

Trading

How to Get the Most Out of Trade Shows

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MARKETING PROFESSIONALS often offer advice on how to get better results from trade shows. We have all heard standard show wisdom like “Have a compelling display, always stand up in your booth and don’t chew gum, and be sure to capture leads.”

Here are some less commonly known tips to ensure that those days spent out of the office with sore feet, “booth breath” and no sleep really do pay off for you and your business.

Trade shows have four purposes for exhibitors and attendees:

Commerce. Shows are the ultimate business “shopping malls.” At the end of the day, commerce is how most business people measure success (e.g., how many “deals” did I do at or right after the show?) Although every marketing activity should be evaluated in terms of payback, some business people will consider a show a failure if it does not deliver immediate financial results. This can be shortsighted, because the true value of trade shows lies in longer-term benefits and the three areas below.

Creative Thinking. At shows with conferences or a keynote, thought leaders reveal trends that will affect your industry. New products are frequently launched at shows. Use both these opportunities to re-energize and gather new ideas for your business.

Deborah Hilfman, Group Show Manager at George Little Management, recommends that businesses “be open to traveling to shows outside their region – both domestically and internationally.” It can lead to new resources and new opportunities.

Community. Trade shows are terrific places to network and re-connect with old contacts. You can pick up industry best practices, recruit new talent, and discuss trends with people who have similar concerns and interests.

Celebration. After-hours entertainment can lead to new relationships and solidify existing ones. Many companies use shows as an opportunity to spend quality time with their teams, clients, suppliers and prospects – away from office pressures.

Before you go to a show, think about how your business, marketing, and sales strategies will support each of those purposes. After you get back, write down all the new things you learned and people you met at the show. If you spent your time wisely, that list will be long and powerful.

Publish your notes and recommendations before you get back to the office and e-mail them to your colleagues who were unable to attend.

ATTENTIVE ATTENDANCE

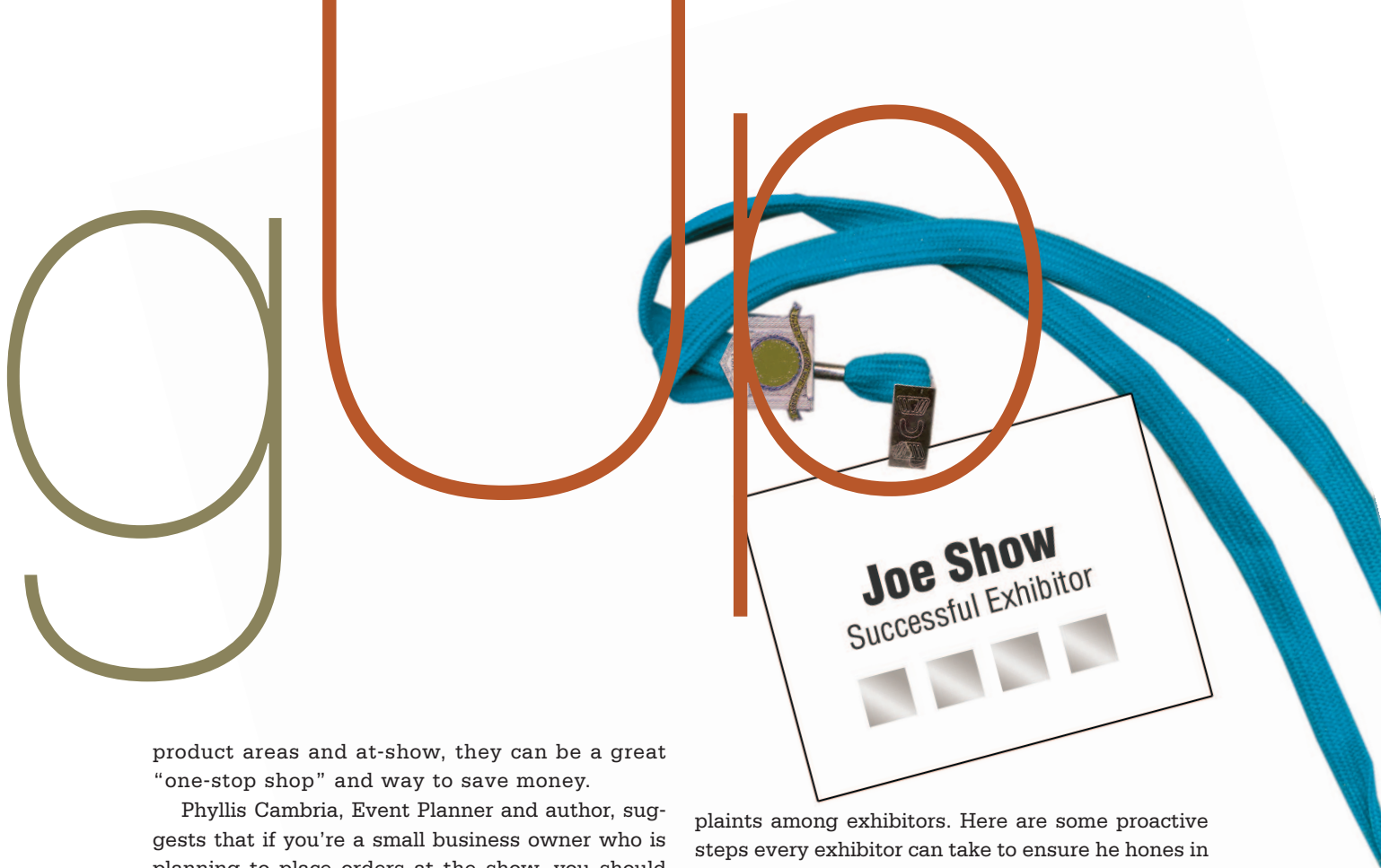
Going to a show should be approached much like visiting a new country on vacation. Before you leave, research and plan for how you will spend your time and plot out the roadmap for your on-site travels.

