

# Making the Most of Your Trade Show Visit: Avoid These 18 Common Mistakes

Phillip M. Perry

**G**oing to IMTS? Beware. It's easy to make any number of common mistakes that can turn your productive buying trip into an expensive bomb.

"Attending a trade show is an investment in time," says Steve Miller, who runs a consulting firm called Adventure of Trade Shows in Federal Way, WA. "And time is the currency of the 1990s."

How true. Given the business opportunities you forgo to attend the show, the hours you spend navigating the aisles can be more expensive than the actual cash outlay for flight and hotel room.

So how can you get a solid return on all this investment in time and money? Seven trade show consultants pinpoint the most common errors made by trade show visitors — then tell you how to avoid making them.

## Phillip M. Perry

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**1. Neglecting advance planning.** "I would really stress the importance of preparing for your visit far in advance," says Richard J. Brunken, president of Human Resources Development, Milwaukee, WI.

Indeed, most consultants cite the lack of sufficient advance planning as the number one reason why trade show visitors spin their wheels. They advise marking your calendar a month prior to the trade show. That's when you should start thinking about two things: your goals for attending the show and your strategy for reaching those goals.

**2. Defining goals that are too general.** When deciding what you want from the show, avoid general statements such as "seeing what's new" or "seeing our suppliers." If you don't set specific goals, the show may end with you feeling as though you failed to accomplish all you could.

Steve Miller suggests a better way: "Ask yourself what is the biggest problem you have in your business. Write this down in the form of a question. Then take this question to the show with the idea of getting answers from the staffers in the booths."

For example, how can I get greater cutting accuracy and longer tool life? Who offers the highest productivity with the lowest per piece cost? From

which manufacturer can I get the best support and customer service?

One question or a series of similar questions will keep you focused on what you really need to accomplish at the show.

**3. Not developing a strategy to reach goals.** You may fail to reach your goals because you did not plot a detailed strategy. "Define a game plan so all your steps are laid out before you arrive at the show," says JoAnn R. Hines, who attends close to 20 shows every year as president of the consulting firm of Hines & Associates, Ackworth, GA.

The steps in the strategy should result in achieving your stated goals. Example: See  $x$  number of vendors to find the best sources for a specific product or type of equipment.

Part of a successful strategy is to allocate tasks among coworkers who will be attending the show. Do this early enough to avoid the duplication of effort that would otherwise result when different people plan to accomplish the same goals.

**4. Failing to get a floor plan and booth directory in advance.** Most shows have floor plans that list booths numerically and directories that list exhibitors alphabetically. Well in advance of the show, ask the managing company to send you both.



"Cross-reference the directory with the floor plan to lay out a walking plan which maximizes the time you spend at the show," says Hines. The savings in hours will ensure that you reach your goals. "Most people just turn to the right and go down the aisle to start the show," says Hines.

And what if an advance copy of the directory is not available? "Many shows that don't send out directories will send you their exhibitor registration lists," advises Hines.

Industry trade publications will usually include advance directory and booth information (see p. 9).

**5. Not prioritizing sections of the floor plan.** Try to estimate how many booths you will be able to visit during the time you have at the show. "The average attendee spends about 13 minutes at each exhibit targeted for a visit," says Brett Fisher, marketing manager of the Trade Show Bureau, a Denver, CO, association that studies the industry. He adds: "To that you must add your walking time, eating, resting and the chance encounters with peers."

Considering that slack time, figure you can visit maybe three booths each hour. These are booths run by exhibitors you specifically want to see, not unknown booths where you stop for quick looks while walking up and down the aisles.

Okay. That comes to 18 booths in a six-hour period. Select these booths as your "Priority 1" selections and mark them with a green marker. Write general guidelines for seeing  $x$  number of these booths per hour. You want to see these exhibitors without fail.

Select a number of "Priority 2" booths and mark them with yellow. You see these booths during slack time between the green booths. Then use a red marker for the new vendors in whose products you might be interested and for those whom you'd like to see if the opportunity arises.

Now you have a visual aid for

walking the floor. You can check off the booths as you see them and monitor your progress in getting through your top priority stops.

**6. Making too many appointments.** Don't get carried away when you make appointments. Trying to squeeze too many in one day can actually make you less effective on the floor. That's because you can easily fall behind and start rushing from one appointment to another before you have all the information you intend to gather.

