



Trade Show Dos And Don'ts

By Jim Schakenbach

Every year the trade show debate rages within just about every firm that has the potential to include show participation in its marketing budget. To make the issue even more problematic, 9/11 has forced this debate to now include safety issues. But at the heart of the matter is the question "just how effective are trade shows, REALLY?". The answer is a definitive "depends...".

It depends in large part upon what a firm puts into it. While trade show attendance is certainly down, it doesn't mean it's out. In fact, the attendees who show up at shows these days are there because they really want (and need) to be.

The days of the free-and-easy, firm-subsidized junket are over and any firm worth its salt is demanding ROI on any travel expense, especially trade show attendance. What does that mean for the exhibitor? Fewer "tire-kickers" and more qualified, interested, potential clients.

OK, so now we've established an argument for participating in an industry trade show even though attendance is almost certainly going to be off what it's been in the past. How do you capitalize on this opportunity? Let's start with the most common mistakes exhibitors make:

Creating Unintentional Barriers.

Ever notice that the booths with the most traffic are also the ones that are easiest to get into? They have wide, inviting spaces that seem to blend into the aisles so that attendees can pass easily from a common traffic area into a firm's selling zone, often without even knowing it.

That means removing those ubiquitous eight-foot folding tables that people erect across the front of their booth space, with carefully fanned out literature and stony-faced reps sitting impassively behind this protective barrier, waiting for someone to stop and talk to them. Waiting and waiting and waiting....

The result is as inevitable as it is unintentional – "The show was a flop...nobody stopped to talk to us...".

Put The Cell Phone Down.

Let me say it again. PUT THE CELL PHONE DOWN. How many times have you walked past a booth, only to see a representative talking earnestly into a cell phone, staring off at some invisible horizon, usually with a finger pressed into his or her open ear in a desperate attempt to hear the other person?

Totally oblivious to the hundreds of potential sales walking right past them just a few feet away, these clueless individuals instead are concentrating all their efforts on a single person they can't even see. Does that make any sense? Of course not.

Instead, relegate phone business to a limited period of time, away from booth activity. Then every rep in the booth should be instructed, while working in the booth, to turn...the phone...OFF.

"I'm Not Sure..."

Some firms, desperate for professionals to staff a booth, will tap those with little or no services knowledge or, worse, because they have a pretty face. Then, when confronted with a question of perhaps even modest difficulty, they respond sheepishly, "gee, I'm not sure...I don't really handle that service...the manager will be here this afternoon, can you come back then?".

If someone is staffing the booth, they ought to have at least a passing knowledge of the services being offered so that they can provide potential clients with more information than what they came in with. There's no substitute for knowledge, even if it's just a little.

The Bulletin Board Look.

Also known as the College Dorm Display. You've seen them – a fabric-covered pop-up display covered in what looks like white paper reprints, some photos, maybe a half dozen or so small graphics. They're confusing to look at, worse to decipher, and at best, a waste of time.

The key word is "display" – this is a firm's chance to show the world exactly what it has to offer in the best possible light. Throwing up a bunch of data and some digital photos does not do that. The best any firm that puts up such a display can hope for is one or two confused people wandering through, peering quizzically at the myriad of prints and photos, half-heartedly trying to figure out what the exhibitor actually does.

Does all this sound depressingly familiar? That's because hundreds of firms commit these violations on an all-too-frequent basis. But that means opportunity for you, if you choose instead to maximize your trade show participation and create an effective, interesting lead-gathering sales machine.

Here are ways to do just that:

Create Open Spaces.

Remember those eight-foot tables? If you must use them, stick them on a back wall or along the side drapes. Open up the front of your booth and you open yourself up to sales opportunities. Keep displays to the side or back of your booth so that you can draw people in to view them. Use pedestals wherever possible to create islands of interest. Removing physical barriers also removes psychological ones.

Create Excitement.

Remember the College Dorm Display? Instead, work toward creating a single, exciting image or theme for your display. Opt for a single, large color image in your booth that graphically depicts what your firm offers.

Ideally, a person walking past should be able to glance at your display and immediately determine "oh, they're involved in (blank)". The added benefit is ease of set-up and transportation, lack of clutter, and often less expense – sometimes it's cheaper to create a single, larger graphic than it is several smaller ones.

Multimedia displays are even better, and can serve the added benefit of providing compelling "live" digital demos that might not be cost-efficient or even possible to do physically.

Leave Sales Literature In The Box.

Or even better, back at the office. Firms waste an enormous amount of money printing up beautiful four-color sales materials and stacking them in come-hither piles at their booths where everyone then scoops them up and unceremoniously dumps them in a trash can outside the exhibit hall because they've got too much stuff to carry.

Instead, have just a few brochures or catalogs available discreetly under your table so that when you have a really live prospect, you can offer literature if the situation calls for it. Use your valuable literature instead as a response sales tool that you can mail to your leads when you get back home. This provides you with another reason to contact them.

Use Real People.

Remember, this is your opportunity to show the industry the breadth and depth of your firm, so bring out your most talented, knowledgeable people. If that means engineers who aren't used to the light of day, make sure you pair them up with experienced sales professionals who can run interference for them if they become uncomfortable.

Make sure you have the intellectual firepower in the booth to handle the kind of questions you're likely to get. The quicker you can answer a prospect's question, the quicker he or she becomes an actual client.

Don't be afraid to go out and greet people. The booths that are always crowded and active are the ones with better outreach. Professionals who greet people in the aisles with a smile and a friendly question attract more interested attendees than the walled-off booths with dour employees staring sullenly at the passing traffic.

Conclusion: Less Is More.

In short, the ideal trade show display has fewer barriers, less clutter, singular themes or images, and more opportunities for contact and prospecting. By using these guidelines and a little common sense, you can turn even today's diminished trade shows into the effective marketing tools they ought to be.

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RainToday.com Note: Want to learn more about trade show marketing? RainToday.com talked with expert Ruth P. Stevens about how professional services firms can be effective using trade show marketing. Read the article [here](#).

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