

The Art of Engaging and Disengaging Prospects at a Show

by Barry Siskind

Approaching Prospects on the Show Floor

Most of us are comfortable handling customers in normal selling situations – in a client's office when we have an appointment to do business or on the retail floor. Exhibiting places you in a rather different situation. You will be standing at an exhibit with dozens – maybe hundreds or even thousands of people walking by. You have two choices:

- You can hang back and let the visitor come to you, or...
- ...you can proactively approach them.

The choice is clear. If you remember why you are at the show. Whatever your objective, you are in the booth to do business. At an exhibit you have to be proactive – you will waste valuable opportunities if you let the prospect walk by. Some visitors will approach you. But as often as not, they resist making contact. Many visitors scope out the whole show before they commit to a long look at an exhibit; some simply are shy. It's up to you to take the initiative and approach the visitor.

But approaching isn't as easy as it sounds. You have to overcome timidity, develop an effective opener, avoid closed questions and focus on business. All this while overcoming one objection visitors have about show salespeople – they are too pushy.

Many people don't feel comfortable being proactive. This is understandable because it is something they may not be used to doing. Further there is the fear of being rebuffed, appearing pushy and not knowing how to approach visitors gracefully. Reaching out to a visitor is a compliment - an attempt to engage them that nine times out of ten they will appreciate. But, it's one thing to approach visitors and quite another to do it comfortably and effectively.

Openers like "Enjoying the show?" or "Nice day isn't it?" or "How are you doing today?" are time-worn and ineffective because they do not lead anywhere. Visitors can answer

with one word and keep on walking. Or worse yet, they can answer at great length and waste your time with irrelevant chit-chat.

A good opener not only engages the visitor in a meaningful conversation about business, it leads the booth person to finding out more about the visitor and his needs so a decision can be made on how to help that visitor (see *Trade Shows are not Sales Calls*, CEIR Research Report SM24).

Avoid Closed Questions

Effective openers invite the visitor to pause and continue the conversation. For this reason, "closed" questions – questions that can be answered with a simple "yes" or "no" won't serve you as well as questions which by their very nature require a lengthier answer. These are "open" questions, questions which usually begin with words like "how," "what," "when," "where," and "why."

Focus on Business

An open question is better than a closed question – but not just any open question. Asking about the weather or the local sports team may invite a conversation, but this conversation will not move you any closer to your objective. Effective openers waste no time. They get directly into the job of qualifying the visitor. The best way to start is with a question around their needs.

In choosing a theme for your exhibit, you will have focused on a key benefit of your product or service. Questioning your visitor's need for this key benefit is the most effective way to launch your conversation. Here are a couple of examples:

"How often do you run into problems transferring business information from program to program at your office?" or...

"Tired of paying an arm and a leg for a quality widget?"

Three Approaching Scenarios

A good approach doesn't have to be complicated, rather it should consist of words that the booth person can say comfortably and

honestly. In a show situation there are three times when approaching is necessary. A quick look at each will give your booth people the necessary background to develop openers of their own.

1. *When a visitor approaches the booth*

When a visitor approaches your booth and appears interested in a product, graphic or something else in the booth, you have a great opportunity to approach them. Finding a business related opener comes from focusing on whatever attracted them in the first place, "Are you familiar with our new widget?" or "Do you use a cash manager now?" If you are not sure where their interest lies, ask, "What caught your eye?" or "What attracted you to my booth?" All approaches should be preceded by the booth person introducing themselves first: "Hi, my name is Barry Siskind. What caught your eye?"

2. *When you are conducting a demonstration*

A demonstration will attract lots of people to your display. As the demonstration is drawing to a close there will be some visitors who are expressing more interest than others. You should approach the visitor who is expressing interest. Visitors express interest in a number of ways. Some do it verbally with positive comments and questions. Others do it non-verbally. They nod their head, lean in closer or smile. Experience will be the best teacher when looking for positive interest.

Once the demonstration is closed this person is approached and asked "What part of the demonstration was most applicable to your needs?" or, "How does this product fit into your work needs?"

3. *When nobody stops at the booth*

When the booth is quiet and visitors are not coming in voluntarily, the exhibitor has the most difficult challenge. This scenario breeds bad habits like slacking off, making phone calls or taking a coffee break. Staying focused on your objectives will help keep each person aware that even though the show is slow, their job still goes on.

If visitors are not coming into the booth, move to where they are - the aisle. But not in the aisle - in your booth. Stand at the edge of the booth, look relaxed and inviting and smile. As people walk by try to catch their eye. Most will ignore you but once someone does make contact, be prepared with a simple opening question like, "What are you looking for at the show?" or "I see you are in the printing business, how do you handle downtime?"

