

20 Ways To Turn a So-So Show Into A Bonanza

by Robert Letwin

There is no trick to your getting a good return on your investment in a trade show exhibit. Hard work? Yes. Magic? No.

To make your exhibit pay off, there are dozens of things you have to do right. Here are 20 essentials, which could turn a so-so experience with trade shows into a bonanza. (They work for a select few companies who know what exhibiting is all about.)

1 Before you go into a trade show, make sure you know who attends.

Are they mostly engineers, technicians, high-level executives, purchasing agents, what? You have to have some idea of the numbers of the specific kinds of people you want to reach with your message. It may be that only 10% of the audience are the most important people to you, but it is important you know that in advance. Ask show management for attendance breakdowns. If management can't or won't tell you, don't go into the show until you visit it first and have an opportunity to see who comes, and to talk to other exhibitors about the audience.

The article originally appeared in Computer Publicity News in 1980. Because it continues to interest experienced exhibitors and newcomers alike, it is one of the most frequently requested items from the Bureau catalog of publications.

2 When you know the numbers to expect of the important people to you – then you must set an objective.

(Not one company in a hundred does this at all.) The objective should be in numbers. (Examples: We want to sell three systems at the show; or, we want to sign 12 up new dealers at the show; or, we want to have 240 people who express interest in our product and want a salesperson to call.) Your objective can be a combination of expectations, but it should always be in numbers. Otherwise, how would you know whether you succeeded? How else could you measure success objectively? You set your objectives based upon the number of your prospects that normally come to the show, the competition, the economy - whatever factors can affect a good sales call.

A good exhibit is, in a sense, an opportunity to make a special kind of sales call.

3 Buy enough space at the show to accommodate all the people you are trying to reach and all your sales, technical and executive personnel.

Since a trade show is an opportunity to make sales calls, you need room for people to talk to your prospects. With show management's help, you can estimate how many of your prime targets are going to be walking down the aisles every hour. Don't be stingy with space for your own personnel if the figures indicate there are a lot of important prospects they should be talking to.

4 Before the show opens, hold a meeting with everyone who is going to be in your booth – salespeople, engineers, company brass and others.

Often, 30 minutes or so before the show opens is time enough. At this meeting, make sure everyone knows what your goals are – in numbers. Assign not simply hours to be on duty, but how much of the objectives each of your booth personnel will be responsible for reaching each day of the show. Let them role play how they will handle prospects.

5 Consider an “annex ” to your exhibit in the headquarters hotel or nearby hotel where special prospects and customers can be given special attention.

This is not a “hospitality suite ” but a workshop or business environment where you can negotiate in private, examine equipment in fine detail -whatever will help your prospect make a wise buying decision.

6 Avoid games and unrelated giveaways (items that have nothing to do with your product.)

They attract crowds of the wrong people. The serious prospect is not interested in a lo-cent ruler or rolling the dice to win a 50-cent prize. The job of your exhibit design and operation is to **limit** idle curiosity of spouses, children and other non-buyers, not to attract them.

7 Assign responsibility to those involved with your exhibit program.

Examples: personnel selection and training for booth work; ordering an exhibit booth designed to fit your objectives; supplying directives to everyone involved so he/she knows your objectives and what each one is supposed to do before, during and after the show.

8 Reward high achievers

At your daily meetings, give away a small gift to those who beat their quotas and a gift to the person who did best for the day. The gift can be small; it's the recognition of high achievement that counts.

9 Check on other exhibits at the show.

Take time to examine which are getting the right kind of audience and which are failures and why. It will help you plan next time. Don't be fooled by big crowds. **Large crowds are not to be equated with success** unless you sell tooth paste or soap. The key to exhibit success is to attract only those people who could buy or recommend purchase of your products or services.

10 Have news releases in your booth to give to reporters and editors who stop by.

Make sure there is always someone on duty who can talk to someone from the media. Shows attract media people, and you miss important exposure if you are not prepared with the right people and information.

11 Promote your trade show participation in advance.

Send out invitations to visit your booth or “annex”: Have your ad agency alerted to include an invitation in your advertising long in advance – magazines go through the mail so slowly these days.

