

10 Tips for Tradeshow Success

1 » CHOOSE WISELY

You first need to determine how trade shows fit within your overall marketing strategy. Perhaps you are seeking to generate new sales opportunities, reinforce your leadership image, meet with specific target accounts, test a new product concept, or do some concentrated market research. Trade shows can serve many purposes, and identifying exactly why you are exhibiting is the best starting point.

There are more than 12,000 trade shows per year in North America. Be careful not to spread your company too thin. You'll be forced to skimp on each show, and you'll waste money since you may never be able to properly follow up on all the leads.

Similarly, the quality of the attendees, not quantity, is the key. Research as much as possible beforehand and review lists of past attendees. Go for total effectiveness over sheer numbers in choosing how many and which shows to put into your marketing plan.

2 » SET CLEAR OBJECTIVES

Like all goals, solid trade show goals are important as both motivators and measurement benchmarks. Believe it or not, research shows that 54% of exhibitors don't set objectives beforehand.

It's most effective to set goals in terms of achievement instead of activity. For example, instead of "We will generate 150 leads," a better goal might be, "We will meet 25 people who have a true need and are interested in our service." Make sure the goals are consistent with and reinforce your purpose for attending the show in the first place.

3 » PLAN EVERYTHING

It is almost impossible to start too early. Set a strict timeline. Identify a high-traffic booth location and pay special attention to your neighbors when making your choice. Plan your layout, booth design, demonstrations and graphics around a key message, and focus on attaining your objectives for the show.

Carefully craft your pre-show promotion strategy, and plan your booth set-up, dress code, literature, giveaways, work schedules and press contacts. Don't forget to hold a mandatory show kickoff meeting with your entire show staff to review objectives and key messages and get everyone into the right frame of mind. Finally, plan and prepare your complete post-show follow-up tactics prior to the show.

4 » DESIGN TO WIN

People attend shows to see what others are doing, benchmark their operations, and discover new solutions. Use your space to demonstrate how you can meet their needs and solve their problems. Have ready examples from others in their industry.



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Use interactive demonstrations where possible. Show that you are a success by having high quality graphics and brochures. Design an open and inviting booth by putting furniture to the sides and draw customers in by putting brochures and handouts inside the booth. Use giveaways only if they are going to add to your message. A cheap toy with your name on it will only attract freebie grabbers, but a giveaway that nicely reinforces your message will be very valuable. A booth designed on a budget is fine, but if you're going to go to the show, look like a leader. Visitors will form lasting impressions about you based on their experience at your booth.

5 » PROMOTE YOURSELF PRE-SHOW

While registrants may get bombarded with pre-show mailers, research shows that 75% of attendees do make up their schedule prior to the show and that 65% of attendees are influenced by pre-show promotions. Therefore, it is critical to not only promote yourself prior to the show, but to do it creatively, with a focused message of why you are different and better, as well as a great hook that will get people to your booth.

In addition, always prepare and send a press kit regarding your participation in the show. The press kit should contain recent press releases, fact sheets, and new product information. Send the kits to the trade press a week or two prior to the show, and bring along a few additional copies for your booth.

6 » WORK IT

Now that the show has started, be sure to make every minute count. Profit from your investment by zeroing in on those goals that you set pre-show and achieving them.

These things are grueling, both mentally and physically. Hire an advisor to help man the booth, if necessary, because the money you save trying to do an entire large show with one or two people will be lost in reduced effectiveness. A poorly-managed booth will hurt your image.

Also, allow for rotating shifts so staff can be fresh and charged. Everyone working the booth should be focused on the objective, clear on the message and excited about being there. Energy and attitude are critical.

Greet visitors first with a look in their eyes, not a radar-vision stare at their name badge. Have a brief and friendly introduction of your key benefits and ask open-ended questions regarding their situation and interests.

Finally, though fewer people are attending shows these days (trade show attendance is down about 8% from 2001), those who do attend are much more likely to have a reason for being there (and are much less likely to be looking for a day off work). Use this to your advantage and spend some quality time getting to know your best prospects and customers, both at the show and after-hours. Setting up key customer gatherings and reserving meeting space are also good options.

7 » GET OUT OF YOUR BOOTH

Don't forget the rest of the show! This is one of the best opportunities for gathering competitive and market information. You'll do yourself a disservice if you are not able to walk the floor gathering information, spotting new trends and ideas that you can apply towards bettering your business, and of course, seeing what your competition is up to.



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Be sure to introduce yourself to the trade press editors, and follow up with them after the show offering your availability to help them when they need information about your industry. Relationships with the trade press put you in the position of being an “expert reference” that they can quote when they are writing a story about your industry. This is great ink that will enhance your credibility and your image with prospective customers.

8 » DEBRIEF

At the end of the show, assess the leads gathered and sort them into by potential. Be sure to have a system in place during the show where you can add quality information about contacts so the sales force can best follow up. In addition, send contacts a thank-you letter and any specific information or literature they requested.

It is also a great idea to have each member of your staff fill out a post-show feedback report recommending improvements, highlighting key learning points and identifying the most critical new information gleaned.

9 » FOLLOW UP

Trade show research finds that 80% of leads are never followed up. If all you do is throw your sales force a pile of business cards and forget about it, you will probably find your leads in that unfortunate majority. You must supplement the list of names with quality information.

We recommend regular follow-ups through mailers and/or phone calls (without becoming a pest, of course). Most prospects, even if they are interested, may not be “ready to buy” at show time but may be in six or nine months.

You should also develop a system to track the outcome of these leads. It will help prevent everyone from forgetting about this all-important part of your show participation, and it will give you some solid, quantifiable results to measure.

10 » MEASURE IMPACT

Finally, carefully assess your show participation and impact. This will help you evaluate other shows, tweak your show strategy, and improve your results at the next one.

Results, of course, should be directly measured against your objectives (see step 2). A typical measure is in terms of sales and the lifetime value of the new customers gained. You may wish to track customers’ perceptions through ongoing surveys if your objectives were geared towards reinforcing your image. The bottom line is that well-planned objectives at the start will lead to the best way to measure your final results and to determine the overall value of your activities at the show.

Of course, there are many more details to consider. These ten steps are just an introduction, but if you follow these guidelines closely, you can be confident that you are approaching trade shows in an effective manner.