Ask yourself:

- What am I looking to buy or window shop?
- Who do I want to meet?
- What do I want to learn?
- How much time should I spend doing each of these things?

In effect, you’re creating a “mini business plan” for the show; one that you can use to ultimately measure if your time and money were well spent.

If you are going primarily to buy products and services, carefully study the exhibitor list (usually available on the show’s website) and note the “must see” companies. Allow some time to simply wander the aisles. If you are pressed for time, look for new



product areas and at-show, they can be a great “one-stop shop” and way to save money.

Phyllis Cambria, Event Planner and author, suggests that if you're a small business owner who is planning to place orders at the show, you should attend with a colleague who owns a similar business. “By placing a larger order, you'll be able to bargain for better pricing.”

Be sure to carefully review the conference program. Speakers and panelists may be people you want to meet. Most speakers are willing to stay after their sessions to mingle. (Do not cross that fine line between “networking” and “hounding, however”)

Keep in mind too that many of the other conference attendees are potential contacts and prospects. Read nametags and seat yourself next to interesting people. If you get to the session early, you'll have schmooze time.

Trade show registration lines, lunch areas, hotel bars and gyms, shuttles to and from the show, and after-hours receptions are also all great places to mingle and meet.

A word of caution for show attendees: Do NOT attempt to sell your services to exhibitors at their booths. They are at the show to sell, not to buy. Be respectful of their time and resources.

EXHIBIT INTELLIGENCE

If you are an exhibitor, look way beyond your booth. Your piece of real estate on the show floor and presence in it is just one aspect of your marketing strategy. Pay attention to your base of operation, but spend time and strategic energy on what is happening beyond the booth “walls.”

“I didn't get enough traffic” and “The right people just weren't there” are the most common com-

plaints among exhibitors. Here are some proactive steps every exhibitor can take to ensure he hones in on the right prospects.

1. Work closely with the show organizer on developing marketing opportunities. Consider sponsorships of events, online marketing, on-site signage and promotion, PR, and other ways to make your business and brand more visible before, during and after the show. Greg Topalian, Group VP at Reed Exhibitions emphasizes, “Most show organizers will customize a package that targets the exact titles of buyers you're looking to attract, and will help you build a plan to drive them to your booth.”

One of Cambria's recommendations for at-show promotion is the tried and true “heavy-duty fabric tote bag.” “These are practical giveaways that attendees will value...plus they will be moving advertisements for your company” at and after the show.

Ask about speaking opportunities too. Most shows do not want speakers who are just going to “hawk product,” but if someone at your company is a thought-leader and can deliver an objective educational session, that can be great exposure. (Of course, at the end of the talk, you can always say, “If you have any other questions for me, please visit me at my company's booth”)

2. Pre-market: Most shows will make their attendee lists available before the show. Even if you have no plans to do a pre-mailing, that database is valuable! The final list of attendees is often available for rent as well.

Pay careful attention to how you describe your company in the show's directory. Many attendees use these guides before and after the show to source suppliers. If your write-up is not descriptive, specific, and compelling, you may be overlooked.

3. Review the floor plan: Get a good sense of who else is exhibiting (especially competitors) and which companies are located nearby. You might even consider co-op promotions and lead referrals with complementary exhibitors.

