

Tips for a Successful Trade Show

Many companies live or die by trade shows. Trade shows provide an opportunity to meet many prospective customers, vendors and associates at one place and time, allowing businesses to conduct a lot of business in a short period of time.

Trade shows require a significant investment of time and money. The key to maximizing a trade show's effectiveness is to plan well in advance, promote the fact that you will be exhibiting at the show, and be organized so as to maximize your time. If one of your goals is to get more high-quality sales leads, consider using these techniques.

PRE-SHOW

Evaluate and select trade shows carefully. Are the show's attendees likely prospects for your products or services? It's better to have a few very qualified leads than many from people who are not real prospects.

Set measurable goals

You can't determine the success of your exhibit without first knowing what you want to achieve.

Marketing, sales and advertising personnel, as well as your exhibit vendor, should be involved in establishing the purpose of exhibiting. Make your goals as specific as possible. If you can sell at the show, how many sales do you expect? If direct sales are prohibited, how many qualified leads do you hope to generate? What is your definition of a qualified lead?

Put your show plan in writing

This plan should include a workable schedule and designate responsibilities for each task. Don't wait until the last minute, and be sure management signs off on the plan.

Develop a key message for your exhibit

Like good advertising, a good exhibit communicates one major message clearly. This is more effective at drawing prospects to your booth than the cluttered image projected by companies trying to communicate too much.

Design an open, inviting booth

Don't block access with tables and counters; you want to draw people into your booth. Use interesting graphics to engage them. If space permits, provide comfortable chairs to encourage prospects to linger.

Identify key prospects and invite them

Mail your customers and prospects complimentary passes to the exhibits, often available free from show management. Call and remind them to shop by your booth. Be sure to pique their interest by telling them about new products or services.

Merchandise your show participation

Include tag lines in your ads such as; "See us at Booth 1525 at Widgets Expo." Include free exhibit passes with your inquiry response materials. Write a press release explaining new products or services to be introduced at upcoming shows. Invite editors to stop by or schedule specific appointments with your key people. Publish an article in your company newsletter listing trade shows and conferences at which you plan to exhibit.

Train your exhibit staff before each show

They need to know what is expected of them. They also need to have detailed information about any new products, services or company policies being announced.

Design a custom lead form

Be sure to include questions designed to qualify your prospects by determining the immediacy of their needs, purchasing authority, budgetary situation, etc.

SHOW-TIME

Create a unique identity for booth personnel

Matching blazers, T-shirts, cowboy hats (for a Western theme) or even boutonnieres will identify your people to prospects who need information or assistance.

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Offer samples or premiums

Merchandise your traffic-building giveaways through pre-show mailings. For example, include the cap portion of a high-quality pen in a pre-show mailing that invites customers and prospects to pick up the rest of the pen at your booth.

Provide live or video demonstrations

This will draw attendees to your booth and help them learn more about your company's products or services. It also allows you to effectively communicate to a number of prospects at once.

Remind the folks staffing your booth to record all prospect information

Encourage your people to record everything they can learn about the prospects' needs and applications. Stress the importance of getting phone numbers, fax numbers and email addresses whenever possible. Consider awarding prizes or special awards to your exhibit staff for the most completed leads turned in on each shift.

POST-SHOW

Send requested literature or samples immediately

Have literature ready to go before you head to the show. Then fax, email, or send leads from the show to your inquiry handlers overnight. Have them send the requested material to prospects within 24 hours. Fast response is your second opportunity to get a jump on the competition and make a favorable impression. (Your performance in the booth is the first.)

Include a teaser on the envelope

Something Like "Requested Information from Widgets Expo" works well to get the package past the assistant (or wastebasket) and into the prospects' hands.

Help your prospects take the next step

Make sure your literature packages make it easy for prospects to take the next step by including 'where-to-buy' details, including the names, addresses, phone and fax numbers and email addresses of your sales offices, dealers or distributors.

Use the telephone, mail and email to follow up

Your goal is to build sales-winning relationships with your prospects and further qualify them. Telemarketing and direct mail (including e-mail) are cost-effective and efficient ways to do this.

Track your leads through to the sale

Did the qualified prospects buy? How much? Use the answers to demonstrate to management the show's return on investment, and to increase the odds of show budget approval next year.

Complete a critical evaluation

After each show, look at what went well; what didn't. Critique each aspect of the show and ask salespeople and other participants for comments. Give special attention to the feedback pertaining to lead quality. This information will help you maximize the effectiveness of future show efforts.

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