

A successful trade show starts long before the exhibit hall doors open. Want to learn how to have the best chance at success? Below is an extensive outline of best practices for the planning phase, at show participation and post event follow up.

PRE-SHOW You have chosen the show, decided on booth size, and sent in your deposit. It's time to start planning the details! Ideally, this process should start two months prior to the event; if time does not permit, then prioritize the items with a longer lead time like booth graphics and ordering of trade show materials.

- **Save The Date:** Mark off your calendar and internally recruit those you want to work the show. Have them block off their schedule to account for travel, set up, event hours and breakdown. Be sure you have enough staff to ensure success.
- **Establish a Budget:** You know the cost of the exhibit space. Now factor in transportation, lodging, food, giveaways, graphics, printed material, etc. Settle on a reasonable budget and stick to it.
- **Establish Goals:** What are you trying to get out of this show? Solid leads or sales at the show? Awareness of your new product/service? Be both specific and realistic.
- **Create a Checklist with Timing & Responsibilities:** Map out tasks working back from show date. Assign specific tasks to staff that they are responsible for. Refer to this often to make sure you are moving forward.
- **Review Current Exhibition Material:** Do you have a sufficient booth display or do you need a new one? Will it fit in the booth size you have reserved? What kind of shape are your existing graphics in? Is the information still accurate and pertinent? This is the time to pull in a graphic designer (internally or externally) that will be charged with creating an engaging, consistent visual theme.
- **Ordering of Trade Show Materials:** Many exhibitors wait until the week or two before a show to place orders. Rule of thumb for graphic design approval is 7-21 business days (dependent on item and internal agreement/sign off). Don't forget about printing and/or shipping time as well.
 - **Items to consider creating:**
 - Direct mail postcards promoting the event. Mail to prospects and best customers alike.
 - Rack cards, catalog, brochures to be handed out in booth
 - Promotional product giveaways such as pens, magnets, tote bags, food, etc., with your company logo. A good promotional products company will be able to provide you with a list of popular items.
 - Logo clothing for staff. It's a good practice to have those working the booth wear clothes bearing your company's logo.
 - Trade Show Booth/Graphics/Table Cloth. If your booth or graphics are not in good shape or you are starting from scratch, a trade show exhibition company can provide a wide range of items to fit any budget. Some types of booth display items to consider: vinyl banner (hung from the drape wall at back of booth), banner stands, and portable 10' pop up booths.
 - Name Tags. Everyone working the booth should wear a name tag!
- **Promote the Show:** While the show's producers will promote the event through multiple avenues, it is vital that you spread the word of your involvement. If you are currently advertising on TV/Radio/Print, mention the show along with date(s) and booth location. Below are some additional ways that you can promote your participation and **build excitement!**
 - **Social Media:** Post consistently on your company's Facebook page leading up to and during the event
 - **Company Web Site:** Make sure the event is on your home page

- **Email Blast:** Utilize often leading up to the show
- **Blog:** Make mention of the show in your blog posts and why you'll be there
- **Flyers:** Insert flyers in mail or messages on invoices announcing the show
- **Direct Mail:** A well timed postcard campaign mailed 3-4 weeks prior to the event is a cost-effective way to spread the word.
- **To Giveaway or Not To Giveaway?** Consider a giveaway or discount off any purchase made during the show. This helps raise awareness and create excitement among prospects. It also allows you the opportunity to capture critical visitor contact information (email, street address, phone #).
- **Trial Booth Set Up:** Once you have received all the material for your booth, find space and mark off the dimensions of your booth. Now set it up and make sure everything fits and assembles correctly. If you plan on having a table and chairs in your booth, place those as well to ensure the set up works. This is the time to work the bugs out.
- **Create Trade Show Supply Tote:** There will always be something that you forget to bring to the show, but having a well-stocked supply tote will help! Here is a list of items to consider including: Hammer, screwdrivers (flat & philips), pliers, box cutter, power strip, extension cord, paper clips, pens, pencils, sharpies, highlighters, double sided tape, scotch tape, note pads, business cards, post-it notes, scissors, white out, calculator, dust rag, paper towels, multi-purpose cleaner, small trash can, fishbowl (or other basket if capturing customer information for giveaway).

AT THE SHOW Show time is here! You've set up your booth, now what?

- Just prior to arrival, **create a schedule for who is working the booth when.** Distribute this ahead of arrival so everyone knows their schedule. Build in time to walk the show as well. Very important to meet other exhibitors, see how they present their goods/services and make new contacts. Everyone should do this at least once.
- **Do's and Don'ts in the booth:**
 - Do stand by the aisle and greet people as they walk by making eye contact
 - Don't sit in the back of the booth with a table in front of you. It tells attendees you are not approachable.
 - Do ask questions of the attendee. Are they familiar with your goods/services? Would they like to see a demonstration?
 - Don't talk on your phone, surf the web or read. If you have to take a call, excuse yourself from the booth and step away.
 - Do schedule breaks for staffers so they can stay fresh and energized
 - Don't eat lunch or snacks in the booth if possible. People are less likely to approach someone while they are eating.
 - Do gather contact information such as email, address, and phone number. If you have a giveaway make sure you ask all to complete the entry form.
 - Do ask them if they are ok with receiving the occasional email from your company.
 - Don't form a cozy cluster of you and your co-workers. Again, this makes you unapproachable.
 - Do have several good open ended questions to ask. For example, "What brings you to the show?" or "How many times have you attended this show?" Determine what they are interested in and tailor the next group of questions accordingly. Avoid asking "Hi, how are you?" It's too easy for an attendee to say fine and keep walking.

- Don't bad mouth the show, the competition or any other aspect of the event. A positive attitude will be better received by attendees and other exhibitors.
- Do remember a trade show is work. The impression you give will stay with attendees for a long time, so make it count!

POST SHOW You are back from the show, tired and want a break. We understand! But first:

- Enter all contact information gathered at the show into your database.
- Debrief staff who worked the show on the pros/cons of the event, contacts made, suggestions for improving booth, etc. Create a list or spreadsheet so you remember what changes to make for the following year.
- Distribute leads based on territory, sales person, etc.
- Send out post show letter/email thanking contact for stopping by your booth
- Social Media posting on the success of the show – Facebook, Email blast, Blog, Company Website
- Contact all leads via phone within the first 7 business days after the show
- 10 days after show regroup with staff and have updates on all follow up
- Mark your calendar with the show dates for the following year!