

The Bottom Line on Trade Shows

Turning Trade Show Leads Into Sales Is The Name of The Game.

Nancy Bartels

The whole point of a trade show is to get leads that will turn into sales. No matter how attractive your booth was, no matter how smoothly the setup and the show ran, no matter how many visitors you had at your booth, if your presence at a show didn't net you any sales, then your considerable investment of time, money, and effort has been wasted.

But turning trade show leads into sales does not happen by magic. Like the other parts of a successful trade show, this transformation is the result of planning and hard work.

Getting Them In

Step 1, of course, is getting people to your booth, where you can qualify them and determine if they are valid prospects. Every trade show is full of noise, color, and activity, and just getting a visitor to notice your booth can be a challenge.

The key words here are comfortable and inviting. People have to want to stop

at your booth. It shouldn't be too crowded or cluttered. Avoid graphics, furniture, and colors that will cause visual overload. One new machine, attractively displayed, will be more effective than several similar models all jammed together.

You want to be different enough to stand out from the crowd, but beware of novelty for its own sake. You may attract a lot of lookers with a magician or a girl in a bathing suit, but will any of them stop to discuss your product after the dog and pony show is over?

Your booth should also be neat and clean, of course, and your people should stand out. Consider having them wear distinctive hats, sports jackets, or ribbons that will identify them as the people with the information about your products. Remember you want to make it easy for the visitor to ask questions and get the information he or she wants.



MANAGEMENT MATTERS

At the same time, avoid a booth that is too perfect or too comfortable. John T. Lawrence, of Design Origins, Inc., says, "I've seen booths that are so neat, pristine, and pretty that no one wants to walk into them. They're beautiful. People walk by and say, 'God, that's gorgeous,' but no one stops. They're afraid to mess up the white rug or whatever."

Lawrence also warns against having a lot of sofas or comfortable chairs. "You don't want people to use your booth as a rest area." A table and upright chairs that say, "Let's talk business," are more appropriate.

Are You Qualified?

Once you have people

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in your booth, your most important task is to separate the serious prospects from the tire kickers. A stack of business cards from booth visitors by itself will be next to useless in terms of generating sales. These names have to be evaluated - or qualified - for their sales potential.

Qualifying leads is a process that should begin before the show even opens. Your salespeople need to have the proper qualifying forms, and they should be trained before the show to fill them out properly.

Your qualifying form should answer the following questions: Is the prospect using your product or a similar one? Is he or she considering purchasing one? Can he or she influence the decision to buy? When is the purchase planned? What is the budget for the purchase? You may also wish to add questions that apply uniquely to your product, but these five questions should be the basis for your form.

After you have developed your qualifying form, you will need to establish some criteria for evaluating the information you receive. What will constitute an "A" lead - a really hot prospect? What will make a "D" lead - probably not really interested? A chief decision-maker with a half-million dollar budget already approved and looking to buy in the next six months is obviously a better prospect than a someone with no

influence on purchasing at a company with no budget for acquisitions in the coming year. A clear set of criteria for evaluating leads understood by everyone working your booth and back in the home office is necessary to make the most of your trade show effort.

But your planning shouldn't stop with the qualifying form. *Absolutely crucial to your success in turning prospects into sales is what happens to these leads - both at the show and afterwards - once they have been qualified.*

At the show, your sales staff should be instructed to fill out a form every time. Too much goes on at a trade show to trust anything to memory. A system should be developed so that properly qualified leads get into the right hands as soon as possible. You don't want good leads to end up languishing in a coat pocket or briefcase. Don't wait to bring all the leads back from the show with you. Get them to the home office or to your literature fulfillment house right away.

Literature & Freebies

The question of what to give away and how much to give are open to discussion. The issue should always be looked at in the context of the basic purpose of your goal at a trade show - to qualify potential customers. If freebies help, then they're worth the trouble and expense; if not, trouble and expense are all they are.

John Lawrence puts the freebie question this way: "The only thing more important than getting your name out is getting the prospect's name, address, and business card. If the booth visitor isn't really a prospect, then you don't care so much about that, but, in that case, it's sure nice if they took a notepad or ruler with your name on it back to the office."

Lawrence recommends personalizing literature. Write something - a quote, a phone number. He says, "Rather than just handing out literature, you should be discussing the brochure with the prospect. Make a note of

ris RF Communications Group in Rochester, NY, has a different view of the literature question: "I don't recommend handing out literature in the booth at all. It's like flushing it down the toiletProspects leave it behind or throw it out because they don't want to carry it."

