another aspect she likes of going to Chicago.

“I feel our area gets underestimated a lot for the kind of businesses that we have here,” she said. “We've got amazing people in our community that a lot of people would never know about. I just kind of look at it as the hidden gyms being exposed.”

Bartel said one thing she is continually asked at other conventions is “where in the world is Liberal, Kansas?” She explained what she tells them.

“I always tell them put your finger in the middle of the map, and we're right there,” she said.

Bartel also said having someone from Liberal at the Smart Show is good exposure for the local

community.

“It’s able to put us out there on a different kind of platform where people get to see the beauty of the area often ignored,” she said.

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