12 Make sure the message your exhibit conveys is directly related to your prospect's needs or concerns.

It's more important to address your prospect in the exhibit "header" than to have a startling logo in 17 colors. Tell your prospect how you can solve his/her problem in a few words - **big and prominent**. Company ego trips (names in big type, maps of plant locations, pictures of the founders) are of little interest to a buyer who is looking for an answer to a problem.

13 Consider the "fiddle factor."

Engineers and technicians love to touch equipment and examine parts minutely. They simply love to "fiddle" with things. So plan your exhibit so they can. Let them turn dials, look through a magnifying glass, feel the parts, and so on. If you are not trying to reach engineers and technicians, the "fiddle factor" is less important.

14 Have a telephone in your booth to be used for business only.

Make it a "hotline" to the home office. You can handle a customer's complaint immediately, or check on a delivery or get an answer to a technical question that no one in the booth can answer.

15 Use a demonstration in your booth.

Show the superiority - or difference - of your product. Find something it does better and demonstrate it. Demonstrations are the most cost effective ways to attract a worthwhile audience. Use a sledge hammer to pound a part to show its strength. Run a tape through boiling water and then into ice to show it will still function under extreme environmental conditions. Demonstrate anything that could make a difference to a buying decision. Don't use young women (or men) in bikinis to do it. Use technicians and engineers in white lab coats. Make the "demos" professional in appearance. Remember, the audience will put no more importance your demo than you do.

16 Monitor your booth's activity daily.

See what works and what doesn't. Maybe a sign should be changed because nobody is reading it. Maybe the seven features should all be on one sign instead of placed around the booth on seven signs. Be flexible. Change hours of duty if booth personnel are getting too tired or if the traffic pattern at the show is not what you intended. Don't consider your plans set in concrete. Look for clues of success or failure and use this knowledge constructively.

17 Meet with your booth personnel each day of the show - preferably right after the show's closing hour.

Discuss what each one did and what was learned. Share experiences so you can improve booth operations the next day.

18 Assign booth personnel in advance to seek out specific prospects or buyers who are visiting the show.

Have salespeople make appointments in advance to meet with VIPs at your booth or "annex": Don't trust to luck that important prospects will find you; arrange for them to meet with your people.

19 Talk to exhibitors in advance of the show to seek possible tie-ins.

You can use their equipment in your booth with appropriate signs, and they can use your product with a sign indicating your booth number and name. Sometimes you can get dozens of other exhibitors to use your product with extra exposure at a show.

After the show, evaluate everything you did and what happened.

Do it immediately or soon after the show when everyone's experience is fresh. A post-show meeting is valuable. It doesn't take long and it dredges up many ideas worth pursuing next time to give you sound reason for dropping the show or being more prominent.

See-there's no trick to having success. **There is a lot of hard work.** Those who try to "wing it" are usually those who complain bitterly about high costs and poor return. Those who know what to do seldom complain on their way to the bank.

REMEMBER...

1. Make sure you know who attends.
2. Set objectives with numbers.
3. Buy enough show space.
4. Hold a pre-show meeting.
5. Open a business "annex."
6. Avoid unrelated giveaways.
7. Assign exhibit responsibilities.
8. Reward high achievers.
9. Check out other exhibits.
10. Prepare news releases.
11. Promote in advance.
12. Clarify booth graphics.
13. Consider the "fiddle factor."
14. Install a telephone "hotline."
15. Demonstrate your product.
16. Monitor your booth's daily activity.
17. Hold daily debriefings.
18. Arrange appointments in advance.
19. Seek tie-ins with other exhibitors.
20. Evaluate your results.

The right attitude and the right preparation will generate solid trade show results for you. The Trade Show Bureau would like to suggest the following publications to help you prepare for success at your next show. They are a sampling of the million-dollar-plus library of research results and other publications that the Bureau makes available to members and the public.

Exhibiting by Objectives: A guide to setting objectives for trade shows and realizing them. Fred Kitzing.

You Make the Difference: A guide to getting sales results through trade shows. Kitzing.

Tradeshow Marketing and Sales 1: A system for selling in tradeshow. Kitzing.

Tradeshow Marketing and Sales 2: A guide to the many uses of tradeshow in business marketing. Kitzing.

How to Improve Your Sales Success at Trade Shows: Michael J. Hatch.