Instead Cicotta recommends setting up a system to mail literature to prospects during the show. He suggests either having a local fulfillment house do the mailing or have the leads sent to your home office each day. Literature packets for each of your products should be prepared

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An industrial sales call costs \$250, whether it is made on a hot prospect or someone with no interest. A trade show contact costs only half that.

some kind and give it to them. That makes it more valuable than just a printed piece. People will say, 'I'm going to throw this away - oops! - I gotta keep this one.'"

John Cicotta, an experienced exhibit manager, formerly with Gleason Works and now with Har-

ahead of time and mailed to the prospect the day after he or she visits your booth. "Think how impressed the prospect will be when he returns from the show and finds the literature he requested waiting on his desk," says Cicotta.

Richard Erschik, of

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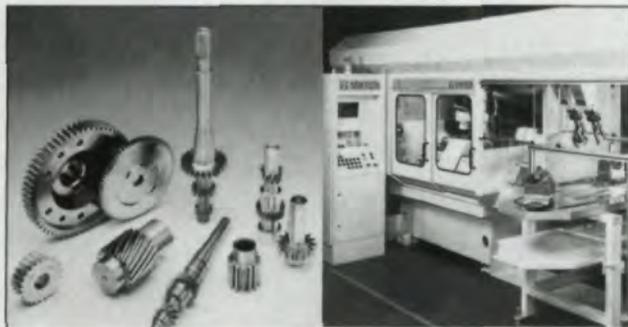
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Leads to Sales, a marketing consulting firm in Carol Stream, IL, goes one step farther. He recommends: "Send your literature only to qualified people. As a courtesy, you should send something to everyone who stopped at the booth, but save your big, glitzy, expensive catalog or product kit for qualified prospects."

After the Ball is Over

Once the show is over, your work with your prospects is only beginning. Follow-up is the key to turning leads into sales, and it is here that many companies negate all the hard work and effort they have put into making a successful trade show appearance. According to a survey run in *New Equipment Digest*, less than 20% of the leads brought home from trade shows are ever followed up!

Why? Not because sales forces are lazy or inefficient, but because following up on leads from trade shows tends to be the lowest priority for the sales team.

Here's why. Consider that today it takes approximately 12 tries to get through to a person on the phone. You have to deal with the voice mail, leave messages, get busy signals, miss a couple of returned calls, and then, maybe, if you're lucky, you will actually make contact with the person to whom you wanted to speak - only to get a reply like,

card at your booth? Which show? When? No, I'm not interested in your new line of computerized portable gadgets. There's no money in the budget."

Not even your most aggressive and persistent salesperson will be willing to spend a great deal of time in conversations like that, especially when he or she can be having much more pleasant - and productive - ones servicing current customers.

The solution? Requalify all those names you got at the show. It sounds like a lot of work, and it is, but in the end, while you will have fewer leads to turn over to your sales department, they will be better leads, much more likely to turn into sales. And, after all, it's results, not total number leads, that are important.

The requalification should be done by someone from your marketing department. The phone call to requalify should be a conversational one whose aim is not to sell products, but to discover the level of interest in buying your product. It should answer the same five basic questions you used to qualify prospects at the show: Present use of product; consideration of use; decision-maker status; date of purchase; budget. Only the prospects that survive this second cut are the ones that should be sent to your sales department.

"XYZ Gadgets? I left a

This is a system it takes

time to implement. Begin by requalifying only the people who were "A"s and "B"s in your show qualification. Others can be sent literature or put on a mailing list. Expect that the process will take two or three months. Also expect that it will take your sales force a while to get used to the fact that the leads now coming from trade shows are truly valuable potential customers.

Realize that this system will work much better if you put it on a computer data base. This is valuable information you can use not just to generate sales, but also in your other advertising and marketing

turn into solid numbers on your sales chart.

The trade show route to sales is expensive and a lot of work. If you find yourself wondering if it's really worthwhile, if the money and time might not be better spent some other way, consider one set of numbers. The cost of the average industrial sales call in the U.S. is \$250.00 - whether the call is made on a hot prospect ready to sign a contract or on someone who "might be interested some day." According to the National Association of Exposition Managers, the cost of a contact generated at a trade show is nearly 50%

MANAGEMENT MATTERS

Less than 20% of leads brought home from trade shows are ever followed up. One reason is because the leads have never been properly qualified.

plans. You're going through a lot of effort to get it. Be sure to make the most of it.

Once you get this system in place, either using your own staff or an outside fulfillment service, you will find that the prospects gleaned from a successful trade show do

less than that.

So in spite of the complexity of planning and implementing a successful trade show strategy, it is still one of the most cost-effective means available to get your message to interested prospects. And that, of course, is the point. ■

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