Make The Most Of The Trade Show

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Marketers are always under pressure to do more with less – especially in these uncertain economic times creating tight resources and slashed budgets. Despite these challenges, trade shows continue to be a popular and effective way to capitalize on marketing and sales investments, as well as a successful approach for leveraging business success. In fact, according to the Center for Exhibition Industry Research [1], 73 percent of executives rated trade shows as a highly valuable tool to achieve marketing and sales goals. Additionally, a recent study of marketing executives across industry sectors shows that, over the next several years, 85 percent will either increase the number of exhibitions they will attend or remain status quo. Clearly, executives see the value and importance of attending trade shows and will continue to do so.

With trade show participation, careful planning will allow marketers to maximize lead generation, as well as educate target audiences and recruit distributors. By following a few simple rules, any exhibitor can boost its return on investment (ROI).

Preshow: Plan and Outreach

To ensure a high ROI and create solid business opportunities, the most important actions happen months before setting foot on the show floor. Begin with developing a detailed calendar filled with key industry events for the year, as well as crucial deadlines for submitting materials. By searching industry association websites, trade journals and publishing companies, you'll be able to pinpoint the trade shows that will yield the best return.

Next determine the key messages your company wants to share with the trade show audience and then build initiatives to deliver them effectively. For example, if your company will be launching a new product in the upcoming year, identify the trade show that will put your product launch in the brightest spotlight for your target audience.

For maximum exposure to your company's target segment, it is critical to conduct customer and prospect outreach well in advance of the show. This includes emails and e-newsletters to inform customers and prospects about show attendance, product launches, and speaking opportunities your company may have. Make sure these missives contain the important show details, such as the location of your company's booth and what you plan to show.

Media Outreach

In addition to informing your customers and prospects, don't forget to reach out to the media that will be in attendance. The best way to draw media attention to your company is with something "new" to the market, such as a product launch, a new

approach to an old problem, or an original twist on an old product. Send out a separate, concise media alert as a teaser for the media to visit your company's booth and secure interviews. In addition, press releases further detail what your booth will be showcasing, such as the unveiling of a product launch or set of services, and will conjure up pre-show enthusiasm. Connecting with editors at important media outlets will drive your messaging beyond your existing customer and potential customer base — reaching prospects you didn't even know existed.

Because editors' calendars quickly fill up, it's essential to secure appointments with the media in advance of the show. These include press conferences, one-on-one interviews, round table discussions, sponsorships and speaking engagements. These all supplement event participation by giving in-depth exposure and more interaction with key targets.

You could also organize a press conference to communicate key messages to a group of journalists at the same time, or conduct one-on-one interviews that deliver to a more tightly-focused media group. Yet, both require early planning to coordinate with a careful selection of editors. A strong news angle with invitations sent out at least three to four weeks in advance of the show are vital to secure optimal attendance.

Additionally, speaking opportunities, including panel discussions, case studies presentations, and sessions on industry trends, also add to a company's exposure and visibility, whether or not they are actually exhibiting at a show.

It's vital to coordinate a media briefing with your sales team to go over key messages, as well as the process for booth tours and interviews. Editors can ask a variety of questions so make sure to clearly define the necessary details that your team must cover, as well as anything confidential that cannot be leaded to the media, such as pricing and company financial information. Provide your team with simple responses or a plan for what to do in such a situation.

The Booth

It's also crucial to plan your booth design with the attendees in mind. Think of the booth it as a store front – It needs to look great, draw attention, and display your key messages. Consider how you want attendees to experience your products or services, and orient the booth to lead them down an informative and organized path. People will be drawn to a well-organized booth as it saves them time and lets them easily find the information they seek. Perhaps you arrange the booth according to key-industries or maybe you show a progression of products for different applications. Thoughtful organization will provide the efficient and pleasant experience that attendees seek.

Remember that the show floor is an interactive stage to demonstrate your company's capabilities. For example, a packaging manufacturer might have the latest machine technology running right inside the booth or have prototypes for people to hold and inspect. This hands-on type of experience helps a customer better understand and appreciate the value of your innovations for their business.

The customer's familiarity with your products or services will reinforce key benefits and spur meaningful dialogue between companies.

It's Showtime

Once you're at the show, it's critical to strategically plan how to entice attendees into the booth. Incentives are a great way to attract attention and can include an exclusive "first look" at a new product or a special giveaway like an iPod or iPad.

Your presence should reinforce what you stand for. For example, sustainability continues to be a hot topic. However, I'll often walk around the floor of a trade show and notice the many sustainability messages blasting from a booth, yet there are piles of brochures and printed materials. Excess materials are not only wasteful and expensive; they contradict the 'sustainability' message your brand is touting. One solution might be to display colorful presentations on LED screens instead of printing on paper. This eye-catching spectacle is more meaningful to the viewer, and has an added benefit of saving on printing costs.

Beyond exhibiting or attending a trade show, take advantage of additional activities that you are doing at the show. Make sure to film your company's speaking opportunities and tape customer event footage, as these can be used in post-show promotional efforts, further increasing your ROI.

Size up the Competition

Many companies forget that trade shows are also an excellent chance investigate your competitor's booths, speaking sessions and press conferences. Because competitors will also be showcasing their latest and most desirable products and services, you'll have the same first glance as media and industry professionals. This is an opportunity for a peak inside your competition before the news is actually published, giving you a head start on planning for the future.

The Work Doesn't Stop When the Curtain Closes

After the event, your pockets will be bursting with business cards. Thus, it's crucial to follow up with editors and new business leads after the event to maximize your trade show ROI.

Now that you've started a dialogue with a customer or prospect, it's time to nurture it by staying in contact after the show. A phone call will also help continue the conversation about how your products or services can benefit your customer or prospect. In addition, enter these new contacts in your database so they will receive updates from your company, such in the form of an e-newsletter. These e-newsletters are a great method of staying in touch and promoting your company's latest achievements. Take advantage of one of the free email distribution sites that will help get the word out at no cost.

Make sure your focus extends beyond customers. You've successfully caught media attention during the show, after is the time to sustain it. Put yourself in the shoes of

editors, who had visited multiple booths each day of the show. Thus, it's critical to make sure your company stays at the top of their list when they create post-show articles. After a week, follow-up with each editor with a phone call and/or email thanking them for stopping by the booth and ask if they'll be featuring your company in post-show coverage. It's also helpful to review each publication's media calendar to see if an upcoming issue has a focus relevant to your company. This can help guide editors with placing content about your products or services.

When in Doubt, Ask for Help

Don't be afraid to ask the trade show organizers to help guide you through the unique opportunities each show offers. In addition, take advantage of every opportunity to maximize your investment. Never fear if it all seems too overwhelming as there are many companies that specialize in helping you reach your trade show goals. It doesn't matter how you get involved in harnessing the unique power of a trade show – just be sure you do. Your sales numbers will thank you for it. [2]

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[1] [2] CEIR http://www.ceir.org/ [3]

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