

# Trade Show Marketing Best Practices

by Mark Johnson, CBC Account

Trade shows are a time-honored tradition among business-to-business (B2B) marketers. Trade shows used to be the only way for prospects to get a really good look at what new products were available. The Internet has changed that; companies cut back on sending employees to attend trade shows, and many of the weaker shows went out of business. Marketers started questioning the value of exhibiting at any trade show, as trade show marketing usually has the highest cost per lead of any promotional activity, exceeding \$250.

However, trade show marketing as a tactic has shown an amazing resilience, as marketers realize that there is no substitute for face-to-face meetings with clients and key business partners. In fact, in Goldstein Group's most recent study on marketing budget trends, B2B marketers reported they plan to allocate 17% of their 2010 budget on trade shows.

The quality of sales leads coming from trade shows continues to rank among the most qualified. Companies are still exhibiting at trade shows, but they do fewer of them and they are focused on squeezing all the value they can from them.

At 17% of your budget, it makes sense to make sure you wring every bit of value out of any trade show. The following 25 tips are best practices that have emerged from years of collective experience with B2B clients from a wide variety of industries. There are of course exceptions for every rule, but the advice that follows will help marketers limit costs and get the most benefit from trade show marketing.

1. Schedule customer appointments. Every salesperson should arrange set meeting times with customers during the show. Slot prospect appointments at the same time as customer appointments. It's magic when your customers do the selling for you. Specific customer appointments have become standard in trade shows; making the show pay for itself by hoping for quality "walk-by" traffic is unlikely.
2. Schedule appointments with editors who are going to the show. Editor face time is invaluable. It is the basis of trust that will result in ongoing PR coverage. Make good use of their time by educating them, and then give them a press release that ties into the trends you just described.
3. Seek free product coverage in advance show guide and show dailies.
4. Host a breakfast if you have a particularly educational topic and a strong list of prospects you can invite via targeted direct marketing. Consider co-sponsoring it with a publication to attract a wider audience and enhance your visibility.

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5. Meal sponsorships are not worth the cost. However, sometimes it is affordable at small, well-targeted conferences. Consider a sponsorship only if you get to speak to the group and get to put literature on each chair.
6. Send someone from marketing to manage the booth. The marketing person is judged on how many leads the show generated, and will act accordingly. Most salespeople just wait for prospects to approach them, and at times their sense of urgency is lessened if the prospect is in not their territory.
7. Triage your traffic: marketing people invite passersby into the booth, sales people or customer service reps qualify them, and the qualified prospects get passed to sales people or sales engineers who stand in the back of the booth and can spend lots of time with them.
8. Don't buy space in a literature rack at the show.
9. You can have the daily newspaper delivered by the show hotel staff to hotel guests with your ad wrapped around it. You can also print up a restaurant guide and have that delivered to hotel rooms. This is far more cost effective and high profile way to stand out, away from the competing messages at the show.
10. Don't spend a lot of money on trinkets to give away. Real prospects are looking for solutions, not Frisbees. If you must, then use trinkets germane to your message, such as battery-powered fans to promote a new product with the highest temperature rating in the industry.
11. Don't give literature to unqualified prospects – instead, tell them that you'll send the literature to them so they don't have to carry it, and then get their contact info. Most of the literature collected at shows never makes the plane home.
12. In the booth, things that move attract attention. Moving machinery, for example, is a magnet for engineers. Remember to use things germane to the product. A dancing fountain is relevant for a pump manufacturer, but not a paper company.
13. Be tasteful. No dancing girls, etc.
14. Demos and presentations work if the show floor is crowded and if you have enough space in the booth. You can present twice a day (invite prospects) or hire someone to give a canned presentation every hour. You can post the job at a local college theater department.
15. Games attract a lot of unqualified people. The booth should be an environment for selling.
16. Extra carpet padding is worth the extra price.
17. Pre-show mailings no longer seem to be as effective as in the past. However, you should always send an email invitation to customers and prospects. Offer a reason for them to come to the booth, such as a show discount.
18. Have a daily huddle with booth staffers. Remind them of their roles, what their shifts are, and review the activity from the day before. Keep the team focused on the specific goals set before the show: number of leads, number of qualified prospects, number of appointments kept, etc.

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19. Tradeshow signage: resist the temptation to fill your booth with words. A booth is more like a billboard than a datasheet. Attendees won't stand in your booth to read its signage, and in any case it is the job of booth staff to communicate key messages and product features. The booth should be an environment for selling.
20. Don't put signage below table height. It will never be noticed.
21. Make sure your booth and literature graphics are consistent in look and message with your website.
22. After the show, follow up on leads promptly within days. One client even had a system set up so that leads were sent to the home office at the end of each day, so that when the prospect returned to his/her office, a package from the client was waiting for them. It spoke volumes about the company's interest in their business, their follow-through, and their attention to customer service.
23. Watch your body language. Standing with your arms crossed does not welcome people into the booth. Neither does talking with colleagues – attendees will find you unapproachable.
24. When you meet someone, introduce yourself and use their name when you talk with them. Ask open-ended questions, such as, "what prompted you to stop by our booth?" If you ask, "how's it going?" or "can I help you?" you will likely get a one-word response or a "no."
25. Always get complete lead information and mark the contact with lead quality and notes of your conversation. This is valuable for lead followup.

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