

The seven steps to successful exhibiting

It's generally considered that, for face-to-face marketing, exhibitions, conferences and confexes are one of the most effective media in the marketing mix

NO OTHER media offers the opportunity to maximise sales, marketing, research, branding, financial, and other rewards for companies that understand some important exhibition marketing fundamentals. Executives consistently rank exhibitions as their prime choice for obtaining purchasing information, beating 12 other business media choices, including direct mail and advertising.

Exhibitions are the only sales and marketing medium that delivers a pre-qualified visitor to your company's stand in a face-to-face selling environment. And these visitors invest their own time and expenses to be at the exhibition. This is truly outstanding.

But it can all go horribly wrong if you don't follow some basic rules.

STEP 1 Selecting the Right Exhibition

Seems pretty basic, but with more than 50,000 b2b exhibitions held each year, so many companies exhibit in events that have no bearing on the trade sector in which they operate.

Choosing the event that matches your company's objectives is your first step towards success.

How to select the right event

- ❶ Focus on those global exhibitions offered in the industry sector that are appropriate for your company and importance within that sector, as well as their local, national, or international appeal.
- ❷ If your competition is exhibiting in these events, it may be a good indicator that you should consider exhibiting.
- ❸ Carefully review the audience demographics. Do your customers attend the exhibition?
- ❹ Be sure that the company producing the exhibition has a good reputation.
- ❺ The total geographical area served by the exhibition should match your marketing needs.
- ❻ Consider accessibility to the exhibition.
- ❼ Finally, the time of year the exhibition will be held and political considerations can be important factors.

STEP 2 Set Objectives

A major advance towards exhibiting success is establishing objectives for participation at an event. Objectives provide direction for every aspect of your company's exhibition participation: your marketing strategies, branding plans, budgets, exhibit architecture, graphics, products, literature, IT support and the necessary staff.

Truth is that 71 per cent of companies do not set objectives or plan strategies for their participation. Even worse, only half of these companies with objectives ever follow through on their stand.



Companies that do establish and measure objectives consistently achieve great success.

Basic Objectives

- ① Increase sales through new orders or qualified trade show leads
- ② Introduce new products or services
- ③ Enhance your relationships with current customers
- ④ Conduct market research
- ⑤ Obtain contact names for the company's email list
- ⑥ Open new markets or territories
- ⑦ Gain media exposure

STEP 3 Marketing

Marketing is the next important step in exhibition success. In theory, it's quite simple: you contact the visitors you want to see at an exhibition and tell them where your stand is located.

However, it's important to be realistic about the number of visitors you can expect to meet at any exhibition. You must understand that not every visitor has an interest in what your company is exhibiting. In fact, research proves that approximately 15 per cent of an exhibition audience has general interests in any product or service category. To be certain in your exhibition planning, consider 10 per cent as your specific target audience.

Visitor Categories

- ① Buyers
- ② Specifiers
- ③ Press
- ④ VIPs or opinion makers
- ⑤ International visitors
- ⑥ Students, who may be influential buyers in the future
- ⑦ Others involved with the industry

STEP 4 Communications with Visitors

A recent study of the most successful companies at exhibitions found that they had one thing in common: they all engaged in pre-show promotion, or target marketing. Some companies mistakenly think that the organiser is solely responsible for getting a quality audience to the event.

Smart exhibitors know that they share the responsibility and promotions are the key. The bottom line is that everything you do in advance pays real dividends at the show.

Visitors spend their own money and give up valuable time to be at the exhibition so you must do everything possible to make their investment worth the effort.

At a typical exhibition:

40 per cent of the audience is attending for the first time.

50 per cent of these important buyers and/or purchasing specifiers will not attend another exhibition in the year ahead.

88 per cent of your prospects were probably not contacted by one of your field sales representatives in the previous year.

83 per cent of the visitors use show 'previews' to help them plan their visit.

60 per cent of a typical exhibition audience has been attending for two or more consecutive years.

53 per cent is the figure that an effective direct mail programme can increase visitors to your exhibition.

18 per cent of visitors attended an exhibition because some exhibiting company gave them a complimentary pass.

69 per cent of visitors want to see what their competition was doing.

66 per cent of visitors attend an event to support their exhibition staff.

80 per cent of leads gathered at shows are not followed up. So you need to let these new prospects know about your participation.

How to market yourself:

Advertise in pre-show publications – both print and electronic – and special show issues of your industry's trade journals.

Offer 'show specials' or other promotions:

■ Take advantage of all the new promotion opportunities on the Internet.

■ Personalised direct mail is a highly effective motivator and you should try to send at least three mailings.

■ Give-aways, or speciality items, creatively used in conjunction with direct mail are an effective way of getting people to your stand.

■ Advertising is important because it reinforces your show presence and enhances your company's recognition.

■ Newsletters are an effective way to promote your participation in an exhibition. It should be easy to read and be filled with valuable information.

■ Sponsorships are particularly effective in demonstrating your support for an exhibition. Be sure that the sponsorship package offers opportunities for increased exposure for your company.

STEP 5 Management Perspectives

Never doubt that your pre-show activity is worth the effort, since 75 per cent of all visitors arrive at an exhibition with a predetermined agenda as to whom they plan to see and very often what they plan to evaluate and buy. You want your company to be one of them and pre-show promotions are the best way to do that.

Also, for the larger shows where visitors must be highly efficient with their time, they are greatly influenced by what they see/ hear prior to the show.

STEP 6 Your Staff

Often the only factor differentiating companies with similar quality products/services from their competitors is their staff. Your people are your ambassadors. Everything they say and do can make or break relationships with customers.

Consider this:

■ How prepared are your people to work in this unique selling environment?

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'Who wants to Be a millionaire?' – give the attendees something to get involved with, and you'll change your exhibit from a display into an interactive experience

- Dressing unprofessionally
- Overindulging after hours
- Ignoring visitors
- Appearing unapproachable
- Handing out literature/give-aways without talking to people
- Judging by appearances
- Chit-chatting with colleagues
- Respect your guests
- Make sure that you are energetic, enthusiastic and friendly with visitors
- Be attentive to your guests
- Convey the right impression both verbally and non-verbally

STEP Your Stand

The design and presentation of your stand can give you a competitive advantage at events. People want to interact – not just be passive observers at shows. When people leave your exhibit, they should be able to say, 'Here's what I learned, and this is what I am going to change.'

Research has found that people like to compare what they are doing to what other people are doing. Some of the ideas that work are two-minute games to test knowledge. Many exhibits use the 'Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?' format with answers related to their business. Give the attendees something to get involved with, and you'll change your exhibit from a display into an interactive experience.

This will make your stand different from 80 per cent of other exhibits. ■

■ How suitable are they to represent your organisation?

■ How effective are they at qualifying prospects?

■ How much training do you give full-time and temporary staff on how to exhibit themselves at an event?

■ At an event professionalism is a must. Conduct yourself appropriately and refrain from certain behaviours that may appear unprofessional or offensive.

Keep the following in mind:

Be your best

■ Make sure you are clear about your planned schedule for manning the booth or any other activities.

■ Know what other activities of interest are occurring and at what times so you can attend.

■ Decide on a sleep schedule that allows you to get plenty of rest.

■ Be sure to schedule time to eat before exhibit hours—and don't forget to drink plenty of water.

■ Plan to take breaks when you need them.

Adopt appropriate booth conduct by refraining from:

- Using cell phones
- Sitting (unless talking with a customer)
- Smoking
- Eating
- Chewing gum