

Secrets of the Aisle

by Dr. Allen Konopacki, President, Incomm International

Exhibition visitors who develop a system and organize their time while at an exhibition can double their productivity and gain greater results. Dr. Konopacki defines eight factors that will ensure the maximum return on show attendance.

Without mapping a practical “wish list,” a trip to a trade show is nothing more than a trip to Fantasyland. Attendees who wait until they are en route to the show to scan information and plan activities are merely “winging it.” Any productive outcome of the trip would be accidental. Yet, incredibly, visitors often spend more time preparing a list for a trip to the grocery store than they do getting ready to find the answers they want from a visit to the show.

Unmanaged time automatically means astronomical costs for information of questionable worth. Take a few minutes to determine the actual cost of a trip to the show, including accommodations, entertainment, travel, meals, ground transportation, food and the value of your time.

Each hour on a show floor can easily cost \$100 to \$200. Few of us would spend \$100 for a personal item without expecting a return. Likewise you should plan a payback from precious show time.

1. Start planning your mission before the show. A much more exciting approach to the show is to identify problems in the workplace and to match them with products or services. One way to do this is to make a “show productivity list” well in advance of the show—even 90 days is not too soon. This list could simply be a notebook with the convention name on it. Establish a routine to jot notes on the list about any pressing problems you see or learn about from others that could relate to the show. This filtering process leads to setting tangible objectives that will make the show experience more manageable and more productive.

2. Let coworkers participate in the mission. Workers often view an owner’s or manager’s trip to a trade show or convention as primarily a recreational activity. You can avoid such faulty thinking by challenging others to participate in setting show objectives.

Encourage workers to funnel ideas and information about trends or issues they believe to be important. Post memos or ask for suggestions in meetings or conversations. By probing the minds of your associates, you’ll not only reap valuable input but also impress upon them the serious nature of investing time and money in the show.

When you have the ideas and have selected an agenda, post it or pass it around for review. You will find your employees much more receptive to trying out any new product or idea you bring back.

3. Plot precise strategy the night before. Top negotiators always set time aside before important meetings to define what they intend to do and say and even to forecast the results of their deliberative deal-making. This is a good strategy to adopt the night before the show because the opportunities at the show are limitless, as are the options for using time and energy.

No forward-thinking attendee should waste the evening before a show on entertainment. This time is too critical; use it to plan show site-seeing, not sightseeing! After registering, take the show directory back to your quiet hotel room. Then compare the “wish list” with the exhibit guide. Highlight important offerings with a yellow marking pen. This sets limits on your valuable time.

Keep two items on hand while reading the directory—the exhibits floor plan and an

appointment page marked with half-hour intervals. When you note a program or exhibit of high interest, write down the product or program’s name and the booth number or location. Then, when your list is complete, consult the floor plan and group together booths by location and select the best time for visits. Finally, complete your appointment sheet with “sure-bet” calls. This strategy brings a sense of order to “marketing noises” that can bring chaos to your senses and psyche!

4. The three-step method for successful booth visits.

■ *(I) Surveillance.* Once on the exhibit floor, set your priorities by scanning. The cautious solution-seeker should not cross petlines to see products up close or use this initial time to talk with salespeople.

An attendee who first plans visits by seeing what’s available is actually doing the exhibitors a favor. Besides visually confirming that a listed exhibitor has what you want, this time is also useful to spot product applications not yet identified on the original “want list.”

■ *(II) Reflection.* Take a 60-minute break to review notes and relax after this initial observation. Use this time out to identify the principal questions you want answered. This should always occur before you talk to any exhibitors, because it helps you simplify communication and deal only with key concerns.

A well-prepared attendee is instantly separated from the hordes of others who weakly say to sales representatives: “I’m just looking around” or “What’s new?” The result is more professional attention instead of intensive sales pitches. Those who know

what to ask are more likely to get knowledgeable, prompt answers.

• (III) *Validation/clartification*. Most attendees overlook the great value of assessing data from the many key players of differing expertise companies assembled at their booths. The show is the perfect place to get an astute second opinion from various levels of experts. Once you get basic screening questions answered by a sales representative, prepare to move beyond him or her for more discriminating data. Ask to speak with a product specialist, technical manager or vice president. This is an analytical, not an arrogant, way to do business.

