

Getting the Most Out of Trade Shows

Deciding to participate in a trade show is never an easy decision. It is generally a costly affair, with booth, handouts, airfare, staff related expenses and other costs to take into consideration. The events are usually overshadowed by the big firms, who have the big budgets to create the flashy booths and attract all the attention - both attendees and press. It's hard to know whether you can create the business you need to make the event worthwhile. Some take these reasons to conclude staying home is best.

Others attend all the trade shows in their industry for fear that they may miss something, lose out on an opportunity, or have their absence taken as a sign that they are no longer a player.

Just as not attending any trade shows is a faulty strategy, so too is attending them all. Like any other marketing decision, you need to weigh the advantages of each trade show against the costs and determine whether you believe your attendance is worthwhile.

One way to make the decision making process easier is learning how to maximize performance at trade shows so that when the decision is made to attend, the goals of the company can be realized. To accomplish this, of course, you need to clarify and define what those goals are. Doing so will help you select which trade shows to attend, and how to structure and implement your appearance.

With all their trials and challenges, trade shows are important and your ability to succeed in them important to your success. I guess that's why Tudog asked me to put this article together. So here are some helpful hints for successful trade show participation:

1. Your Appearance is Part of Your Overall Marketing Plan

Your booth, materials, message and staff appearance should all reflect the company's marketing strategy, making sure that everything from corporate colors, taglines, product positioning and other details are consistent with the company's branding program.

2. Plan Ahead

You should be planning your activities ahead of time. Review the list of attendees and see whom you want to be meeting with and arrange meetings prior to arriving. People often think they can have spontaneous meetings at trade shows. Rarely do these happen, as everyone is quite busy pursuing his or her own agenda. If you want to be on that agenda, you need to set it up ahead of time.

3. Contact Press Before Attending

If you are planning to attend a trade show your decision should be made months in advance. Proper trade show implementation will take 3-4 months. One element of this is press. Ideally you would like two types of press - an article in a major industry publication just prior to the trade show (that is usually distributed for free at the trade show) and a

mention in articles covering the trade show itself. The only way to get either is to get your public relations people working on it with enough time for them to get results.

4. Look for Other Ways to Increase Awareness About Your Company

Trade shows are competitions for attendee attention. Look for ways you can draw attention to your company. Often trade show organizers offer seminars and lectures as a way for companies to tell attendees about their products. This is certainly an option, although there is usually a cost associated with being awarded a seminar. Other, more guerilla type methods include, having staff where a uniform or sorts that separates them from other guests, hold a contest with an attractive prize as the giveaway, and have staff give fliers to attendees as they walk the floor.

5. Use the Show to Make a Special Announcement

One way to get attention during a trade show is to use the occasion to make an announcement about your product. Perhaps a new version is completed, or a new feature has been installed. Whatever it is, it is wise to coordinate your trade show appearance with your R&D department so that you can use the industry gathering to gain position within the industry.

6. Keep an Eye on Your Competition

You probably know your competition well. You know which companies have really sophisticated marketing operations and which just don't get it. Set your standards to match and exceed the best among your competitors. How you look, the quality of your materials and the creativity of your booth are all representing your product. Nobody will know you genuinely offer a better technology if everyone is at your competitor's booth.

7. Select Your Staff Carefully

The employees you select to represent you at the trade show are ambassadors for your company. You need to select them in accordance with the overall appearance you want the company to project - and not because they deserve a few days out of the office at whatever exotic location the trade show happens to be in. Make sure your staff knows your product. Rehearse their presentation with them. Make sure they know what sort of questions will be asked and what the answers to those questions are. And make sure you have a senior decision maker at the show. Should some serious decision be necessary, nothing kills momentum more than you having to say "I'll get back to you".

8. Have Giveaways and Candy

It may seem silly. People walk the floors of these trade shows and collect all kinds of silly gifts that they have no idea what they'll do with once they get back to the office. Some people think so much is given away that any value the giveaway might have by way of keeping you in front of the customer is lost in the all the noise. This may be true, but having a giveaway is also important so that you are not remembered as the company that didn't have a giveaway. In other words, it may be silly and it may be hard to understand, but people care about the giveaways at trade shows and it will make you look bad if you don't have one. Now, if you're going to have one, you might as well

employ some creativity in deciding what it will be. Fun giveaways get attention. Also, have candy at your booth. It's a small courtesy to your guests and creates an atmosphere of hospitality.

Trade shows can be a gateway to an industry and an extremely effective way to gain critical, mass exposure to your target industry. Making the right impression is critical. Hopefully these hints will put you on the path to trade show success.

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