

Operation Trade Show

Planning ahead and keeping an eye on the details are keys to a successful trade show exhibit.

Nancy Bartels

Organizing a successful trade show exhibit is not unlike running Operation Desert Storm. The logistics can be a nightmare; the expense, horrendous; the details, mind-boggling. About the only thing you won't have to cope with is having someone fire SCUD missiles at you.

On the other hand, the sales leads you can generate at such an event can make it well worth the effort. According to the National Association of Exposition Managers, when you've added up all the numbers, the cost per face-to-face contact at a trade show is nearly 50% less than the cost of the average industrial sales call.

So where to begin? How do you make best use of the trade show option in your marketing plan? *Gear Technology* spoke with two trade show veterans, John Lawrence of Design Origins, Inc. of Madison Heights, MI, and Pam Felgenhauer of Exhibit Installation Specialists, Inc. with corporate offices in Philadelphia. They have shared with us some trade show planning basics.

Planning, Planning, Planning

The first key to success is

advanced planning. Going to a trade show is not a decision to be made on a whim, nor is it a plan that can be implemented in two weeks or a month. Successful trade show exhibitors often begin planning six months to a year prior to the show dates. At many shows, the first opportunity to reserve a booth comes at the close of the prior year's show (in the case of shows like IMTS or the AGMA Gear Expo, that's two years in advance), and many of the best booth locations are snapped up early.

Furthermore, for maximum effectiveness, your trade show effort should be a part of your overall marketing plans. It should not be viewed as something-*we-can-do-if-we-get-around-to-it*. What you want to show at your booth and how you show it should be part of an overall plan and should supplement your other advertising and marketing efforts.

Once you've decided that trade shows should be part of your strategy, the next question to ask is which trade shows you should attend. Research the shows at which you think you belong. John Lawrence suggests, "Get a



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prospectus from the show. It should have a count of the attendees and total audience and usually a breakdown of the industries and job functions. Evaluate if you belong there...Look at past exhibitors. If your competitors are there, it seems logical that you belong too." The next important decision to make is what you are going to show and what you want to tell the audience about it. Decide early what story you want to tell and how you are going to tell it.

The question to ask is, what will draw people to my booth? There's no point in being at a show if no one stops to see you. Hardware attracts visitors to booths at engineering shows. If you have a new machine, bring it. If your budget or the story you want to tell doesn't lend itself to that,

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show instead a smaller part - perhaps just a cut-away example of your newest feature. Or bring in samples of manufactured parts to show your booth visitors. People like to have things they can see and touch and manipulate.

How Big A Booth?

The decision about what to bring has to be made early because it affects the next important question - the size of your booth. Obviously, if you're going to show a large machine, you're going to need more than a tabletop to do it.

But other factors should also go into your size decision. "You get better exposure with a 10' x 20' booth than you do with a 10' x 10," says Lawrence. "It's just like having a bigger ad in a magazine."

Show regulations have to be considered as well. When you register for a show, you will get an exhibitor's manual. READ IT CAREFULLY. COVER TO COVER. SEVERAL TIMES. It contains a wealth of information, including any restrictions that the show management or the location will place on your booth construction.

"The best thing you can do is read those rules and regulations and make sure when you design your booth, you have followed them," says Pam Felgenhauer. "Show management has restrictions about height and different kinds of booths and not blocking other booths, etc. I've seen people come to a show with a fifteen-foot tower and dis-

cover that the ceiling is only twelve feet. They've had to take a saw and cut off the top before the show started."

Costs will also have to be factored in. On custom construction of booths you should expect to pay around \$1,000 per foot for the back wall and standard graphics. Product illustrations would be extra. A folding "suitcase" display will run between \$2,500 and \$3,500 for a 10' section. These costs are in addition to space rental, shipping, installation, and employee salaries.

If these numbers cause you to reach for your heart medicine, remember that you can do effective things with small booths or tabletops. The key to success with them is the old adage, "You get what you pay for." Lawrence puts it this way: "[With a table top...] good photography is important. A lot of people will say, 'I'll take my 35mm and go out in the shop and shoot the pictures,' and then they're disappointed with the outcome. Use good photography and quality sign work. Remember that you can use things like this for more than one show - and they do make a difference in your presentation."

Rolling Your Own - or Not

This brings us to the knotty question of when to bring in professional help. It is, of course, theoretically possible to design, build, ship, and run your booth all on your own, using only in-

house talent. And it's tempting to think you'll save a lot doing it that way. In most cases it's also probably not a good idea - especially for the first-time exhibitor.

Booth design and graphics is as specialized a field as any of the engineering disciplines, and, in the end, you will probably be more satisfied with the results if you use experienced professionals. These are the people who can give you the most "bang" for your buck.

Remember, too, that appearances are more than three-fourths of the battle at a trade show. You want a

and then of taking it down and getting it back again.

If this seems like a monumental task, you can turn it over to an installation and dismantling (I&D) house. Says Jan Felgenhauer, "We have some customers that just let us handle the whole thing. They call us and say, 'Here's where the show is. Here's when we need to be there,' and they let us take it from there."

