

How To Improve Your Sales Success At Trade Shows

By Michael J. Hatch

How do some companies book thousands (even millions) of dollars in business or generate hundreds of sales leads at trade shows, while others seemingly stand around twiddling their thumbs?

Consider the following trade show scenario: Two companies with the same basic product, a similar floor location and typical exhibit and graphics; yet one has a booth full of eager prospects, while the other you could shoot a cannon through without disturbing a soul!

If it's not the product, exhibit, floor location or graphics, then what does make the difference? The answer, 9 times out of 10, is the sales people working the booth and how well they're *trained and prepared* to work the show.

After all, it's the sales people who invite prospects into the booth, answer questions and objections, demonstrate products and services, reinforce your corporate image, and finally, it's the sales staff that write-up your leads and *write orders*.

But you might ask, "Why do I have to train sales people to sell at trade shows? After all, selling is selling! Right?"

Wrong! At least not at trade shows, where nearly every aspect of the typical field sales call is either modified or reversed, compared with the sales dynamics at a show. Consider the following differences:

◆ Open-Minded Prospect

Recent surveys of show audiences have revealed that up to 80% of trade show and conference attendees are looking for "*NEW*" products and services or have come to learn the latest industry techniques (Trade Show Bureau Research Report #1120). And many travel hundreds, often thousands of miles, only once a year to see what's new.

The normal field sales call doesn't offer this kind of client openness. Automatically, your staff is one step closer to sales at trade shows. They need to be *prepared* to use this psychological switch to their advantage.

◆ Compact Selling Time

Four hundred twenty-five (425) agents visited an exhibitor at a recent two-day, 10-1/2 hour Alliance of Canada Travel Agents (ACTA) trade show. That's 40 visitors per hour - more than most salespeople actually call on in an entire week. At a trade show, your sales team must be *properly prepared* to quickly meet as many prospects as they can, qualify their needs, then move on to the next one.

◆ High Volume Of Qualified Prospects

Nearly 700 association executives visited a corporate hotel booth at a recent American Society of Association Executives (ASAE) annual convention. Even more significant, however, was the fact that 75% of these visitors had direct responsibility for making the final buying decision. Where else but a trade show does your staff meet such a high volume of open-minded, *highly qualified* prospects.

◆ Long Hours

Continental breakfast: 7:30 a.m. Educational sessions: 8:00 a.m. to 12 noon, Trade Show to 5:30 p.m. following luncheon, Dinner function and hospitality suites to 12:30 a.m.

That's a demanding 17-hour sales day. Back at the office even work-a-holics seldom put in more than 12 hours per day... and even then they're normally not expected to stand on hard concrete floors for four to eight hours.. When these seventeen hours are

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multiplied by the standard three-day conference, you have a true test of stamina for any sales person. Proper rest during this time is especially important. Coming in at 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning and heavy drinking can ruin the effectiveness of even the best sales people, and often does.

These are only some of the unique differences that sales people contend with in the trade show environment. It's no wonder, then, that most sales teams are ill-prepared to tap the full potential of a trade show.

So where do you start to prepare for a successful trade show?

◆ First Things First

Begin your pre-show planning and training by reviewing your corporate marketing objectives to help you develop specific goals and strategies for the selected show/audience. First: Do *not* design your exhibit before you establish your show goals and strategies. That would be akin to designing a stage set for "CATS" then realizing it's "ANNIE" that you really need to produce... they're both musicals but that's where the similarities end.

Second: Your show goals should be measurable; i.e., generating 300 qualified leads, booking \$75,000 in business, signing up 50 NEW dealers or demonstrating your NEW product line to a third of the attendees.

Then it's important to break down these show objectives into smaller, individual goals for each salesperson to achieve, every day they work the show.

◆ Exhibit Design

"NEW" is one of the two most powerful words in advertising – and when you combine it with the fact that up to 80% of trade show attendees go to shows to see what's NEW and innovative within an industry, you can begin to appreciate why NEW is one of the most "sales-effective" words you can put on a trade show exhibit.

At a trade show you have less than five seconds to attract someone's attention – relate something that's important enough to them to make them want to come into your booth and ask for more information. Therefore, I recommend that you take a *billboard* approach to your exhibit graphics.

