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Tricks of the Trade for Trade Shows (Part 2)

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Tricks of the Trade for Trade Shows...

A Little Planning Goes A Long Way

Part 2

By Doug Swanson

Editor's Note: This is the concluding part of Doug Swanson's article on preparing for your company's trade show participation. Part I appeared in WC & P's December 1993 issue.

During the trade show, you must maintain a professional appearance at all times. In addition to the general appearance of your company's booth, everyone who's working in it needs to look as polished and professional as possible. Everyone needs to be in uniform (if that's your normal business attire) with a name tag. Everyone needs to have a clipboard to take notes on potential leads. Everyone needs to have business cards and brochures handy.

Unless you have a huge exhibit space, don't staff it with any more than two people at a time -- and make sure you rotate your staff members often. Nothing creates a zombie faster than putting a person of normal intelligence onto a trade show floor for a little while. Your people should work no longer than a couple of hours at a time without taking a break. Even if you have only one person in the booth (and no relief help) that person needs to get out of the booth for a break, every couple of hours, to keep mentally alert.

Do not put chairs in your booth unless they're for customers. No one working your booth should sit down. Sitting suggests a less-than-assertive attitude. Likewise, no employee in your booth should be eating or smoking, or gabbing with the person manning the booth next door. You have to be on your toes the whole time!

Be keenly aware of the amount of products you've got on display and the specific services you illustrate. You need to have examples on hand for people to see and touch but you don't want to overkill by cramming the booth with too many supplies and too much equipment.

Too Many Brochures Can Cause Trouble

Having too many brochures easily accessible invites people to "grab and get going." Mom, dad, kids and grandpa each take one of your 30-cent-a-copy brochures -- and then none of those folks buys anything from you! (In fact, trade show organizers say most literature passed out in quantity at booths gets dumped in the trash cans at the exit door.) Instead of offering a whole lot of literature, just offer one small brochure to each person. Hand it to them personally, then have more specific information ready, should you be able to engage them in a conversation about your business.

It's often helpful to arrange some kind of door-prize drawing to get people interested in your company -- and to help them remember your name. This also helps to generate a pool of names and phone numbers for future follow-up calls about your products and services. The problem is that everyone from the age of six on up tries to win something for nothing -- so you collect a lot of entry blanks with worthless names and phone numbers (people who have no potential for being a future sales lead). You can reduce this by talking to each person as he or she fills out an entry blank. If the person appears to be a good lead, write down some notes about them to help you when contacting the person in your follow-up calls.

If you decide to hand out
“freebie” prizes, make sure the give-away doesn’t cost too much. And make sure the handouts relate to your business. They need to help people make the connection between what you do and how your service will benefit the consumer. Too often, pens, pencils, magnets, calendars, key chains and other such items keep people’s hands busy—but they don’t facilitate a buying relationship between the business and consumer.

Finally, make sure that you and your employees stay in control of the dialogue with consumers. When people visit your booth, it’s your responsibility to engage them in conversation. Direct the conversation toward customers’ concerns about water quality—and how the products and services you offer can help ease those concerns. Open up conversation by asking questions:

- Have you ever tasted our delicious, chlorine-free drinking water?
- What are you doing to keep the iron out of your plumbing?
- Don’t you just hate that soap scum ring around the bathtub? Etc.

You must maintain control of the conversation at all times. Don’t get locked into conversation with someone who wants to tell you his or her life story while potential prospects walk by. If you need to, end a conversation by offering this gabby person a brochure, and then saying “I hope you’ll read this over, and then call us if you have any questions.” Then step back. Usually this gives people the message—in a polite way—that it’s time to move on.

The Follow-Up

All of your time, money and energy spent working toward a trade show promotion might as well be flushed down the drain if you don’t do follow up. You must generate leads during the trade show, and you must follow up on those leads within 72 hours after the show. Call or stop by in person. Ask them, what did they think about the show? What did they think about your booth, products and services? Did they have time to read the brochure? Did they have any additional questions about ______? (This is where your notes come in, so you can remember exactly what you spoke to the prospect about during the show).

And, if your competition was at the show, ask the potential customer if they checked out the competition’s offerings. (Don’t be scared of your competition. If you’re better-equipped to serve than they are, and can demonstrate that to the customer, then the “competition” isn’t competition any more, is it?)

Above all, continue to make the connection between you, your company, your products and services, and the prospect as different parts of the whole trade show experience. Create a positive attitude; show how the show may be over, but you’re still ready to put what you know to work to benefit the consumer.

A Few Final Words

Like everything else in business, your experience in the trade show should offer you an opportunity to learn. If your trade show exhibit wasn’t everything you had hoped for (or even if it was), take some time afterward to reflect on the event. What did you see and experience at the show? What did other exhibitors do differently? What can you improve for next time? How can you make a better connection with people most likely to do business with you? What other shows could you get into, to build on this success? ☐

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.