

Trade Show Best Practices

Trade shows are an important marketing tool because they allow a company to simultaneously gain exposure to new prospect clients, meet and greet existing clients, and gain exposure and competitive momentum within the business sector. These three opportunities, worthy even as individual pursuits, make the trade show a compelling, and in many cases, a must attend, event.

Companies often shy away from trade shows because of the expense involved. Not only is there the expense of participation and the booth, but there are also the expenses associated with the materials distributed, giveaways, travel, hotel, and meals. When these are combined they can present an intimidating number that seems impossible to recover over a mere few days of intensive sales activity.

This calculation, many times, is incorrect, for the purpose of the trade show, in addition to actual sales, is to drive future sales, and as is often the case, the long term benefit is difficult to measure. The trick is to be in the position to maximize the trade show experience, and by doing so, be able to justify participation. Tudog has 6 hints how:

1. Understand Your Objectives

It is hard to measure and ascertain the results of an event when you are uncertain what it is you hoped to achieve in the first place. The only way you will be able to meet your objectives at a trade show is if you have a clear definition of what those goals are and you use the clarity of your understanding to construct tactics that will enhance your chances of reaching them. The broad or abstract goal of “selling and meeting people” is so indistinctive as to render it meaningless. You need to know what you want and then know how to get it. Otherwise, going to the trade show will be an exercise in undefined and unfocused activity.

2. Gather Intelligence

Just like every other marketing endeavor, the trade show requires that you engage in some business intelligence gathering before you arrive at the show. Make sure you understand which of your competitors are attending and as much as you can of their trade show strategy. Make certain too that you know which of your current customers are attending and make certain to invite them to swing by your booth to say hello and perhaps participate in some sort of customer appreciation event or contest. Finally, be sure to know which of your prospective or most desired prospects are attending and be certain to set up the opportunity to meet with them and discuss with them the opportunities and benefits of doing business together. These acts of intelligence gathering and the following up on them will improve your trade show performance.

3. Train Your Representatives

The employees (both senior and support) who are charged with executing the company's trade show strategy will be better equipped to meet their mandate if they are properly trained. Your staff should know the products on display and how to answer questions about them, they should be trained in sales and techniques for engaging the inquiring but not committed browser, they should be taught how to be playful (in the spirit of the mood of the trade show) without coming off as goofy or unprofessional, and they

should be aware of the processes and procedures they need to engage in order to qualify a lead and place it in the qualified leads pile (to be followed up upon after the trade show). What you do not want is to provide your team with an incentive to gather as many business cards as possible, even if the person doesn't want any additional information (but has to give his business card in order to get the free t-shirt). Unqualified or down right false leads will only burden your follow up effort after the show.

4. Make Some Noise

Trade shows are like mini-festivals and you are allowed – indeed encouraged within reason – to make some noise and draw some attention to your company. Whether you elect to do so by sponsoring an event or lecture, giving a lecture, running a contest, distributing shirts and buttons for people to wear, or holding a parade through the center of the exhibition hall, all of these are fair game and make sure that everybody attending knows your company is there too.

5. Get Covered

Keep in mind that trade shows are being covered by the industry (and sometimes general) press and they are excellent opportunities to gain coverage. Use the trade show to launch a new product, make a new offer, introduce a new executive or any other event that would merit press coverage. Being selected for coverage at a trade show has more mileage than typical coverage because you will be viewed as being selected from among all your industry peers.

6. Remember When the Show Ends

The trade show isn't over just because you have folded up your booth and gone home. The show is not over until you have completed all the follow up and contacted all the qualified leads you gathered. Only then can you review the show and determine whether your performance was maximized and the show worthwhile.

Trade shows are just one of the many marketing tricks you have in your integrated strategy, but under the right circumstances and when executed well, they can also be among the most cost effective and useful. Your company should use the trade show when appropriate, always making certain that you enter with a plan, execute well, and follow up.