4. Be sure you have news. If your booth is identical year after year, it becomes boring to attendees. The media also look for new and hot products at the show. Make sure you're on the "must see" list. Cambria advises exhibitors "to offer show specials to encourage attendees to place discounted orders immediately or within days of the show."

5. Look for creative ways to draw traffic to your booth. By attending trade shows in other industries (that have little to do with your own business), you can often pick up creative ideas for driving traffic. Gatherings like the BizBash Event & Style Show and TS2, because they are focused exclusively on the event industry, can be great places to expand your mind. Engaging the services of professional marketing companies to help with your show concept can also breathe new life into a stale trade show presence. Even simple ideas can be powerful.

Creative food and games add warmth and fun to a booth and create opportunities for prospects to "linger" and for you to meet them. Maui Wowi served custom smoothies to attendees at the Legal Tech Show and Amusitronix provides interactive virtual reality games (like hang gliding flight simulators and roller coasters) for exhibitors. Waiting time can also mean relationship-building time for your booth staff.

6. Spend time on building business, not building your booth. Lana Shaken, the Special Events and Facility Manager for Penn Plaza Pavilion Exhibition Hall, stresses that exhibitors can save both time and money by reading and understanding the specific rules and requirements of the venue, to prevent misunderstandings or last-minute orders.

7. Listen, listen, listen...and then listen some more. Marc Sherer, President of Event Management, says, "Too often exhibitors are so intent on getting their message out that they lose sight of the need to create a relationship. Like in a marriage, you need to listen, understand and then (maybe) speak." Hilfman adds, "Treat everyone who enters the booth with the same level of respect. The old adage, 'Don't judge a book by its cover' is central to a successful business."

You may consider conducting a survey or holding focus groups during a trade show. Be sure to offer a compelling incentive for responders too.

8. Get out there! Assign at least one person to "work the floor" at all times. If you don't have adequate internal staffing, engage the services of a publicist or marketing company. Some of your best prospects may be in conference sessions, lunch areas, or some of the "mingling areas" noted above.

9. Hold team meetings to troubleshoot and brainstorm. Of course, your booth staff will be exhausted and drained after standing and selling for hours on end. But try to find a time (like breakfast) when you are refreshed and can all get together to talk about what's working and what's not, share ideas, and lay out your game plan for the rest of the show. If you have significant issues, consider engaging the show organizer in your discussion. They will, of course, want you to return next year so if you are experiencing problems; they need to know about them immediately.

10. Hang in there. No matter how burned out you are, never close your booth prior to show's end, advises Hilfman. "One of our exhibitors got a substantial order from a booth visitor two minutes before the floor closed. That was the start of a long, profitable, relationship. You never know who your last visitor is going to be."

KEEP THE SHOW ALIVE, 365

Both attendees and exhibitors meet this same challenge — you get back to your office and have 100's of e-mails (at least) to deal with. Papers, meetings, and messages have accumulated. You have to return to your "real job."

Do not let those few valuable trade show days fade into distant memories. Resolve to build on the leads you generated, the ideas you collected, and the people you met. Keep the show directory in a prominent place on your bookshelf as a reminder. Register early for the next year's show (or, if you decide not to return, research alternative shows). Provide feedback to the show organizers, so they know what needs improvement. Set an hour each week for "trade show follow-up" and don't sacrifice it for other business priorities.

Whether you attend one or 100 shows a year, these time-tested strategies will ensure there's "no business like show business."

Nancy A. Shenker, Founder and Principal of theONswitch (www.theonswitch.com) is a marketing professional who has spent most of her 30-year career involved in some aspect of events and trade shows — as an exhibitor, attendee, and in show management. theONswitch provides creative strategies and services (marketing plans, PR, events, websites, and more) to a wide range of companies and industries. Nancy was Senior VP of Marketing at Reed Exhibitions and has also held executive positions at Citigroup and MasterCard and in the publishing industry. •

She is the author of "Your Handy Dandy Guide to the Web" and "Your Handy Dandy Guide to Trade Shows" (November 2001). She lectures on marketing topics at NYU, Trump University, and professional conferences. Reach her at nancys@theonswitch.com.

Helpful Resources for Exhibitors/Attendees

The Handy Dandy Guide to the Web (pre-order at www.theonswitch.com; to be published in November 2007)

- www.bizbash.com
- <http://www.exhibitoronline.com/>
- <http://www.tsea.org/>
- <http://www.tsnn.com/>
- <http://www.ts2show.com/>