

Trade Show Marketing

Industry gatherings and conferences can be an ideal way to meet prospective customers. Almost every industry has at least one trade association that has an annual conference with exhibits. There are few other venues that bring together as many people from a single industry. If your product or service is attractive to those in that industry, you should consider exhibiting at a trade show.

While trade shows bring together potential customers, being effective in marketing to those people requires some thought ahead of time and hard work at the show. Here are some tips to consider.

Choose the right trade show

Before deciding to exhibit, make sure the audience is the one you want to reach. Show sponsors target their efforts to get attendees at the show. Look at their material and decide whether it would be interesting to your audience. Try to choose shows that attract decision-makers. Even if you would end up selling to a lower level person, the CEO or decision-maker will probably be involved in the process.

Make sure there will be a large enough number of attendees to justify your costs. If a show sponsor says there will be 500 attendees, ask how many of that group will be other exhibitors. Sponsors are trying to sell you on exhibiting and may try to pump up the numbers.

Get a list of attendees before the show

Most sponsors will make lists of attendees available, but often at some cost. Getting the list is usually worth the cost. You can identify existing customers and likely prospects. You may even want to make special arrangements with a good customer for dinner or at least a discussion. You may want to mail a letter or brochure to attendees before the show. Most attendees go to trade shows to learn and if you can get their attention before the show they will be more likely to search out your exhibit.

Make sure your exhibit tells your story

At almost any trade show there will be exhibits that are extravagant (and expensive). Unless you have a very large budget just for your exhibit, you are unlikely to attract attendees just because your exhibit is appealing. The key is to make sure as people walk past your exhibit, they understand what you are offering. There may be dozens or hundreds of exhibits and your message should be clear. Simple graphics with minimal text can work very well if it conveys your message.

Meet your most likely prospects

Another challenge is getting your most likely prospects who visit your exhibit to have a conversation. Many exhibitors use drawings for prizes or trinket give-aways. If you are having a drawing, make sure your prize would be well received. Electronics, food baskets and golf equipment are common prizes. To initiate conversations with those registering for a drawing, you may want to have some type of "challenge" associated with the prize. Ask how many golf balls are in a bucket or the value of a jar of coins. This will get attendees to spend a few more minutes at your exhibit and you may be better able to start a conversation.

Materials to have

Most exhibitors will have a supply of brochures and written materials for attendees to take. Avoid the temptation to overspend on large packets of materials for everyone. A lot of trade show materials get tossed in hotel wastebaskets without ever being read. A better idea is to have a simple handout for most people that just appear to be looking while having a more complete packet for serious prospects.

Follow up, follow up and follow up

Just like any sales process, following up is critical. Be sure to keep good notes about which prospects deserve special attention. Remembering which prospect said what could be difficult especially if the show lasts for several days. Most attendees are relatively free with their business cards and you may want to make notes on the back of them. Be sure to ask good prospects how they would like you to follow up. Then do it.

Summary

Trade shows can be effective marketing tools. However, they can also be hard work and frustrating. Be sure to be prepared, use your best sales techniques and be well rested.