

GROWING YOUR BUSINESS WITH **TRADE SHOWS**

As the economy starts to rebound, the question in front of most CEOs is "How can I replace my clients that are no longer in business while taking advantage of this resurgence?"

One of the easiest ways to increase your business is by attending trade shows. A trade show allows you to not only connect with a large number of your current customers in a cost effective way, but it allows you to present your solutions to clients who currently deal with your competitors.

Trade Show Power

With various marketing tools available, trade shows are still far and away the most effective way to meet new customers. A trade show gives you the best opportunity for personal contact - many committed buyers who are all under one roof at one time for the same reason - *to find solutions that will help their business!*

Some people have observed that overall trade show attendance is down over the past few years. Given the challenge of travel and security checks, this is not so surprising. However, for trade shows, this is really "good news" as it indicates that the "tire kickers" are staying home and only prospects with a *real need* to make changes in their business are attending.

One industry statistic that helps illustrate the opportunity is that over 85% of the average trade show audience is made up of final decision makers or those who influence the purchase of products and services (source: Exhibit Surveys Inc. Trade Show Bureau).

At a trade show you can not only strengthen relationships with existing customers but also reach out to new prospects that your sales staff have yet to call on. In a year of tight budgets, by meeting your clients at trade shows you may be able to eliminate travel expenses to outlying areas. You can also save considerable travel expenses if your senior management decides to meet your clients at the trade show rather than visiting offices across the country.

When you are at a trade show, your chances of generating a strong lead and closing a sale is much greater since you can present your product in your "showroom at the trade show" and develop a rapport in a manner not possible with other marketing methods such as web sites, direct mail or cold calling. In the confines of your exhibit, you can create the ideal environment to showcase your product or service in the best way possible.

You also have the opportunity to present your solutions to clients that are currently dealing with your competition, especially ones that would not normally invite you to their building for a presentation. If your competitors have decided not to attend a show, then it creates an even more exceptional opportunity.

Keep in mind, with the high cost of travel and accommodation, most show attendees have to justify their trip to management. This involves reporting on what is new and which new suppliers they should be considering.

About the Author

Brian Keobke, CME, is Senior Exhibit Marketing Specialist for The Portables, Canada's largest exhibit and graphics company. Brian is a Certified Manager of Exhibits (CME) and a 17 year veteran of the tradeshow industry. Brian consults, develops and trains companies and their staff in the art of effective tradeshow marketing and exhibit design. Brian's articles have appeared in newspapers and magazines across the country. To receive additional articles or to book an in-person seminar, please call 1.800.663.1737 or email displays@theportables.com. Articles also appear online at www.theportables.com.

It is important to note that attending a trade show in itself is not enough. To be truly effective, your program should integrate other marketing tools such as pre-show advertising and email reminders, personal invitations, information on your web site and appointments made by your sales force with key clients asking them to visit your exhibit when they attend the show.

Choosing the Right Show

If you can only exhibit at one show, then try to make it your industries' largest annual show. While it may cost more than other shows, the greatest number of target customers are likely to attend. Once you have decided on a show to attend, Marketing and Sales should establish sales objectives that you can be measured for future reference in analyzing your return on investment.

Working the Show

If you spend an hour preparing for a single meeting, how much time should you spend preparing for a thousand meetings?

A training session before the show will help your staff review the criteria for identifying and qualifying new clients, learning how to engage and disengage with attendees, how to collect lead information and to develop a short concise demonstration that presents your product efficiently.

You will find that most visitors are looking to evaluate new products or get solutions to specific problems. They will also use the show to make new contacts, and develop future purchasing decisions.

After the Show

Perhaps the most important aspect of a trade show is what you do after the show. To achieve the maximum return on investment your company expects, you will want to employ a formal follow-up system so that no qualified leads are overlooked.

A lot of customers will judge you and your company by the service "before the sale" if you cannot even follow their request for a follow-up call after the show, what will they think of your service and, in turn, your company in general?

Your competitors were undoubtedly at the same show talking to the same prospects. Your motivation to make the follow-up calls may be as simple as to "get to them before the competition does".

At the end of the day, if you don't follow up on your leads, then there really was no reason to attend the show in the first place! You might just as well stay home and let your competitors get the new business!