Think about it! When you're traveling 50 mph down a highway, you only have 3 to 5 seconds to see a billboard, read its message and graphics, then get

your eyes back out on the road. Therefore, *one* large photograph or graphic is more effective than several smaller ones. And a single bold headline will be read quicker and five times more often than several sub-heads or blocks of copy. Let your sales people and literature impart all the details... *not* your trade show exhibit!

Initially, your headline- the message you relate to the attendee is more important than your name or logo. Believe me, if what you have to say is of interest and importance to the attendee, they'll be sure to get your name. And remember this: the most "sales-effective" headline you can write makes a *promise* to the reader, i.e., "Reduce Your Downtime and Repair Costs by 60% with... our Widget!"

Like moths are drawn to a flame, trade show attendees are attracted to well-lighted exhibits and especially exhibits with *backlit* graphics. For example: Major retailers like Sears and Estee Lauder have found that backlit color photographs (transparencies) actually generate 4 to 6 times *more sales* for them than traditional frontlit photos/graphics.

Booth layout can work for you or *against* you. Try never to place counters or tables parallel to the aisle, especially across the front of a small 10 ft or 20 ft booth. It's hard enough to get visitors to step off the aisle carpet into your booth without putting a physical barrier like that in their way. A perpendicular (to the aisle), even diagonal counter placement creates a much more inviting and free-flowing layout.

For similar reasons, avoid ceilings and over-hangs unless you have a large peninsula or island display. If you can't establish a minimum clearance of 8 ft (standard ceiling height) and/or use an open (space) frame construction, these techniques tend to repel visitors because subconsciously they may feel "trapped" or claustrophobic about walking into your booth. Exceptional interior lighting can also counteract the potential drawbacks to ceilings and over-hangs.

A trade show is no time to get conservative... it's Show Business! Don't use subtle earth tones without adding color and exceptional lighting. Bright, wide horizontal ribbons of color really attract the eye at trade shows and look great when balanced with neutral and complimentary hues and textures.

These are only a small sampling of the basics to effective exhibit design, but keep this in mind:

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People tend to stop or slow down at every fourth exhibit, and the simple application of these “basics” will help you generate more leads and sales than your competition at trade shows.

◆ Sales Staff

Select your sales team early and wisely. For heaven's sake, do not make the granddaddy of all trade show mistakes by selecting the new recruit to work the show as a training exercise.

The Trade Show Bureau confirms that 29% of the attendees at trade shows are top management (owners, partners, presidents, vice-presidents, general managers). Another 51% fall into the middle management classification (Trade Show Bureau Report AC/RR #3). Therefore, using novice sales people for trade show duty can be disastrous for your product creditability and corporate image.

Conversely, if you want to build booth traffic and strengthen your image and sales, schedule your key executives to make appearances during the show, or to be on hand throughout the program. Don't forget to promote their appearances in your *pre-show promotions*.

◆ Networking

Further, make sure your staff knows that the scheduled (conference) meals and events are additional opportunities for them to network. Instruct them to split up, don't sit or talk at length with each other at these events. This simple technique will maximize their opportunities to meet more prospects,

Also review the exhibitor list. For many companies, the best prospects at the show can actually be some of their fellow exhibitors. If this is a possibility for you, make sure you allocate duty time for the sales people to “walk the show” and visit with the other exhibitors, in addition to their booth assignments.

Impress upon your sales team long before the conference that selling is different at trade shows. Further they need to adjust their standard routine and sales procedures if they expect to take full advantage of the opportunities available during the show. Discuss the psychological differences of the attendees, the longer hours, compact selling periods, pre-show promotions, objectives and strategy, etc.

◆ Promotion

Let exciting clients and new prospects know your company is going to be at *their* conference and trade show. Print the name or initials of the show, the

dates and location prominently on the *outside* of direct mail pieces, in trade advertisements, etc. Your entire staff should also start an “awareness” campaign three to four months in advance of the show. During visits, in phone conversations, or as a postscript in correspondence, your sales staff can greatly influence their trade show destiny if you give them a little guidance. On average, one-third of the leads you generate at a show will depend on your pre-show promotion.

The Trade Show Bureau reports that only 10-15% of exhibitors exercise any pre-show promotion opportunities, and of those who do, 83% report greater return on objectives set.

