
Trade Show Dos and Don'ts

by Janet Attard

Planning to exhibit at a trade show soon? If so, you're not alone. Many businesses find that trade shows can be one of their best sources of new business as well as a good way to attract media attention.

But exhibiting at trade shows doesn't come cheap. The cost of booth space, drayage, product literature, airfare, shipping and hotel costs, and meals can take a significant toll on a small business' bottom line if they don't get the hoped for sales from the show.

No single thing you do can guarantee you will have a profitable show. However, there are a number of things you can do to better your chances for success. Here are several to consider:

1. Check Out The Show History

Is it a show that regularly attracts large crowds? Will the show be held in a place that's easy for attendees to find and reach by car and by public transportation? Will the show be adequately promoted to your potential customers? Have vendors who have participated in the show in the past done well? What has past attendance been?

2. Prepare A Professional-Looking Display

You don't have to have the biggest, flashiest booth on the trade show floor to attract attendees. But you do need to have some type of display that lets passersby know what it is you are selling. Signs, photographs of products or other elements used in the display should look professionally prepared. Unless you're working a crowd that's attracted by the possibilities of bargain basement prices, banners printed with a dot matrix printer on continuous form paper or homemade posters pinned or propped up against a backdrop will make you look unprofessional and make prospects leary of your products.

3. Have Sufficient Literature Ready To Hand Out

Have professionally prepared brochures or other handouts made in quantity to distribute at the show, and have them prepared well in advance of the show. If you wait until the last minute to prepare your literature you'll wind up paying unnecessary rush charges. If you try to prepare it yourself on a laser printer and photocopier, what you turn out may not do your product justice.

4. Make Sure You *HAVE* a Product

If your product doesn't work, or doesn't work properly, you'll lose more customers than you'll ever gain.

5. Do Pre-Show Promotion

Experienced trade show exhibitors don't wait for the show to start to try to see customers and make new contacts. To get the most traffic at your booth, send out mailings and announcements before the show inviting your customers and prospects to stop by your booth. Insert announcements in bills you send out, on your web page, and in ads you run near the show date. A couple of weeks before the event, call important customers and prospects and set appointments with to meet with them at the show.

6. Have A Giveaway Or Gimmick

Your goal is to attract people who would be interested in your product to your booth. The giveaway or gimmick doesn't have to be big or elaborate. Samples of your product given away at intervals during the show are ideal. Novelty items such as key chains, pencils, pads of paper with your company and product name can be good too. Even something as simple as a large bowl full of bite-sized chocolates or hard candies can bring people to you booth. Use your imagination if there aren't sufficient funds for expensive giveaways.

7. Take Notes

You will have conversations with dozens of people during a trade show. Many of them will give you their name or a business card. Make sure you remember what you talked about and why you saved their card by jotting a note about what you talked about on the back of their business card or on a note pad while you're at the show.

8. Train Booth Personnel

Choose your booth staff carefully and be sure they know how to deal with the public Among the faux pas to avoid (all seen at recent trade shows), are booth personnel who:

- Pick their nose while talking to prospects
- Look unkempt and/or unwashed
- Bad-mouth competitors
- Don't speak the language of the country well enough to be understood or to understand questions
- Talk to each other instead of to people passing by the booth
- Delight in garlic-laden lunches (or breakfasts)
- Sit at the back of the booth and wait to be approached

9. Play to the Crowd

Plan demos so more than one prospect at a time can view them. If booth personnel are tied up giving a demo to one or two people, and that demo can't be seen by other passersby, you limit the numbers of potential leads and customers you will attract. If at all possible, use movie screens or projection screens, or large screen computers and have demos done with the demonstrator facing the any audience or the aisle of the trade show.

10. Follow up!

Have a plan in place for following up on leads as soon as you get home from the show. Don't wait a month or two to get around to sending information to those who stopped by your booth. By then, the hot prospects are likely to have become good customers for one of your competitors.