Planning + Execution + Follow-Up = Great Trade Show Performance

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Participation in a consumer or business trade show can bring a lot of changes to your business.

Involvement in a trade show can allow you to illustrate to the community your professionalism in dealing with many kinds of water treatment problems, polish your company’s image as a leader in the field, and stimulate sales of products and services both immediately and in the future.

On the other hand, participation in a trade show can tie up valuable resources, cost more money than you can afford to spend, frustrate your employees, and do little if anything to generate new business.

The choice is up to you

What determines how well you’ll do in a trade show exhibit is how well you plan, carry out, and follow up on your company’s appearance in the show. Successful trade show exhibits don’t just “happen,” they are planned—down to the smallest detail. If you’re considering getting into a trade show, you need to give a lot of thought to the many important issues involved.

Scouting reports help

In order to ensure that your trade show exhibit is successful, experts agree that you must first scout out the best opportunities among the dozen (or more) trade shows that may be planned in your service area over the next year. Here are some questions to ask yourself:

- Which shows have the potential to provide the best promotional opportunities for my products or services?
- Which show will have the best attendance among people most likely interested in what I have to offer?
- Which shows are promoted best by the companies or groups that host them?
- Which shows are held in the most desirable locations and at the best times of the year for my business?
- Which shows are most economical and convenient to work into my business schedule?

Not all shows alike

Not all trade shows have the same objectives. Some are industrial shows geared toward wholesalers and distributors. Other are business-to-business shows run by chambers of commerce and business clubs. Other trade shows are sponsored by associations and specialty groups, and are often associated with national conventions—such as that of the WQA and PWQA. Still other trade shows are consumer-oriented events—home shows, garden shows, bridal festivals, county fairs, etc.

I’ll never forget the big shock we got after buying our first trade show booth to kick off the opening of our public relations agency. Without much thought, we purchased a booth in a chamber of commerce consumer-oriented trade show. On the opening morning of the show, there we were in our tidy (and expensive) little booth, ready to talk to companies about public relations. The exhibit hall doors opened, and in rushed 500 senior citizens, all bused in from local retirement homes. The seniors—who, of course, had no interest in public relations consulting—swooped down on us and quickly relieved us of all our expensive literature.

Which points out an important lesson: Everyone walks through trade shows and grabs freebies and handouts. But if people visiting the show aren’t really in the market to make a purchase from you—now or in the near future—you’re wasting your time. So don’t get into a show unless there’s the potential to make contact with the people most likely to want to do business with you.

Get last year’s show stats

When planning to exhibit, talk to the sponsor about past shows: When were they held? Did they conflict with other important events in the community? What were past years’ estimated attendance? What about
the estimated “buying power” of those who attended? How many exhibitors placed in the show? Were they satisfied? Contact some of the companies which exhibited in past years—and don’t hesitate to ask tough questions about whether the show was a worthwhile experience. If it wasn’t a worthwhile experience for them, it probably wouldn’t be for you, either.

Getting ready—early!

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!

Tell everyone you’ll be there

One of the tasks most often overlooked is self-promotion. Even though the trade show itself will be promoted by the organization staging the event, you must do some promotional work for your own exhibit.

Write a brief news release to submit to the local media several weeks in advance. Announce that your company will exhibit in the show, and briefly explain 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. Keep in mind, you may have to settle for a brief mention in a business section or social calendar.

Start spreading the word to current customers, prospects, 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—some inexpensive but useful promotional item—as an encouragement for people to visit your exhibit. Talk it up at clubs and organizations you belong to—Kiwanis, Rotary, chamber of commerce or garden clubs—and try to get it into their newsletters. You may wish to include your own small flyer in your billing statements for a written reinforcement. Remember, your current customers are still potential future customers—either for an equipment or service upgrade, new service or referral business.

What to display?

When planning what will go into your exhibit booth, try to identify products and services your company offers that would be of primary interest to most people attending the show. Unless you have a very limited product line, there won’t be room in your booth to exhibit everything—and you don’t want to cram equipment into the space to the point where it looks crowded. So identify and limit what you want to promote in the show. Then, take time to consider how you want to display items in the exhibit booth.