Purposeful booth reps are impressed when a second opinion is solicited. And the additional insights are worth much more than the few minutes this effort takes. The contact with several management levels can also be a benefit in future negotiations.

5. Sixty percent of getting what you want is knowing what to ask.

Attendees compete with one another to get facts they need. Most conversations last only five minutes. A sales-minded representative sometimes screens out a visitor as not worth further attention in less than 30 seconds. Yet more information is available than anybody could possibly want. You have to avoid becoming overwhelmed by "word debris," the onslaught of oral presentations and video and audio productions.

Three questions will get your search for usable data on track. Ask:

- How does your company handle this specific problem?

- How do I go about finding methods to manage or improve this urgent problem?

- What has changed or is different about this process? (Probe to see if benefits and features fit personal applications.)

Never ask a key question only once. No seasoned reporter or negotiator ever feels safe with a single response. Do as top professionals do and ask the same questions twice or more, rewording to fit the situation.

The first answer gives the basic "nuts and bolts" data; the second gets closer to crucial information – facts needed to make a decision when it's time to recommend a buy.

6. Avoid a compulsion to overload with brochures. Many attendees instinctively reach out for brochures and business cards, as if amassing a considerable collection were a required ritual. The conventional wisdom of visitors and sales representatives is that attendees are getting crucial decision making data to quickly follow up. Actually, many people take such offerings for emotional rather than purposeful reasons.

We have been conditioned by a culture of excessive consumption to take more than we need – without forethought – especially when things are free and eagerly presented. Or we think it impolite to reject an offer, even though it fits no need. Free up time for productive work by asking yourself what function a brochure or business card (or a give-away trinket) will serve. It is not rude to say "no," and it is illogical to say "yes" without reason. Calibrate the worth of any business card or brochure before taking it. Knowledge without application has zero power!

Discard the aimless "business-card bingo" mindset. Mine opportunities instead. A proactive attendee escapes being among the visitors who act as if productivity requires carrying around a full bag. Essential data are readily available from the exhibitors you select.

7. Make the most of the material you select. A few basic tools are especially valuable when gathering useful brochures. These include a supply of paper clips and small note paper, such as 3M Post-It Notes. When taking a brochure, use the note paper to write brief comments on products and the most important statements the representatives make. Jot down key answers to questions such as: How is this product different? How would it be used? What are the terms and delivery dates?

Write coded phrases reflecting confidential facts and translate them immediately after leaving a booth. If you assume that you will recall facts without taking notes, you may be surprised that you don't remember what was said when you review a brochure only days later.

Although the mind can store an estimated 100 trillion bits of information, the hectic pace of the show can cause even the brightest attendee to forget important matters. A person usually forgets 50 percent of what is heard in less than 60 seconds – a strong reason to put cogent notes in brochures.

Paper-clip notes to the representative's business card. This procedure improves future discussions because your note reviews will then be more focused, and it will be easier to discuss key items with associates.

6. Fight stress. Vast numbers of attendees fall victim to the hectic demands of a convention. To maintain enthusiasm and strength, pace yourself and establish clear-cut priorities, knowing well the difference between doing what needs to be done and doing what is simply enjoyable to do. Long tours and numerous talks do not have to result in lost motivation, inattentiveness, tired eyes and a slouching body. Energy loss comes from not having a clear, achievable mission in mind. Those with set goals have more positive attitudes, generally use less energy and accomplish more. To eliminate burnout, set a mission.

The most overlooked factor that contributes to stress and burnout is what you eat. Much of the food at conventions is high in carbohydrate content of a kind that does not give long-lasting energy but instead increases the release of serotonin, one of the brain's chemical messengers that reduces activity and induces sleep. Foods, such as a sweet roll, dissipate quickly in value, causing the 11 a.m. or 3 p.m. "bum-out blues," when the body signals a need for renewed energy. If that is not available, the brain releases serotonin, which saps energy and puts a person close to an exhausted or sleepy state. Turn to protein foods and fruit for energy.

A system works

Attendees at trade shows who use a system and organize their time can easily double their productivity and gain greater results.

Reprinted from "Restaurants USA."

Dr Allen Konopacki is a psychologist and president of Incomm International, a consulting, marketing and research firm in Chicago specializing in trade shows.



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