

Exhibitions Tips

Doing a show is a great way of meeting existing and potential customers/clients. However, understanding what delegates want from a show and what kind of people they are is key to successful exhibiting. What they don't want is sore feet. According to research by HSBC Bank, people spend only about one-fifth of their day wandering around the exhibition stands.

The bulk of their time is carefully pre-planned: attending lectures and workshops and having pre-arranged meetings with exhibitors or other delegates. Meeting the right people and hearing knowledgeable speakers is more important than collecting a polybag of brochures.

Event organisers have cottoned on to this and often provide free seminars and conferences alongside the main event, to which exhibitors are encouraged to contribute.

At a big show as many as half the exhibitors may also be giving presentations and educational seminars on their own stands. The chances are that these will be the ones delegates are actually visiting.

The best way to find out who attends which shows is to ask your customers which ones they go to. Reputable show organisers understand who comes to their events and why. The sales representative should be able to tell you who attended last year's show - with Audit Bureau of Circulation-audited statistics - and who is expected to attend this year, including their status and buying power.

If this information is not forthcoming, think carefully before signing the contract. Also, ring up some companies that exhibited at last year's event and ask them what they gained from it.

It is the organiser's job to get people to the show, but it is your job to get them onto your stand, so it is important to be proactive. Pre-invite as many people as you can manage, including customers (lapsed as well as current), the press and prospects culled from the exhibition's delegate list.

People spend £10,000 on a stand, but if they spent a few hundred more on marketing or training they could quadruple the benefits.

It is best to have a mixture of people on the stand: cheery sales people to welcome visitors and collect leads, support staff to field technical questions, a receptionist to make appointments, and a senior bod for swank value.

Everyone should be fully briefed about the company's aims for the event, and armed with some appropriate chat-up lines to win delegates' confidence - nice, open questions like, "What are you looking for at the show?"

Sales people may need to be warned off the hard-sell approach; you're looking to collect leads, not necessarily make sales on the spot. And establish a few ground rules; for example, nobody has a hangover; nobody reads a newspaper on the stand; and nobody says, "Can I help you?"

Collecting leads is more than chucking business cards into a bucket. You need to capture enough information about the person - identity, business need, likely

solution, buying plans, budget - that you can follow up intelligently after the show. Then classify the leads so you can follow up the strongest first.

An estimated 70 to 80 per cent of exhibitors don't follow up leads properly. Someone should be responsible for organising the follow-up, ensuring the sales people phone the people they met to arrange meetings and so on, and writing to more nebulous prospects - several times if necessary. The key thing is to get the right sales people following up leads within a week of the show.

Vitality is worth more than vanity. "You only have two or three seconds to grab people's attention, so it is very important to create some sort of movement. This can consist of light or sound, software or videos, lectures, demonstrations, or just the throng of delegates enthralled by your pitch.

If all else fails, there are always gimmicks and giveaways. A company called Alpha Landsteinar swears by the "free sweetshop" format it uses at the Retail Solutions show. But beware: they remember a company that paid a troupe of Japanese traditional drummers to perform on its stand. "True enough they got a crowd each time the drummers set up, but the crowd fled as soon as they started playing. The noise was actually painful!"

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