The advantages of letting the I&D house handle all or part of your project come down to two factors; efficiency and cost-effectiveness. Because the I&D house

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booth that looks good, one that leaves the best impression of your company and its products. Sloppy, amateurish design and construction isn't going to do that.

Also keep in mind that booth design and construction are time-consuming. If someone on your staff is going to do it, that someone will have to take time away from his or her regular duties.

It may help to look at booth design and construction costs as a long-term investment. An experienced professional can design one for you that is flexible enough to meet your needs at a variety of shows and can be used for a number of years.

Moving Right Along

Once your booth is designed, there's still the question of getting it - and its contents - shipped to the show and set up on time -

will be working with several exhibitors, it will usually have access to the pick of the labor crop and the pick of the schedule. Also, on the basis of experience alone, your booth will be assembled more quickly. Remember that all the construction help you need will be paid hourly, and you can reap great savings by avoiding situations where people are standing around waiting for material to arrive or taking extra time to assemble your booth.

But many companies do choose to handle their own shipping and setup. Here again, careful planning is absolutely essential. Choose a trucking company that has experience with trade shows. Companies that are familiar with trade show practices can save a lot of headaches.


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many first-time exhibitors is the question of dealing with union help in setting up your booth. Horror stories abound, and usually they are much worse than the reality.

Says Lawrence, "Attitude is so much different than it was 20 to 25 years ago. Unions are much more agreeable. They would like to do your work because they need employment. They won't fight you like they used to...In almost all cities now, especially with small booths, they are getting very lenient."

Still, there are areas of possible conflict. The first place to check to avoid it is that exhibitor's manual. It will list which unions must be involved in your setup and what their respective jurisdictions are.

Attitude is important here. Felgenhauer reports, "Some people come in and say, 'Well, you're union, but so what? You're going to do what I say.' That attitude is not going to cut it. The best advice is, if you're having problems with a particular union person, don't argue with them. Go back to the service desk or that person's supervisor and talk to them. Let them handle it. That's what they're paid for."

Working within the system and playing by the rules are the keys to smooth operation here.

Details, Details, Details

Whether you handle all your own setup or have an I&D house do it, you will need to assign one person from your company to be responsible for the trade show booth. Pick the most

obsessive person on your staff. "You need someone who will dot every i and cross every t and then check five times after that," says Felgenhauer.

Your guide (or your designated person's) to the i's that need dotting is the show manual mentioned earlier. This book will become your "bible" for the duration.

The show manual is the source of much important information, such as setup schedules, building and zoning rules that will apply, regulations about deliveries, storage, pickup, and the vital telephone numbers of the people to call if a question comes up that the book does not answer.

Paying close attention to these dates, times, and rules can save you big money. "Missing a deadline on an installation can cost you big money," says Felgenhauer. "For example, if you get your electrical outlets in one day late, the cost will go up \$100 per line for a 110 outlet at most shows. It could be \$300 or \$400 for a 480 outlet."

But your show manager should also be flexible. "I've never been to a show where, no matter how carefully you've planned, something doesn't go wrong at the last minute. But when you've studied the manual and know the options, you know how to respond," says Felgenhauer.

It's Show Time

Planning for trade show success doesn't stop with the minute the booth is set up. The wise exhibitor remembers to bring a few "survival

supplies" to the booth as well. Some of these are common sense items, but they are easily forgotten in the rush of opening day.

Bring a small first-aid kit. Aspirin, vitamins, band-aids, and cough drops are the kinds of things that seem unimportant until you need one. And don't assume you won't need them.

The same is true for small office supplies. Be sure to pack extra pens, a stapler, ruler, scissors, paper clips, pads of paper, etc.

Paper towels, all-purpose cleaner, a small whisk broom and dust pan, and a

should not have more than one or two people in a 10' x 10' booth at one time, according to John Lawrence. On the other hand, remember that these people need a break. "If you've got two or three people at a show, let two walk through the show and have one work the booth for an hour. Then trade off," he suggests.

What you want to avoid is having five or six people standing around in your booth doing nothing. That looks bad and may actually drive people away.

Follow Up

Once the show is over,

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waste basket aren't bad ideas either. These can prevent your booth from getting "tired" before the end of the show. A basic set of tools - a hammer, screwdriver, some duct tape, extra extension cords - can also stave off minor disaster in the middle of the show.

Also think about your own comfort. Comfortable shoes are a must. You're going to be on your feet for hours on end. (If the show is running more than a day or two, consider carpet padding. The cost is minor compared to the difference it will make to your comfort.) Bring along some mints, hard candy, or chewing gum to help tide you over until you can break for a meal.

Bring enough people. The number is a trade-off between overworking your people and the space in your booth. You probably

your work is not done. Along with all the repacking and shipping of your booth and its contents, you should be taking notes on what went right and what went wrong at the show. Write down the things you want to do differently next time. Don't depend on your memory. You also should have a system in place for following up on all the contacts you made during the show. They're the reason you went to all this trouble in the first place. Failure to make good use of these contacts is to waste your entire trade show effort.

It's true. Creating and running a successful trade show exhibit is a little like organizing the Normandy Invasion. But when the contacts you make turn into good sales later, you will find that the effort has been worthwhile. ■

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