



BEST PRACTICES FOR TRADE SHOW SUCCESS

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Trade shows still continue to be big business for all businesses. According to The Center for Exhibition Industry Research (CEIR), business-to-business spending for trade shows is third to advertising and promotion

Even in the Internet age we live in, there are many benefits to participating in trade shows. Increasing brand awareness, obtaining high quality leads and physical presence in front of tradeshow attendees are just a few of these rewards. However, none of these benefits are attainable without a due diligent amount of strategy and effort planned in advance before a trade show. If your company has never participated or exhibited in a trade show and is interested in exploring opportunities – or if you've attended trade shows for decades and are simply looking for a better return on your investment – here are some best practices to maximize your trade show Return on Investment and Return on Relationships.

Remember, a successful trade show starts long before the exhibit hall doors open. Want to learn how to have the best chance at success? Below is an extensive outline of best practices for the pre-show planning phase, at show participation and post show follow up.

Before you begin any trades how campaign, know exactly what you want and need. Ask yourself or your team, "What are we wanting to accomplish?" If you are planning a tradeshow; do you want brand awareness, customer relationships, leads, or market leadership?

PRE-SHOW

You have selected the show, decided on booth space and booth size, and sent in your deposit. It's time to start planning the details! Ideally, this Pre-show process should start 8-12 months prior to the show. If time does not permit, then prioritize the items with a longer lead time like booth graphics and ordering of trade show materials to be ready for your show.

- **Do your research.** Before you consider exhibiting or sponsoring at a trade show, you need to first research your opportunities and attend a few trade shows prior to registering as an exhibitor. Trade shows take a lot of planning and organization to be a major production, and understanding what exactly they entail requires in-person attendance. Take note of the attendees and what seems to draw a crowd. Are their presentations, contests or TV displays? These observations will help in planning your own trade show booth and participation. Rule of thumb: never exhibit at a new trade show. New trade shows are untested venues. Save your cash for the regular, proven shows in your industry.
- **Consider sponsorship opportunities.** Improve your trade show participation by considering thought leadership sponsorship and /or speaking opportunities. Be seen as a thought leader and be seen as an expert in front of your most readily available resource, in-house experts. This helps you to promote your brand and build credibility in front of other influential decision -makers. Panel discussions, small group breakout sessions or being the main topic speaker are just a few possibilities. Get in touch with the show management and coordinators in advance to learn more.
- **Reach out to attendees.** Prior to the trade show, request a list of attendees from the show organizer and begin prospecting by researching the list on LinkedIn. If you have a LinkedIn In Mail account, take these efforts to the next level by executing a campaign and inviting your strongest prospects to a VIP breakfast or event. You could also build excitement through contests, give-away items, and free show tickets if a prospect pre-orders them.
- **Promote your Trade Show and Exhibit.** Prior to the show, promote your trade show booth by posting on your blog and social media platforms to create buzz. Save product or service launches for the actual trade show so customers and prospects anticipate the reveal at the event. This tactic also allows you to submit a newsworthy press release to publications which will spearhead both trade show and product promotion efforts for better visibility. Promote the event like it's your own... because it is. Every year we drive hundreds of attendees to many different trade shows we attend. We even will pay for passes for our key customers, prospects or media to join us at the show.
- **Create an Action Plan for the following items:**

- Save The Date: Mark off your calendar and internally recruit booth staffers you want to work the show. Have them block off their schedule to account for travel, set up, event hours and breakdown. Be sure you have enough staff to ensure success.
- Establish a Budget: You know the cost of the exhibit space. Now factor in transportation, lodging, food, graphics, printed material, giveaways, etc. Settle on a reasonable budget and stick to it.
- Establish Goals: What are you trying to get out of this show? Solid leads or sales at the show? Awareness of your new product/service? Be both specific and realistic.
- Create a Checklist with Timing & Responsibilities: Map out tasks working back from show date. Assign specific tasks to each staff member that they are responsible for. Refer to this often to make sure you are moving forward and everyone has clarity.
- Review Current Exhibition Material: Do you have a sufficient booth display or do you need a new one? Will it fit in the booth size and space you have reserved? What kind of shape are your existing graphics in? Is the information still accurate and pertinent? This is the time to pull in a graphic designer (internally or externally) to create an engaging, consistent visual theme.
- Ordering of Trade Show Materials: Many exhibitors wait until a week or two before a show to place orders. Rule of thumb for graphic design approval is 7-10 business days (dependent on number of graphic items and internal agreement/sign off). Don't forget about printing and/or shipping timelines as well.
- Ordering of direct mail pieces, promotional product giveaways and corporate logo clothing for staffers if needed.
- Social Media & Blog promotion timelines.

AT SHOW

You have done all your pre-show planning and have all your items ordered and now it is time to put the plan to action at the show. This is the time to really stand out!

- **Create buzz.** Use a how-to presentation or great video to create buzz and draw attention to your trade show booth. Create an experience for the attendees by providing memorable interactions that go above and beyond your competition at the show. Contests, product demonstrations, and samples are just a few tactics to keep in mind for creating a buzz at your booth.
- **Monitor your booth staff.** Before the show starts each day, be sure to check in with your team. Everyone should have a divide-and-conquer approach for delegated responsibilities at the show. Some booth staff members should be responsible for upselling to current customers, while others should be responsible for new sales to build your customer lists. Continue to remind the team of talking points and their roles.

Some sales teams fall into the trap of thinking that the trade show is like a vacation. Reduce these attitudes by reminding your team of their sales goals and reward programs for turning leads into prospects and prospects into new customer accounts. Have your best lead generators at the event... And turn it into a game! Invite your sales reps to trade shows and watch for the ones who really earn their pay. Have contests, set goals.

- **Schedule meetings at the show.** Don't wait for a potential customer to visit your trade show booth. Begin prospecting before the show starts and plan prospect appointments to set up during the show. Encourage your team to set their own prospect meetings while at the show with goals in advance, and be sure each booth staffer brings specific samples or literature for those individuals – the added touch won't go unnoticed. If you are in favor of downloadable software programs for your information, be sure to keep track of what is sent to each person direct from the show and track the information.

POST SHOW

The show is over and you received lots of leads and are tired after the show. Now is the time to take all that dedication to gathering leads for new customers and keep relationships going with current customers and make your follow up system set you apart from your competition.

- **Plan your follow-up.** Do not make the mistake of letting well qualified leads from the show go cold by waiting too long to reach out. Input your show leads and prospects into your CRM system right away and rate your leads. Divide your team to tackle the large promising prospect leads and even the smaller leads that are marked priority. At EXHIB-IT!, we recommend taking engaging large prospects via email campaigns, direct mail, or multi-touch point campaigns. For example, you may want to even send a handwritten note with a webinar invitation or even a small gift for them to remember you after the show is over. Integrated marketing at its best!

- **Debrief your staff.** Take time to get feedback from your exhibit booth team and begin planning for the next year with the feedback received to make the next show even better. Bring all good and not so good experiences to the table. What was successful? What should be reconsidered? What should be added? Even consider conducting an internal survey to help you document the information. Your trade show booth, successful lead generation, and future trade shows will depend on this valuable feedback.

It's certainly quite an achievement to pull off a successful trade show, especially on a large scale. The improvements above may not all be achievable for you before your next show. However, if you can commit to adopting these best practices, your trade show experience will be smooth and on track to generate valuable and well qualified leads.

We at EXHIB-IT! wish you much success using our tested and proven Best Practices!