"Rather than setting definite appointment times, I suggest you tell the booth staffers you will drop by during certain windows of time," says Hines. "Say something like, 'I'll drop by between this and that time. . .'" If the staffer is busy when you drop by, don't waste time hanging around. Leave word about the next window of time in which you'll drop by, then move on.

**7. Carrying too much.** Travel light. Hauling a briefcase and other unnecessary items can slow you down and tire you out, making you less effective in the booths. If possible, carry only what you need to take notes, along with your specific questions and your floor plan.

And don't weigh yourself down with lots of product literature from the booths. Take advantage of whatever facilities the show has to check your pile of literature. Some shows also have shipping services, even providing the cardboard boxes.

**8. Wearing the wrong shoes.** More of a problem than you might think, wearing the wrong shoes was universally cited as a damaging error that can erode productivity.

"Select a good walking shoe that has a compliant outsole," advises Steven I. Subotnick, a podiatrist in Hayward, CA. "That means that the sole is not hard leather, but is soft and rubber-like so that it absorbs shocks easily."

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You should also select a shoe that has arches that match your foot, especially if your arches are either unusually low or high. Better quality shoe stores have certified shoe fitters to advise you.

"Women should avoid pointed shoes," says Subotnick. "Their shoes should have leather that stretches over the toes and is not so firm that it will cause corns and callouses."

**9. Omitting an "early bird" visit.** If you visit the show building early in the morning prior to the official opening time, you will find lots of magazines and product literature waiting in bins. "Gather it up, pack it in a box, and check it before the show begins," says Hines. "Then it's out of the way." The show may also ship it to your office for you. You haven't missed anything, and you won't weigh yourself down with material nonessential to buying.

Some literature, such as the market publications, you can review right away. "Scan them to see if there are any interesting product announcements," advises Bob Donath, a trade show consultant in White Plains, NY. "If so, mark where the booths are and hit them at an appropriate time."

**10. Not previewing the show.** Schedule some time to "scope" the show before you start the walk that you have laid out. Walk the entire show floor quickly, looking for unexpected exhibitors or products. Take notes on what looks interesting. Then sit down and adjust your color-coded floor plan and walking path to include them.

**11. Following the crowd.** You are showing your independence from the mob by planning a productive trade show visit. Take that one step further: Walk the show in reverse. "You will get faster attention from the booth staffers if you walk against the traffic," says Donath. "Most visitors start in the front of the show and crowd the booths. If you start in the back,

you will be talking with staffers who are not already crowded by other buyers. You will be able to cover a lot more booths right off the bat."

**12. Ignoring the newer booths/lines.** While you don't want to spend too much time at them, the smaller and newer booths can provide leads for new products that can make your visit even more successful. "You'll see lots of interesting products from exhibitors who are new to the show," says Donath. "These booths are great for generating ideas."

Don't make the mistake of ignoring them. The trick is to cover a lot of them fast. Get in and get out quickly, taking notes on new products you can use.

**13. Attending too many seminars.** Be judicious when attending workshops. Ask two questions: "Is the material covered by the workshop so unique that I cannot obtain it elsewhere?" and "Does the subject matter relate directly to my job and to why I have come to the show?"

A seminar on time management may be appealing to you, but you will likely answer "no" when you ask the two questions. Unless there is another compelling reason for you to attend the workshop (like your boss ordered you to), avoid it.

**14. Not steering the conversation at the booths.** "As the buyer, you are the one in control," says Robert F. Dallmeyer, president of R. D. International, a Los Angeles, CA, consulting firm. "Never forget that. Don't be afraid to exercise your control by steering the conversation at the booths."

That means interrupting a booth staffer who is waxing eloquent on some features of his product that don't concern you and navigating the conversation toward benefits that will help you make more money.

Here's where your goal questions really come in handy. Miller suggests writing the questions on several dozen 3 x 5 inch cards. When you get

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# IMTS Survival Guide

**On September 7**, the equivalent of a medium-sized town will be dropped on Chicago's lakefront. Finding your way around this small city will require more than strong legs and a good sense of direction. *Gear Technology* has assembled some basic information about IMTS to help you get the most from your show visit.

