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Title: Showtime: Making the Most of Trade Exhibits

Public Relations Tactics

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Full Text: Continued concerns over security and increased demands for promotional budget accountability have not hurt participation at trade shows by exhibiting companies and attendees. Indeed, a report in the online version of Trade Show Week revealed a 3.6 percent jump in attendance and a more modest 0.6 percent increase in the number of exhibiting companies in 2003 over the previous year.

Further research underscores the perceived value and size of these industry gatherings (not to be confused with consumer shows, which are open to the public). The Chicago-headquartered Center for Exhibition Industry Research reports that 40 percent of attendees polled found exhibitions more valuable today than two years ago, and 76 percent maintain that face-to-face events are “very important” marketing elements. Annually, trade shows are powerhouse economic engines that generate \$52.3 billion in spending at more than 13,000 events.

Clearly, trade shows present tremendous opportunities. When managed effectively, they can help you and your clients reach target publics with a product introduction, generate membership interest or measure acceptance for a new business service. Here, we’ll tackle the somewhat mundane, yet important, details needed to plan and manage a successful event.

o Complete registration, rental and service forms — now. All trade event sponsors require exhibitors to fill out forms — often lots of forms — prior to the show dates. The key word here is prior. Honor all deadlines listed on required paperwork, otherwise you could encounter extra costs, service and delivery delays, or even a notice that exhibition hall space is sold out. Most shows provide exhibitors with a service kit that includes a handy to-do list containing shipping, service and other deadline dates. Completed applications can usually be sent by fax or processed online, and a credit card will be required for services unless you’re paying in advance by check.

Plan to submit forms to the following groups: a) the sponsoring organization (for booth and exhibitor registration, hotel accommodations and certificate of insurance); b) the exhibit management company (for material handling, furniture and computer rental, carpeting and union labor); and c) the exhibit hall (for electric and Internet service, and sometimes catering). Insist that all vendors provide you with printed confirmation of your registration and service orders and bring copies of all processed forms to the event.

o Arrive early, avoid the rush. There are no set starting times for trade events; however, all exhibitors must have their displays set up and must be prepared for business when the exhibit hall opens. That’s why wise exhibitors arrive the day before (assuming the event is out of town), head directly to the exhibit hall and begin display construction. You can always check into the hotel later. Make sure everything you shipped — the display, literature, giveaway items — arrived undamaged. Get the display set up immediately, whether you’re using hired labor or doing it yourself. If there’s a problem, whether it’s a damaged display panel, a missing part or a faulty high-speed Internet connection, this is the time to find a solution, not 15 minutes before showtime. Prepare literature for distribution by stacking it in neat piles or on a rack, but keep any giveaway items sealed in their shipping containers or in a secure place until right before the hall opens; items left on display can disappear when left overnight. As far as your laptop, cell phone or other valuable items, take them with you when you’re not on the floor.

o Look sharp and observe on-floor etiquette. The maxim “You only have one chance to make a first impression” holds true once the exhibition hall is open for business. Attendees will be much more likely to visit, spend time, take your handouts and, most important, remember the message you want to communicate when the exhibit team presents a professional image. Dress in proper business attire at all times, unless a themed corporate team presence fits the event and audience. (For example, the logo denim shirt look might be appropriate at a software exhibition, but not for a mortgage bankers group.) Wear your name badge at all times and treat it like cash — you’ll be charged for a replacement if it’s lost.

o While on the exhibit floor, look attentive and welcoming. Stand at the entrance to the booth space, but don't block access. And don't be bashful; it's appropriate to read attendees' name badges and invite them by name into the space. Spend time before the show conducting role-playing exercises with all booth staff to ensure everyone understands what's expected. Remember, you only have a finite amount of time on the exhibit floor. Make the most of it by communicating effectively with as many people as possible. A final note: Eating while on booth duty is unprofessional, unproductive and unacceptable.

o What to give and what to take. The capabilities brochures, monthly newsletters, CDs and premium items you plan to distribute should support your objectives for participating in the show — whether they are to generate media coverage, build product awareness, test-market a new service or increase membership or course attendance. But be judicious about what you offer to visitors and think small. A visitor may, indeed, take your literature, but there is a good chance a heavy product catalog will be left behind, especially since some airlines charge for checked luggage exceeding weight limits. Gatefold brochures, four-page collateral pieces, two-sided product profiles and informational CDs stand a better chance of making the trek home simply because they weigh less. You can always offer to send heavyweight materials later.

Giveaway items selected for trade events run the spectrum from the ridiculous (Frisbees and slingshots) to the sublime (miniature tool kits, coniferous tree seedlings), from the useful (notepads, highlighter pens) to the overused (coffee mugs, T-shirts, ballpoint pens). What should you select? What works for a fellow exhibitor might not work for you, so don't be swayed by a neat gizmo just because it looks cool. Select a giveaway that complements the product or service on display, has space for the company logo, Web address or phone number and meets your budget. Expect to pay 50 cents on the low end per item and more than \$3 on the high end.

Certainly take home business cards for follow up and database development. But don't stop there. Prepare a simple contact form to compile qualitative information on visitors: their awareness of your product or service; their depth of knowledge or understanding; and their willingness to purchase, sample or learn more.

The success of your show depends on a variety of second-party sources: the sponsoring organization staff, exhibition management staff, union laborers, computer technicians, caterers and shipping personnel. Treat them all with courtesy and respect. Remember, these people have to construct a miniature marketplace in the course of days or even several hours. Sometimes mistakes are made. Being graceful during stressful moments will yield more results than a temper tantrum.

When you're ready to pack up, ship the excess literature and giveaways to the next event or back to the office rather than discarding them or leaving them behind. Reuse your original shipping cartons and pack carton sealing tape to secure the contents. One more piece of advice: Wear comfortable shoes, because you'll be on your feet a long time.

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