◆ The Show

Once again, difference abounds, The hotel, exhibit hall, booth and the staff may be unfamiliar. Brief the sales staff in the **completed** booth the afternoon before the show opens. Following is a list of items to cover during this meeting.

Staff Introductions - It is especially important to familiarize everyone with specialists and experts on staff for the show,

Product/Equipment Demonstrations - Be sure the staff is prepared to demonstrate new equipment and to answer questions on the latest developments.

Inquiry/Lead System - Develop and introduce an effective system for the staff to identify and record visitors and their special interests. This system alone is essential to post-show follow-up success. Simply collecting business cards is another mistake granddad made.

Traffic Builders - You need to demonstrate to your staff how you've planned to generate booth traffic. A well-planned booth will incorporate some type of product demonstration, introduction, give-away or special presentation to build traffic and establish contact. You have to give attendees a valid reason to visit your booth.

Booth Assignment and Procedures - Do not expect the booth staff to be effective for more than two/three hours at a time. Establish teams and rotate duty.

Further, remind them it's hard to discuss business while they're smoking, eating, drinking or talking to each other.

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The staff should not sit in the booth unless they are interviewing or negotiating with a prospective customer.

Assertive Attitude - Attendees will walk right by your booth all day if you let them. Encourage staff to approach attendees who pass by the booth, inviting them into participate in demonstrations, introductions, or registrations for drawing. While pre-show promotions/invitations can certainly encourage walk-ins, often delegates can't see the forest for the trees and they walk right past you. On-the-floor giveaways, games and demonstrations also help, but you have to grab their attention and address them personally before you begin any meaningful conversation.

Booth and Personal Appearance - The corporate booth is your business office during the show. The booth staff needs to help keep it clean, neat and professional during show hours. The same applies for the Staff. The Sales people who keep late hours, drink heavily, or eat poorly are easy to spot (and avoid) on the floor. They're the ones with the bloodshot eyes who yawn all day and sit quietly in the corner. Appear neat, alert and professional at all times,

Post Show Follow-Up - Although I've produced shows which booked over \$1 million in sales orders *during the show*, more often than not, I've found the full measure of your success becomes evident afterwards. Only if you've qualified and documented each booth visitor do you know who your best prospects are and what is needed to close the sale.

When you let your sales organization drop the ball after the show, you have only yourself to blame. A key complaint from the trade show attendees is that exhibitors do *not* follow-up after the show as they promised. In fact, studies show 80% of exhibitors do not follow-up, so you have an added advantage by doing so.

The best way to avoid this kind of failure is to prepare all your follow-up materials and procedures *before* you go to the show and assign one person (that is not going to the show) to coordinate it all,

Separate the leads into three groups:

- (1) **immediate, high potential prospects,**
- (2) **future high potential prospects,**
- (3) **long-range low potential/unlikely prospects.**

Require your sale organization to follow-up on all leads as follows: All groups should receive a follow-

up letter anti appropriate collateral within two weeks after the show. A personal phone call or visit should be made to Group #1 as soon as possible after the show (two weeks maximum). Group #2 should be contacted shortly after the mailing, but no more than four weeks after the show. Group #3 should be contacted as appropriate.

On the average, 80% of your new business from the show will come from Group #1.

Traditionally, advertising and marketing courses have devoted very little time to the subject of trade shows... if they covered it at all. Further, resources and reference materials which aided in the training process for trade shows have been very limited. Today, however, organizations like the Trade Show Bureau, International Exhibitors Association, publications like *Trade Show Week*, *Exhibit Marketing*, *Exhibitor Magazine* and many custom and "systems" exhibit groups can provide in-depth trade show marketing support, exhibit design and show management advice and counsel similar to this article. Further, if you can find another exhibit manager or exhibit group that consistently produces effective shows, ask them to share their knowledge with you. Of course, be prepared to compensate these professionals for their time and expertise. Their advice and counsel can generate great dividends for you and your company.

Your preparation anti staff training are not the end-all solutions to trade show success. As with any major undertaking, it takes balance: the right combination of audience, traffic flow, pre-show promotion, floor location, staff training, and what I call "sales-effective" exhibit design and graphics... just to name a few elements.

In conclusion, you and your staff the the only common denominators that influence the success of all these elements.



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