## IMTS Basics

Show Dates: September 7-15

Location: McCormick Place, Chicago, IL

Hours: 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. except Sunday, Sept. 11, 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. and Wednesday, Sept. 15, 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

Registration Information: Call 800-322-IMTS.

## The Complete Traveler

**Getting There from Here.** Shuttle buses, taxis and the CTA all will have routes between McCormick Place, downtown Chicago and both O'Hare and Midway airports. Costs run from \$1.50 for a CTA Rapid Transit ride from O'Hare to downtown to \$28.00 for taxi service.

Shuttles will be leaving McCormick Place for O'Hare approximately every 30 minutes during the show. You may also reserve a ride from the show to and from Midway Airport.

Special bus service has also been arranged between McCormick Place and all official IMTS hotels. Discount passes are available. For more information, call 800-322-IMTS.

**Phoning Home.** Messages may be left at the Message Center on the mezzanine level of McCormick Place North. The number there is 312-808-2055. The exhibit halls have no paging facilities, and messages can only be checked and picked up at this location.

Full-service business centers are located in both the East and North buildings. They offer secretarial and postal services, photocopy machines, fax facilities and package handling. Souvenir and gift shops are located near both centers.

**Meat and Drink.** Levy Restaurants has several restaurants inside McCormick Place, featuring a variety of items from pizza and hot dogs to full-course dinners. Specialty carts selling tacos, oriental food and snacks will be located throughout the exhibition halls.

**Cash Crop.** An ATM Money Machine is located

on Level 2 of McCormick Place East. Lakeside Bank is located at the corner of 22nd Street and King Drive, west of the North Building.

**Fun and Games.** Sports . . . Museums . . . Live theater . . . Great architecture . . . The lakefront . . . No one lacks for amusement in Chicago. To help you find the best entertainment, Chicago Information Booths are located in both the North and East buildings. You can also call the Chicago Convention and Tourism Bureau at 312-567-8500.

## Getting to the Good Stuff

Many, but not all, of the exhibitors of gear-related products and services will be located in either the Metal Forming & Fabricating Pavilion or the Tooling Systems Focus Area, both on the upper level of McCormick Place North.

To make sure you don't miss any exhibits of interest, use the Electronic Product Directory. Just insert your Expocard (part of your registration packet) in one of the computers located throughout McCormick Place, select the products of interest to you and get a printed list.

And to help you keep your bearings, the carpets in the exhibition hall are color-coded to indicate pavilion and focus area boundaries.

## Hot Times

Over 100,000 visitors are expected at IMTS, but there are ways to keep ahead of the crowd. The first and last 90 minutes of each day at the show are less crowded than the rest of the time. "Slow" days are the opening and closing days and Saturday and Sunday.

## Manufacturing '94

The Society of Manufacturing Engineers is cosponsoring and managing *Manufacturing '94—the Machining, Tooling and Fabricating Conference*, which will run concurrently with IMTS. Seminars will cover a wide variety of manufacturing subjects, including gear-related issues such as cutting tool materials, tool management, remanufacturing machine tools, EDM and lasers.

The conference will run from September 7-14. Hours are 8:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Meetings will be held in McCormick Place North, Lower Level.

For more information, contact SME at 800-763-2734 or 313-271-1500.



to each booth, hand the cards to a rep and ask how the company's products can solve your problem. That narrows down the dialogue to basic matters pronto. If the staffer doesn't have an answer right away, say you'll return later for the information.

Alternatively, use a statement such as, "I need to make a business decision" to shift the booth staffer's pitch away from product features and

toward your needs. Explain what the business decision is; then ask how the products at the booths can help you make that decision.

"If you find you know more about the products than the salesman does, move on quickly to another booth," says Human Resources Development's Richard Brunken. You may jot down the name of a better qualified person who is expected later.

"Also find a way of verifying what the staffers say the product can do," says Brunken. "Get the name of designers or other technical people whom you can call after the show."

**15. Writing sloppy notes.** Jotting notes on the back of business cards . . . in the margins of show directories . . . along the top of product literature sheets. . . Show visitors can think of as many ways to confuse themselves later as there are blank spots on papers. Avoid them all. If you return home with a bunch of sloppy notes on all kinds of paper, you'll never get them organized enough to achieve the goals you set for the show.