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Say it clearly

It doesn't matter whether you spend $300 or $3,000 on a trade show booth, the booth must look professional and accomplish several goals: The booth must clearly say "who" your company is; it must leave no doubt about what you do or sell. The booth display also must graphically illustrate why your products and services are important and valuable. This may come by way of a three-dimensional display, large photos/posters or some other element that—without a single word being spoken by a salesperson—makes a statement about the value of what you offer.

Booth size factors

In order for you to determine the size of the booth necessary, you'll need to consider the type of show you'll be in and the kinds of people who will attend. Will you have heavy foot traffic throughout the show, with lots of people "just looking"? Or, are you likely to have less traffic, but more serious individual consumers? The people organizing the show are likely to be able to help you plan based on their past experience.

Put out the welcome mat

Generally, you will do better if you keep the 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 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.

Create an environment which welcomes people to step into your booth, examine your products and stay to talk. A table placed horizontally across the front of your booth (as businesses commonly do) actually blocks entrance to your booth and establishes an artificial communications barrier. It stops people from talking with you.

Instead, put the table in the back of the booth, so potential customers must come into the booth space to obtain a brochure. As your sales reps hand the brochures to customers, they have the opportunity to open a dialogue about the specifics of what you offer.

Avoid being overlooked

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 show 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 different directions.

Avoid buying a booth space next to someone whose large display will overwhelm what you have to offer. Stay away from stereo or appliance sales, food booths, animal acts or displays of kitchen gadgets. These items and the distractions they generate among show visitors will draw attention away from your booth.

Personal appearance counts

During the trade show, you must maintain a professional appearance at all times. In addition to the general look of the booth, everyone who's working in it needs to appear 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. No employee in your booth should be eating or smoking or gabbing with the person manning the booth next door. Likewise, no one in your employ should at any time sit down in the booth.

Your employees do need "break time" (nothing turns an average person of normal intelligence into a zombie faster than putting them on a trade show floor for two or three hours!), but break time needs to be taken somewhere else. An employee sitting down in the booth conveys a message of leisure to potential customers, and that's not the message you want to give, if you're in the water service business.

While we're on the subject of break time, it's really best to have employees work no longer than a couple of hours at a time. That way they can leave the booth to walk and stretch their legs, see the rest of the show, get something to eat or drink and be more aware of everything else that's going on in the exhibit hall.

Handouts, freebies and promotions

Don't have too many brochures on hand. Trade show organizers say most literature passed out in quantity at booths gets dumped in the trash cans at the exit door. So, instead of offering a whole lot of literature, just offer one small brochure to each person who seems to be interested in receiving one. Hand it to them personally, then have more specific information ready should you be able to engage them in a conversation about your business.

If you decide to hand-out "freebie" prizes, make sure the giveaway doesn't cost too much. And, make sure the hand-outs 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, offerings of pens, pencils, magnets, calendars, key chains and other such items keep peoples' hands busy—they don't facilitate a buying relationship between the business and the consumer.

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. It also helps generate a pool of names and phone numbers for future follow-up calls about your products and services. One problem, however,
is that everyone from age 6 on up tries to win something for nothing—so you collect a lot of entry blanks with worthless names and phone numbers (people with no potential for being a future sales lead). You can reduce this by talking to each person as he/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 later.

Keep talks going your way

Finally, make sure 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 it toward customers’ concerns about water quality and how your products and services can help ease their concerns.

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, politely, that it’s time to move on.

Don’t wait for follow-up

Remember, too, that all of the time, energy and money you spend on a trade show exhibit will be lost if you don’t do immediate, active 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. 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.) If your competition was at the show, ask potential customers if they checked out the competitions’ offers.

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?

Conclusion

Like just about everything else in business, your success at trade shows will hinge on how much preparation you did ahead of time, how well you carried out designated tasks during the show and how well you followed up on the experience.

If you get involved in a trade show and it 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 on next time? How can you make a better connection with the people most likely to do business with you? And, most of all, is involvement in trade shows something you’ll want to continue doing in the future—based on the marketing plan you’ve established for your business?

The choice, again, is up to you!

About the author

• Doug Swanston has 16 years experience as a journalist, broadcaster and educator. Founder of the public relations and marketing firm The Swanston Group, Swanston is an assistant professor and director of the journalism and public relations program at Oklahoma Baptist University in Shawnee, Okla. He formerly worked in management for the Rayne Corp. in its company-owned water conditioning businesses in San Jose, North Hollywood and Glendale, Calif.

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