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Making the Most of Trade Shows

By Renea Myers, president of Renea Myers Marketing

Trade shows offer your company a unique opportunity to create visibility and communicate with many people at once. However, trade shows can require a big investment of resources (time and money). Here are a few tips to help you get the most bang from your trade show buck.

Choose the Right Show

- It's usually a good idea to attend a show before you exhibit, unless you're 100% sure it's the right show. Scope out the space you want.
- Try to find out as much as you can about past show attendees and exhibitors. This information is often available from the sponsoring organization.
- Ask about planned show promotions such as pre-event mailings and media buys. The more resources that a sponsoring organization puts into the show, the higher the chances of a successful show.
- Talk to previous exhibitors about their show experience.
- Get trade show referrals from your best customers.
- If necessary, choose high-interest shows over larger shows.
- Consider your budget. If you can't afford to present yourself in the best possible light at a show, it's better to pass on that show.
- Idea: Find a show that targets an under-served customer base. You could be the only game in town.

Choose Your Space

- Get in early so that you can take advantage of early bird discounts and secure your space before the show gets "cherry picked."
- Think about traffic patterns and layout. Will the attendees get sidetracked by a show feature before they get to your booth? People tend to go to the right when they enter a show, so a booth located up front on the left might not be the best choice. You also want to avoid dark corners of the exhibit hall.
- Position yourself near traffic drivers like food, drink, anchor booth, interactive elements, Internet cafes, or the entrance door to a show seminar.
- Ask about booth restrictions such as exhibit height limitations, lighting rules, music/sound restrictions. Be sure that your Wow Factor isn't against the rules!

Pre-Show Publicity and Visibility

- Consider doing a series of pre-event mailers or emails to attendees with a very specific call to action that gets them to your booth and/or your Web site. Come see us in booth ## just won't cut it. Big, pretty postcards or "lumpy mail" are my favorites!
- Offer a compelling and interactive booth promotion and ensure that attendees will "get it" with just one glance.
- Use the show as an opportunity to meet potential vendors and strategic partners.
- Contact prospects that you know will be at the event and set appointments to meet with them during the show days.
- Try to leverage media coverage during the show. Sponsor something, volunteer to serve on a committee, let the show producers know you're willing to do media interviews, have a visually interesting pitch for the media, and develop some media one-sheets about your company to have on-hand.

Set Goals

- Determine your primary purpose for being at the show. Generate leads? Close sales? Cement customer relationships? Develop an opt-in email or mailing list? Find vendors? Set a specific goal for that objective.

- What is your branding/awareness goal? What impression are you trying to make?
- Being present with the competition is a non-measurable, but often important goal.

Incorporate a Wow Element into your Show Presentation

- The key to getting attention at a show is interactivity and brand-related fun! Your job is to be the talk of the show.
- You must get the attention of attendees so you have an opportunity to qualify them.
- Unique giveaways, costumes/characters, games, demos and entertainment are all big hits at trade shows.
- Hand out brochures selectively. It's better to have a postcard or rack card for everyone to pick up. Reserve your large brochures for the real prospects.
- Create a reason for following-up with booth visitors.

Getting Ready

- Make a packing checklist for all your materials and supplies.
- Practice booth set-up.
- Choose extroverted, knowledgeable and enthusiastic people to staff your booth.
- Have enough people staffing each booth shift. Three per shift is a good rule of thumb...two to stay in the booth and one to network on the show floor.
- Develop and communicate a complete booth marketing plan for all staffers.
- Determine beforehand how leads will be captured and who will do the follow-up.
- Establish a primary booth message that everyone uses.
- Discuss dress and booth protocol.
- Create brief qualifying questions that everyone will use.
- Wear pockets for stashing business cards while on the show floor.
- Make top executives available throughout the day if possible.
- Have everyone practice the 30-second commercial or elevator speech so it flows naturally with attendees.

Now go out and conquer that next trade show!

---Source: Renea Myers is the President of Renea Myers Marketing. As one of our favorite authors, she writes her articles especially for DM Advisor readers. Visit her web site at www.rmyersmarketing.com.