"If you need to take a lot of notes, then a tape recorder is good," says JoAnn Hines of Hines & Associates. "If you want to jot down short personal responses to what you see, then use a small note pad that fits in your pocket."

**16. Not exploiting "slow" hours.** Every show has its hours when the aisles are as calm as a country pond at midnight, and the booth staffers stand around yawning and staring at each other like owls. "This is the best time to make appointments," says Adventure of Trade Shows' Steve Miller, "especially with your high-priority companies whom you really must see. Find out when the slow times are by calling ahead and asking the exhibitors or others who have attended the show."

Hines recommends Sunday as the least crowded day if the show starts that day. "A lot of buyers don't come in on Sunday, so you have more time to talk with the booth staffers," she says. "It's also a good time to scope out the show."

**17. Not monitoring promises to follow-up.** Don't let the exhibitor forget to contact you with requested information. According to Miller 80% of exhibitors fail to follow up as promised after the show has closed its doors. That means a lot of wasted time. You may never get the informa-

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tion that you need to make better buying decisions.

To solve the problem, Miller has developed what he calls a "buyers guide." This is a long vertical card roughly 4 x 8 inches. The buyers carry a couple of dozen such cards as they walk the show. At each booth they pull out a card and fill it in with answers that the representative gives to their questions.

Lines are included for information such as specific products or services seen, type, quantity and delivery terms. Way down at the bottom is a question: "What is the action step agreed to after the show?" Answers may include making a telephone call, a personal visit or sending literature.

Trade shows are busy times for exhibitors and visitors alike. With hundreds (or thousands) of people coming and going at each booth, it's easy for records to get lost in the shuffle. "By using such a card, you have a personal record of what the exhibitor promised to do," says Miller. Two weeks after the show, go through your cards and call anyone who did not follow up with whatever action or information you requested.

**18. Not updating coworkers.** Prepare a brief report for your coworkers. What are the trends you spotted? The applications you saw? The new products and technology introduced? "Your sharing will not only spread useful and enlightening information, but will reinforce your learning process as well," says Brett Fisher of the Trade Show Bureau.

In summary, to get the most from your visit to a trade show, think of it as a research project rather than a recreational browse through a shopping mall. Have clear goals in mind when you go, a clearly thought-out strategy for achieving those goals, and a specific plan for follow-up after the show is over. That is the best way to make your investment of time, money, and effort pay off. ■

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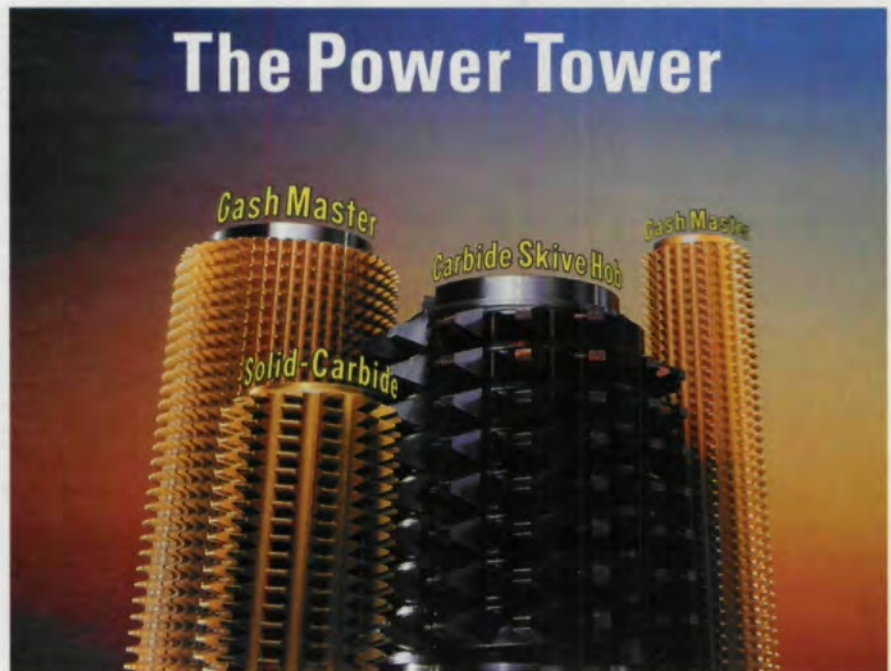


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