One final word. By now you understand the importance of approaching visitors on the show floor. The theory seems easy. But for those who have never done it, it can be uncomfortable. Start simple, and practice. Each time it gets more comfortable. Practice makes perfect, And at a show you can't be anything but perfect.

The Art of Disengaging

Once the conversation is over - it's over!

On the show floor, once you have established your visitor does not qualify for your products or services or, your visitor qualifies and you have made a presentation, there is still one more important step to take - wrapping up the conversation effectively so you can move onto the next prospect.

Effective time management is a boothperson's most valuable asset. There is nothing wrong with spending extra time with a visitor during low-traffic times when it is perfectly appropriate to get into a detailed discussion. Also, depending on your show objectives, you may wish to spend greater amounts of time with your visitors.

However, at high-traffic periods you will be missing opportunities if you continue talking after you have met with a qualified prospect or discovered they do not qualify.

Disengaging is not rude or impolite. It is the logical end to a conversation. If handled properly it will leave the visitor with a positive feeling about you, your company and products.

The trick is to stay focused on your objectives and develop the skill to end the conversation gracefully, when you want to end it.

Disengaging is often easy, the logical end of a presentation - you agree on a follow-up, thank the visitor for his/her time, shake hands and move on.

"Mr. Smith, it has been great meeting with you today. I'll get that information out to you as soon as I return to my office and then I'll call to setup an appointment. Thanks for your interest and enjoy the rest of the show."

But sometimes disengaging can present a real challenge - some visitors will chat all day if you let them. And by letting them, you are squandering time - both yours and theirs. You have a specific objective for exhibiting and they have an objective for being at the show. It is a place of business and once the business of the day is complete it is time to move on.

There are various techniques and tools that will help you disengage. Here are some common disengagement techniques. Try them at your next show.

1. Disengaging from a qualified prospect with a premium

Premiums, draws, literature and sampling are great tools to help you disengage. The trick is to use them strategically. Premiums for example should never be placed out in the open for every passerby to pick up. Rather, they should be hidden from view and given out at the appropriate time - to disengage. Using your premium to disengage is not easy. Follow these three steps and you will end the conversation in a friendly and professional manner.

Step #1 - Change the mood. It is important to stop talking about business and give the visitor some indication the conversation is drawing to a close: "Mr. Smith, it has been great talking to you today."

Step #2 - The set-up. This goes something like this: "Before you leave."

Step #3 - Leave the prospect with something. "Mr. Smith, we are giving each of our new customers our special pen with our thank I am looking forward to meeting you next week to discuss our product further. I hope you enjoy the rest of the show."

2. Disengage from an unqualified person (tire-kicker) without a premium

You don't need to give the visitor anything tangible to disengage. Following the three steps above and offering an intangible, can be equally as effective: "Mr. Smith, it has been great talking to you today. Before you leave, please take a moment to look around our booth and see if there is anything that interests you. If you need more information, let me know. It has been nice meeting you and I hope you enjoy the show."

3. Acknowledge the presence of another visitor

You should never look over one prospect's

shoulder for another prospect. By using your peripheral vision you will see others approach. If you ignore your new prospect, they will wait maybe 20-30 seconds and leave. But a quick acknowledgement will keep them there longer and begin the disengagement from the prospect you are in a conversation with.

Break eye contact with the new prospect saying, "Mr. Smith, excuse me for a second," Then make eye contact with the new prospect saying, "I'll be with you in a moment."

This not only keeps the second prospect a bit longer, it lets the first prospect know your conversation is drawing to a close.

4. Disengage from your existing customer

Occasionally an existing customer will drop by just to chat. This may have nothing to do with business and they are not ready to upgrade or buy more product - they just want to chat.

Spending time with them will not always or entirely help you meet your show objectives, but they are customers who deserve some of your time and have to be treated with care. The best disengagement here is an honest one. Explain the situation and find some time more convenient to have your conversation,

"Mr. Smith, what a surprise to see you today. I'm really interested in hearing all about how the new product has helped your production, but I've got a problem. At this show we are expecting over 10,000 visitors and as you can see many are dropping by our booth. I know we won't be able to get into a conversation without being interrupted and I would like to talk with you, I'm taking a break at 2:00. Why don't I buy you a cup of coffee then?"

Disengaging doesn't come naturally it requires practice and a real understanding that by not doing it when the time is right, you will be under-utilizing your show's possibilities.

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