

## Getting the most out of your trade show effort.

### Quick Tips:

- Start planning early
- Define goals and objectives
- Put your plan in writing
- Stick to your schedule
- Promote your participation
- Extend your post-show effort

I am always amazed when I meet otherwise smart business people who simply show up at a trade show, set up their exhibit and hope that the valuable customers they seek will appear as if by magic. As an integral part of your sales and marketing strategy, a show deserves a good deal of forethought. A well planned, strategic approach to your company's participation in a trade show is the key to a successful event. A timely, proactive effort is essential in achieving the positive attention you desire; advanced planning can be the single most important factor in transforming a trade show into a truly valuable business opportunity. The process of jotting down a simple plan, budget and schedule well in advance can work wonders.

### Start early and think strategically

The first step in planning a more successful event includes asking the following: How will you use the trade show as part of your overall marketing and sales strategy, and what are your specific objectives (introducing a new technology, generating a certain number of leads, presenting a new product, securing trade publicity, touching base with valued customers, etc.) Next, develop a benefits-oriented sales message that gets across the key points you wish to communicate in a minute or less. Every person working your exhibit must be able to execute on this.

### Get the messaging right

How and what you communicate about your company is critical to your success. Decide on a central message, and if possible, condense it down to ten words or less. The graphics and signage serve as support for this singular message. Don't try to cover too much or go into granular detail. Remember: everything at your exhibit must be designed to facilitate face-to-face communication.

### Promotion works

An organized promotional effort is key to maximizing your success. With so much going on before the show (booth design, construction, graphics, multimedia, shipping, labor, etc.) it is very easy to put off promotion until it is too late to be effective. Promoting to your customers can be achieved in a variety of ways and adaptable to every budget; the following are a couple of ideas.



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■ **Talk is cheap - literally!** Nothing is less expensive nor more effective than a personal invitation. Field service personnel talk to customers all the time; sales persons are on the phone constantly, your admins speak with your customer's admins, executives meet for lunch. Practically everyone in your organization having contact with your customers can pass the word. And enthusiasm about an upcoming show can be contagious. Spread the word internally to spread the word externally.

■ **Direct mail can be very cost effective.** Your effort can be as simple as a personal invitation written on business letterhead or as elaborate (themed invitations, maps, game pieces, food and beverage vouchers, etc.) as you wish. Just remember to include the following information: 1) Booth number and hall location 2) Products you will be exhibiting 3) Demonstrations and the time of day you will be conducting them 4) Hospitality events. You can also mention refreshments, games, give-aways, key personnel in attendance, press conference, etc., if these are planned. Make sure you send invitations to media contacts as well.

■ **Advertising and public relations.** Most trade journals feature “show issues” that are published just prior to events they cover. Advertising in these issues can be very helpful in driving attendance to your exhibit - remember to include booth number and products you intend to introduce. Show dailies are a consideration as well. Press releases discussing the products you plan to roll out, new executives you plan to introduce or innovative technology you plan to exhibit can be very useful for generating pre-show excitement. Have your press kits ready with your latest news, product literature and an updated company backgrounder. Advertising must be planned in advance; PR must be planned *well* in advance!

■ **Special events.** Hospitality suites and other off-site events can be a valuable adjunct to your show effort. Whether you plan an elegant dinner for a small number of key customers, breakfast for members of the trade press, or a full-on shin dig, planning well in advance saves money and prevents headaches. Remember, time is precious at a trade show; make certain your event “content” will justify the time committed by your guests.

When all is said and done

Even after your exhibit is back into crates, the business opportunity is not over by a long shot. Each company has a particular method for dealing with the leads that result from a trade show; extend the excitement and enthusiasm of the show to your follow-up process. Post-show direct marketing and public relations are powerful tools in solidifying your successful show effort. Make sure the follow-up materials go out in a timely fashion. Send notes to both attendees and non-attendees. Extend the interest created by your company and products as long as possible; for some, the “big” show happens only once a year.

## Planning guide and time line

### ***9 to 12 months preceding event***

- Identify your space needs and the type of exhibit and display you will need.
- Register and reserve your space and request a complete exhibitor package
- Develop a trade show marketing plan and budget

### ***6 to 9 months preceding event***

- Determine strategy and develop core messaging
- Select vendors and begin design work for display booth, banners, etc
- Determine the literature and marketing materials you will need at the show

### ***3 to 6 months preceding event***

- Choose and order giveaways or promotional items
- Continue working with vendors on your display booth, exhibit items, and marketing materials, confirm delivery dates
- Determine staffing requirements and schedules, plan training sessions
- Arrange for shipping your display, products and other items to the show
- Begin making travel arrangements
- Launch pre-show marketing initiatives (direct marketing, PR, advertising, etc)
- Schedule hospitality suite, dinners or other off-site events with prospects, distributors, customers, media, etc

### ***1 to 3 months preceding event***

- Prepare follow-ups to send to your show leads immediately after the event
- Complete pre-show marketing activities (reserve ad space - mail invitations)
- Finalize all travel arrangements
- Finalize exhibit, show labor, electrical, carpet, furniture, food/beverage service

### ***1 week preceding event***

- Confirm shipping arrival dates for your booth display, promotional items. etc.
- Double check that all previous action steps on timeline have been achieved

### ***Follow-up Activities:***

- Analyze leads, send follow-up packets, and make contact as appropriate.
- Evaluate success of trade show participation compared with objectives
- Compare your actual expense to your show budget.
- Review number and quality of leads and determine your return on investment.