Spring Mall and Home Shows: Finding Your Competitive Edge at Smaller Retailer Events

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In the early spring, many retail businesses get involved in consumer-oriented “Home & Garden”-type shows. These events increase public awareness of a variety of different retail products and services. For your water conditioning business, participation in a show of this type can generate quality leads and immediate sales.

Beyond events in larger cities in your state, there are many such events in your hometown and surrounding communities that offer excellent marketing opportunities, depending upon the demographics of attendees. These include general business expos, homebuilders showcases, pool-and-spa shows, county fairs, street festivals and mall events, among others.

Sometimes, though, smaller retail establishments hesitate to get involved in these shows for fear they’re either too small or of being overshadowed by one of the “retail giants” also selling softeners and water treatment devices. There’s concern the marketing muscle of the bigger firms may overpower what a small retailer has to offer. This doesn’t have to be the case, though. If you plan well, and develop your “competitive edge,” you can compete with the “retail giants” and succeed! Here are some suggestions.

**There’s No Business like Show Business**

Other sources you may wish to consult for further tradeshow assistance:

- **The Trade Show News Network:** [www.tsnn.com](http://www.tsnn.com)
  This World Wide Web site is billed as “the Internet gateway to the trade show universe.” It can help you find shows, exhibitors, suppliers and information about trade shows.

- **The Trade Show Advisor:** [www2.tradeshowadvisor.com/tradeshowadvisor](http://www2.tradeshowadvisor.com/tradeshowadvisor)
  This Internet site has all kinds of free information and advice about exhibiting in a trade show. Includes booth design ideas, resources, Q&A. Free newsletter available.

- **The Do-It-Yourself Business Promotions Kit:**

- **Eating the Big Fish—How Challenger Brands Can Compete Against Brand Leaders:**

- **Business Building in the ’90s—A Complete Guide to Promoting and Marketing Your Service Business:**
  A book by Doug Swanson, published by The Swanson Group, Shawnee, Okla., 1992—
  [www.bisonusa.net](http://www.bisonusa.net)

**Research and negotiate**

First of all, when thinking about getting into a specific trade show, make sure it’s the right type of show. There are different exhibit shows: Consumer, professional, business-to-business and so forth. If it’s a consumer show, you want to be in, verify with the sponsoring organization that the show will be marketed to the consumer demographic groups you most want to reach. Then, gather information about the past history of the show—such as the number and type of exhibitors, show promotional efforts employed and estimated attendance in years past. Get names of businesses that have exhibited previously and contact them to evaluate your potential for success.

If you verify there’s strong potential for you to generate prospects that will lead to sales from a particular show, work closely with the organizers to determine the best location for your exhibit space. You’re looking for booth space that’s well lit with high visibility and in a high traffic area. You don’t want to be at the end of a long hallway, directly across from a competitor, or adjacent to exhibitors selling food, stereos, or offering animal attractions that will be too much of a distraction to your prospects. You also need to be clear on whether the organizer of the show allows direct sales on the show floor, since some do not. This, too, will greatly affect your decision to participate.
Show and talk

Your local "retail giant" may have a huge exhibit space—while you can only afford a small one. But size isn’t the critical issue; what’s important is how you organize your space and how you use it to communicate with people. A consumer show isn’t all about "show and tell," it’s show and talk. Your purpose as an exhibitor is to contact potential customers and engage them in conversation to learn about their water problems with the intent of offering solutions.

You should therefore design your exhibit space accordingly. Avoid blocking your booth entrance with a table out front. Instead, organize your exhibit area to create an inviting place for people to enter, see your products on display and be engaged in conversation about how those products solve real-life problems. Don’t stand there like a mannequin while people walk by—get out there and meet them. Talk to people, and, most importantly, listen to what they have to say.

Making customers remember

You should go into the show knowing a lot about your competitors, what they offer and what they don’t. That way, you’re better prepared to engage potential customers in a conversation about why your products and services are exclusive in the marketplace for solving water problems. If your competition is one of the “retail giants," you could focus on the personal service aspect of your business. Emphasize how many years you’ve been solving water problems, how many trained professionals work for you, how involved you are in the industry, your past civic commitment and so forth. Don’t forget to talk about service after the sale, too. That’s something many "retail giants" are ill-equipped to offer.

Be very conscious of the brochures and promotional items you hand out during the show. As you may have heard before, your purpose isn’t to distribute lots of expensive, four-color brochures to everybody who walks by your booth. One check of the trashcans at the exit doors of any trade show will tell you this. Your purpose is to put something in the hands of attendees to make them remember your business, and make a personal connection with you when they have a water problem you can solve. What you use to accomplish this goal will vary depending on the show, the time of year, the products and services you offer, and the demographics of show attendees.

Many trade show exhibitors I’ve talked to use a small flyer or promotional card to introduce their products or services as they open a conversation with a potential customer. Then, as the conversation develops—or switches to a specific problem or product solution—the sales rep then offers the customer a more expensive, detailed brochure. This way, reps don’t use up a lot of expensive brochures on people who won’t develop into sales prospects.

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Water Conditioning & Purification
Give and take

When considering promotional items to give out at a show, I recommend you stick with items that are inexpensive but relatively unique. Products should make an emotional and logical “connection” between the customer and your company—and should relate to quality water, since that’s what you do. If you’re like me, you have a kitchen drawer filled with potholders, refrigerator magnets and key rings with a variety of business names imprinted on them such as real estate, printing and mortgage companies; but, in a pinch, I’d be hard-pressed to remember any one of the companies by name.

Perhaps you’ll want to use a sports bottle; a Coozie; a flat, imprinted sponge that swells up when placed in water or any customized item that centers on water usage. Check with a promotional novelty company for ideas, as the range of products available in this market is constantly increasing. A half-liter bottle of cold water with a company’s name on the label has become very popular item at many shows in the past year—as people do get thirsty walking at these shows and it’s a natural tie-in.

Don’t forget to take names, addresses, and/or phone numbers of potential customers so you can do an immediate follow-up after the show. Follow-up should be done within 72 hours at the most after the conclusion of the show, depending on the number of prospects. When you do follow-up, remember to emphasize the same small company and good service attributes which separates your firm from the “retail giant.”

Conclusion

Even if your business is very small, you still can get involved in a retail show and do well. The key to success is development of your “competitive edge.” Development of this edge involves a business ethic in which you establish the means to communicate with potential customers, undertake that communication, and work very hard to show people you are most equipped to solve their problems—now and in the future. You then follow-up as needed and show potential customers you’re interested in solving their problems, not just making a sale. If you work very, very hard at establishing this ethic, you will have no reason to fear competition from the “retail giants.”

About the author

Doug Swanson is an assistant professor and director of the journalism and public relations program at Oklahoma Baptist University in Shawnee, Okla., with 15 years of experience as a journalist, broadcaster and educator. He is founder of the public relations and marketing firm, The Swanson Group, and has formerly worked in management for the Rayne Corp. in its company-owned water conditioning businesses in San Jose, North Hollywood and Glendale, Calif. He can be reached at (405) 878-2336, (405) 878-8701 (fax) or email: tsgroup@swbell.net

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