

Plan for Trade Show Success

By Brian Gallagher

Trade shows can be a very cost-effective method of reaching your prospects and customers. Successful trade show efforts, however, begin long before the show opens and end long after the show closes. A carefully orchestrated approach to your

trade show program can generate immediate results and contribute to your bottom line.

Goal Setting

Set specific, measurable goals for each trade show. Goals can be set in terms of number of contacts, qualified leads, presentations, and other specific metrics. Goals can also include vendor meetings, client entertainment, press meetings, competitive reviews, and recruiting.

Complete a Pre-Show Mailing

Most trade shows, production companies, and trade associations provide preregistered attendee lists for free or for a rental fee. A few weeks before the show, send the attendees postcards or letters inviting them to visit your booth. Some methods of maximizing traffic to your booth from these mailings include offers for a free item or discount, or the announcement of a drawing or a contest.

Train Your Staff Before Each Show

Every person working the show must understand your objective for being at the show. While educating your staff, provide profiles of anticipated attendees, identify their reasons for attending, and identify potential questions and answers. The booth staff also needs to be able to effectively answer questions, qualify leads, and operate lead retrieval systems.

You should also educate your staff on how to encourage traffic to your booth when you are at the show. As simple as it may seem, smiling at people as they walk by helps! You should also make your staff aware of potential traffic "stoppers," such as talking intently among themselves, reading newspapers or magazines in the booth, eating meals in the booth, and other behavior that might make them seem unapproachable.

Ask the Right Questions

Avoid asking, "Can I help you?" Ask your prospects effective, open-ended questions that will help qualify and quantify their interest. Engage them in conversation. If the prospect is a qualified lead, set the stage for the next step in the sales process. If he or she is interested in something specific, write it down! Lead-retrieval systems are a great help, but they are best for capturing general information. If a prospect wants something specific, writing it down is the only way you will ever remember it after the show is over.



Invest in a Decent Booth and Nice Graphics

Your display represents your company's image. Invest a few dollars to develop a display that is inviting and engaging. Display graphics should quickly and effectively communicate your company name and the services and products you offer. Trade show attendees make quick decisions while walking down crowded show aisles. Your goal is to get their attention and draw them into the booth.

Network, Network, Network

Trade shows are excellent networking events. If a visitor to your display is not the decision maker in his or her company, find out who is. Talk to fellow exhibitors, show personnel, the press, and others to identify business opportunities. This will maximize your effectiveness, even at a show where traffic seems somewhat slow.

Distribute Literature after the Show

Most prospects will be inundated with literature and brochures at the show. The majority of this material will end up in the hotel or convention center's trash cans. Instead, collect the prospects' information, qualify their needs, and promise to send them information within a few days. Once the show is over, make sure you send the information within 48 hours. However, keep some literature on hand for the prospects who need it at the show.

Follow up with Telemarketing

During the show, your staff collected valuable information about the prospect and his or her needs. If your staff did an effective job qualifying his or her interest, telemarketing should be the next step toward a closed sale. Inquiries and qualified leads should be maintained in a database for future use.

Shop the Competition

During the show, stop by your competition's display. See what they are exhibiting and how they approach their prospects. Observe how traffic is flowing through their booth.

Measure Trade Show ROI

Don't judge your trade show's success by counting leads. Take it a step further and count qualified leads, and find out how many leads turned into quotes and orders. This process may take a few months, but it will be a valuable tool when planning your marketing budget. Follow these simple steps before your next trade show and ensure your success.



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