**Making the Most of Your Trade Show Presence**

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You probably know that participating in a trade show can be a business development bonanza or bust.

Whether you’re exhibiting on a 6-foot table at a half-day local networking event or in a fancy booth at a multi-day expo and convention, you can maximize the returns starting with your preparation process.

Here are some points to keep in mind, culled from various pundits and trade show gurus, as you gear up for an event. We’ve also provided links to more detailed resources to help guide you through the preparatory process.

**Set Your Goals**

Your goals for participating in a business event should be clear even before you decide which event(s) you’ll participate in. It’s hard to identify the best venue if your expectations are unclear. Clear goals guide your focus and priorities before, during, and after the event.

Is your aim to win new clients/customers? Get media attention for a new product or service? Raise brand awareness? Identify potential partnerships? Knowing what you want to accomplish will allow you to develop relevant benchmarks for evaluating your results once the show is over.

**Generate Leads/Schedule Meetings**

Don’t wait until the event to introduce yourself.Examine the attendee and exhibitor lists. Who do you want to see and be seen by? Reach out in advance by phone, email, social media, and U.S. mail. Try to schedule meetings ahead of time with key targets. And remember: the best “pitch” is the one that answers the question, “What can you do for me?” A little more on that later.

**Publicize Your Participation**

Get the word out early and often through your newsletter, emails, website, blog and social media outlets. Consider creating a special landing page on your website for sharing event-related updates. Issue a press release to trade publications, local newspapers and other media as appropriate with a timely, newsworthy hook; they’ll appreciate a good story tip.

And take advantage of any marketing opportunities the show organizer offers to exhibitors, such as media outreach and an enhanced listing on the event’s mobile app, directory, or show map.

**Stand Out**

What can you do to differentiate yourself from other exhibitors, generate buzz, and make it hard to pass by your table or booth without stopping? You don’t want to improvise here. Branded giveaways, samples, contests, visuals and demos can reel people in; then it’s up to you to engage them.

**Build Yourself a “Benefit Statement”**

So how do you engage potential clients, referral sources and partners? By quickly communicating what you can do for them. Experts recommend crafting a brief, descriptive statement (5-7 seconds) that helps decision-makers, influencers, and referral sources grasp the benefits of your product(s)/service(s).

**Are you Getting the Most From Your Trade Show Experience?**

Exhibiting at a trade show can have countless benefits for your business. Regardless of how big or small your presence, trade shows give you a powerful platform for meeting new customers, reaching out to existing clients, checking out what your competitors are up to, building relationships with key press contacts, discovering new partner opportunities and creating visibility for your brand. According to Forrester Research, in-person trade shows, conferences, industry events and seminars comprised the majority of B2B marketing budgets in 2014, representing 20%.

A lot of businesses avoid trade shows because of the costs traditionally associated with them. It’s true – developing a great trade show presence, training your staff, and travel to the event itself isn’t a cheap process. However, with the right strategy, a trade show can be a very viable and profitable mechanism to increase awareness and generate highly targeted business leads. That’s why we have put together a list of pre-event, on-site and post-event actions to help make your next trade show a success.

**Pre-Event Marketing**

**Define your goals for the show**. It is important that everyone on your team agrees to the overall goals of the trade show. Goals could be anything from obtaining a set number of leads to educating the media about your company or product/service. Determining your goals will determine your overall event strategy.

**Leverage your existing database.** Let your prospects and existing clients know that you are attending the event and invite them to stop by. Give them an idea of what they can expect to find at your booth and any additional conference activities – such as break-out presentations or hospitality events – you will be involved in. You can also give them a special code to bring by the booth for a giveaway.

**Establish one-on-one meetings.** Make sure to secure an on- or off-site meeting room along with a detailed calendar for one-on-one meetings with prospects, clients, press and partners prior to the event. Setting dedicated times to meet is a great way of demonstrating your interest in someone as well as adding structure to the hectic schedules of your event staff.

**Promote your event involvement online.** Take advantage of your website and social media channels to share that you will be exhibiting, attending, sponsoring or speaking at the event. Consider leveraging existing online communities where prospects are already gathering and interacting as well. For example, a healthcare software start-up might advertise their sponsorship at a tradeshow in an eNewsletter circulated by a leading industry publication or make an announcement within a LinkedIn group they belong to. Investigate including your logo on the actual event website plus pre-event emails and other communications.

**Plan out your exhibit space.** You want to invite people into your space and make them feel welcome. You also want to consider additional variables that can contribute to a successful booth. Think about presentations or demos that you will want to have. Will there be technology requirements that you need to consider? Are you going to need an open space for conversations, large giveaways or collateral that will be handed out? Verify the size of your exhibit space and avoid stuffing your booth with furniture and material. To ensure that you do not overcrowd the booth, map it out ahead of time by using tape on the floor.

**On-Site Marketing**

**Talk to everyone, everywhere.** Networking is the name of the game at industry events. Take advantage of connecting with presenters, talking to other exhibitors, attending lunches and social events. Exchange contact information with everyone. You never know who you may want to get in touch with after the show. Also, make it a point to befriend the event organizers and staff. They can potentially help you locate someone or drive them to your booth.

**Listen more than you speak.** After sharing your quick pre-planned talking points with attendees, allow them to do most of the talking. You have the best chance of continuing the conversation and closing a deal when you listen to their needs and explain how your product or service will fit those needs.

**Make subject matter experts available.** Take the time to ensure that all booth staffers are ready to represent your company and provide the right information to attendees. Consider a mix of the sales, product managers, marketing and executive team for the event in case attendees or media representatives want to dive deep in to certain aspects of your business. And, of course, ensure everyone has the pre-planned talking points prior to the event so that key messages can be consistently reinforced.

**Do something to set yourself apart.** Consider making your booth stand out by doing something creative. Set up a station to recharge mobile phones or provide drinks and snacks. Break away from the traditional swag or giveaway. If you provide value to the conference attendees, you have a greater chance of being the most popular.

**Host or sponsor an on-site event.** Enhance the attendee experience by hosting a small breakfast event, training event or sponsoring a workshop. If the content is good, attendees will come.

**Post-Event Marketing**

**Follow up with everyone**. This should go without saying, but reach out to your new contacts as soon as possible after the conclusion of the conference. Shoot them an email or connect with them on LinkedIn. Following up promptly is key to successfully maximizing your new contacts. If there were clients you met there, write them a handwritten note. The personal touch will go a long way.

**Have a solid content marketing and nurturing plan.** Content is always going to be a main attraction, so keep newly found contacts interested and engaged with relevant, targeted content.

**Evaluate the event.** Did you reach your preset goals? What worked well or didn’t work well? Did anyone make note of new ideas that could be implemented in your own exhibit or campaign? Have a follow-up meeting to gather feedback from the team in order to improve the event and process for the next one. Continue to track the leads through the sales funnel and ultimately the event’s return on investment.

Pulling off a successful trade show is not an easy task, but with the right preparation and strategy, you can utilize trade shows to increase brand awareness, generate leads, and maximize your return on investment. These tips should help you achieve strong results at your upcoming events – making them well worth the investment.