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Tricks of the Trade for Trade Shows (Part 1)

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Tricks of the Trade for Trade Shows . . .

A Little Planning Goes A Long Way

By Doug Swanson

Some people see trade shows as somewhat rare, exciting opportunities to meet the public, promote their company's products and services, make sales and generate leads.

Other people see trade shows as expensive-to-get-into, boring-to-work-through, weekend-killing exercises in frustration, where salespeople stand around for hours, trying to peddle their products to people who are more interested in finding their way to the Snow-Cone trailer, (meanwhile, the most important parts to the on-loan trade show display booth are packed and circulating in an airport luggage carrel somewhere in the Midwest).

In reality, trade shows are neither a marketing dream come true nor a sales manager's nightmare. The trade show is just one tool at your disposal for promoting your water treatment products and services. But a trade show can be a very effective means for you to make sales, generate leads for future sales, or introduce a new product or service—if you carefully plan and carry out your exhibit.

To insure that your trade show promotion is successful, experts agree that you must:

- Scout out the best show opportunities;
- Give lots of thought to what you will present and how you will present it;
- Devote an extensive amount of time and energy to post-show follow-up efforts.

If you work as hard to plan a trade show promotion as you do to plan the other activities of your water treatment business, you should be quite successful. Here are some ideas:

**Scouting Out Show Opportunities**

There are several kinds of trade shows and exhibits. Industrial shows are events geared toward wholesalers and other “big wheels” in the industry. They're usually not of concern to most small business entrepreneurs (although you may wish to attend these shows to get some ideas about new directions for your specific industry). Sometimes these shows are “display only” with no sales allowed.

Business-to-business shows offer opportunities for individual firms and representatives from a variety of industries to meet, exchange ideas and become familiar with the products they offer. (Your local chamber of commerce might offer such an event.) Many times, these events, too, are designed more for exhibitors to display their products rather than to write sales orders.

There are also association shows and specialty shows — which focus on medical, technological, or scientific concerns, either within one industry or within several. Often these shows are associated with a national or regional convention, such as that of the Water Quality Association (WQA).

Consumer trade shows are retail-oriented. They allow you to display your products and services to the general public. These shows include your local county or state fair, shopping mall/community events, flea market or swap meet. These shows are the places where you will be most successful in offering products designed primarily for the mass market audience. This is not to suggest that the consumer trade show is the “easiest” to plan for or attend. In fact, in many ways, the consumer show is the most difficult because you frequently encounter a lot of people who are:

- Not part of your target market;
- Part of your target market, but not “thinking business” while attending;
- Just passing through, on the way to the swine barn(!)

You can avoid the frustration that comes with not addressing the type of people you want by doing very thorough pre-show planning. It’s imperative that you locate and qualify shows that have the potential.

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tial to help you reach your target audience. Find out about those shows through your state or local chamber of commerce, your industry trade association, through national or regional trade show magazines – or by watching the pages of your community or business newspaper. The people who put on trade shows advertise heavily for businesses to exhibit in them; keep your eyes open and you will be able to find plenty of exhibit opportunities to choose from.

Qualify which shows will be of most help to you. Is the show in your service area? Do the dates of the show conflict with any other big event? Is the show in a good location? Is it a first-year show or does it have several years’ successful track record? What was last year’s attendance? What surveys have been done to determine the extent of “buying power” of the people who will attend? Is the show heavily promoted?

Is the cost to exhibit low enough that you can recoup your investment with just a few good sales?

Pre-Show Planning

Once you determine that exhibiting in a particular show would be beneficial, it’s time to get ready for the show. You can’t start too early because there’s a lot to do!

You will want to write a news release to submit to the local media several weeks in advance. Tell the media that your company will exhibit at the show and briefly tell how people will benefit from seeing what you have to offer (such as a new product or service, for example). Offer to do an interview about consumer or industry trends.

You and your employees will need to start spreading the word to current customers, prospects and your suppliers and friends in the business community. Tell them you’re going to be in the show and invite them to stop by the booth. Perhaps offer a small gift (an inexpensive but useful promotional item) as an encouragement for people to visit your exhibit.

You may wish to include a small flyer inside your billing statements to let your customers know you will be participating in the show. Remember, your current customers are still potential future customers—either for an equipment or service upgrade, new service or referral business.

Your Booth

It doesn’t matter whether you spend $300 or $3,000 on a trade show booth, the booth must look professional and accomplish the following three goals:

- It must say clearly “who” your company is;
- It can leave no doubt about what you do or sell;
- Even without people in the booth, the display must demonstrate why your products and services are important to the customer.

To determine the size of the booth you’ll need, consider the type of show you’ll be in and the kinds of people who will be there. Will you

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have heavy foot traffic throughout the show with lots of people “just looking?” Or are you likely to have less traffic but more serious customers? The people organizing the show should be able to help you plan based on their past experience.

Generally speaking, you will do better if you keep your booth well lit, so it’s bright and inviting. It should be informal but not cluttered. It’s not necessary that you stock it with reams and reams of brochures on every product you offer. In fact, it’s better if you offer a small general brochure that describes your products and services to help you open a dialogue with consumers about specific ways you can meet their needs.

Try hard to create an environment that welcomes people to enter your booth, examine your products and stay to talk. A table placed horizontally across the front of your booth (as businesses commonly do at many shows) actually blocks entrance to your booth and establishes an artificial communication barrier; it stops people from talking with you.

The location of your booth in the show is important. If you’ve got the first booth inside the front door, many people will walk right by and not even see you. If you have the last booth by the back door, many people will tire out before they get to you. Generally, most trade shows organizers say it’s best to have a corner booth somewhere in the middle of the floor space. That way, you get people as they cross the room from one side to another, and you can be seen by people walking the aisles from several directions.

When you select your exhibit space, try hard not to get a booth next to someone whose large display will overwhelm what you have. Try not to get near loudspeakers, food booths, live shows, animals or automobiles. Those things, and the distractions they generate among show visitors, will draw attention away from your booth.

Editor’s Note: Doug Swanson will continue his discussion on “Tricks of the Trade at Trade Shows” in our January 1994 issue with advice on how you should staff your booth and how you can attract sales leads and follow-up on your trade show participation.

About The Author

Doug Swanson has 12 years’ experience in broadcasting, journalism and public relations. He is on the faculty at Cameron University in Lawton, OK where he teaches mass media and communications courses.

Vice-President of the Swanson Group, a research, marketing and public relations firm, Swanson got an early start in water conditioning while working in his father’s North Hollywood, CA franchise. He was later general manager of a Rayne dealership.

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