

# Successful Exhibiting Strategies in Uncertain Times

## What can you do to meet today's exhibiting challenges?

### Trade Show Attendance, although down, is still growing

When we last looked in 2002, the trade show and event industry was being driven to positive growth by strong corporate profits, convention center expansion, low airfares, healthy corporate travel budgets, the need for training and education, historically low interest rates, and the continued embrace of event marketing to reach buyers (TSW – Executive Outlook 2007). However, 2007 ended with flat growth (+1.6%), and 2008 has become a year of uncertainty and questioning of what will happen next.

Many of us in the exhibiting industry are faced with no growth budgets, but, even worse, funding has been withdrawn to protect our organization's bottom line or for other seemingly more effective marketing communications. Our managers and owners are concerned with the economic impact of the fall's election. Will a change in administration mean a change in the business climate? But, the biggest issue for us as exhibit professionals is what do you say or do when your management says, "let's get out of trade shows," "let's reduce our budgets," "let's reduce our participation in trade events?"

Your reply is and should be that trade shows are alive and well and we need to continue our participation. Why? Over the past few years all four indicators of growth – number of shows, attendees, exhibitors, and net square footage sold were growing at 3-4%. Veronis, Schuler, Stevenson forecasted growth of 5.8% over the next three years. Today we are seeing growth at about 1%. All indications are that the economy is in distress, but not as much an issue as "time poverty". Attendees are going to fewer shows and sending fewer, but more qualified people to each show.

Although the growth statistics are softening, trade shows and events still fill a need. Exhibitors want the medium and quality attendees are coming to the shows. The total number of attendees may be declining, but the quality of the audiences is still available to exhibitors. When trade shows are considered objectively, you really want 10 qualified visitors vs. 100 potentially qualifiable visitors. Wouldn't you want to spend more time with qualified visitors than a little time with more qualifiable attendees? So, it's not necessarily bad that the attendance is down. According to CEIR, 79% of attendees will be new contacts for your company and not seen by your organization face-to-face in the past 12 months, which means opportunities for new leads for sales.

Trade shows and events are the only way you can get face-to-face with prospects and customers other than a direct sales call. You can accomplish



more in a day visiting with show attendees than you can in a month of calls in the field.

### **What does CEIR & Exhibit Surveys Say:**

The exhibiting industry has the Center for Exhibition Industry Research and organizations like Red Bank, NJ's Exhibit Surveys. Over the past few years they have given us some valuable study results to prove exhibiting's value:

- Over 77% of visitors to show are key influencers or decision makers. They are attending and you have to engage the audience to find them, but they can provide you with opportunities for sales
- 7 out of 10 plan to buy one or more products and 75% actually do buy one or more products as a result of visiting you. Why? They interacted with you. They tried your products, saw your demonstrations, and had a dialog with your staff. This resulted in them deciding to buy.
- 72% said that the show influenced their buying decision. They may have had one of your sales reps call on them, seen your trade press advertising, received a direct mailer, or had a teller seller call them. But when they came to your exhibit, interacted with you, and your products or services, they were influenced to buy because they saw proof of benefit and application.
- 60% of visitors are part of a buying team. Visitors come in teams – a financial buyer and several technical buyers. They interview potential suppliers and make decisions on-the-floor as to who they want as a partner. Then they have in-depth discussions that lead to a purchase commitment.

## **Research**

The most recent CEIR research has indicated that exhibitions are used more than another other technique in the selling process. Why? You can go on a sales call, but can you bring your products? Can you bring your technical experts? Well, you can at a show. It is an integrated selling tool where you can bring all the tools in your selling arsenal to the show to communicate in response to attendee needs. The Power of Exhibiting Part II 2.2 reported that smaller companies rely on exhibitions for their very survival **because it the most economic way they can get in front of a qualified audience.**

## **Market Reality eSurvey - 2006**

*Trade shows are the #1 business-to-business marketing budget item to support sales*

We also know from America Business Media research that trade shows:



- Help attendees become aware of new products and services (81%)
- Allow attendees to interact with sales reps (88%)
- Enable attendees to interact with peers (86%)
- Provide information attendees can trust (67%)
- Motivate attendees to seek more information on the web (77%)

## Why Exhibit?

Exhibiting should be strategic, not just logistics. Most exhibit professionals are known as logistics specialists. We are known as being experts in getting our exhibit property to advanced storage on time, making our hotel and airline reservations to take advantage of discounts and order show services within the deadline period to obtain the 30% discount. But, exhibiting is a strategic extension of your marketing communications plan. Your challenge is to position yourself in the mind of the visitors so that they see no suitable substitute for your company, its products and services. When you achieve this, you generate a sale. You create a customer.

## Buyers See the Value of Shows

When exhibiting strategically, you are giving attendees what they want – useful information. CEIR's Power of Exhibiting Part II reported that 91% of visitors go to shows because they get their most useful buying information from shows – more than from sales reps, more than from directories and catalogs, more than from collateral materials. Attendees see the value in shows.

## Trade Shows Make Economic Sense

Over the past two decades, CEIR, through studies conducted by Data Strategies and Exhibit Surveys, have reported on the cost of generating qualified contacts and then closing those leads. We know from these studies that exhibiting is economic. Their most recent studies show that your investment to generate a qualified contact is \$212 vs. \$308 for a qualified contact from the field. But the economics get even better when closing a sale from a show - \$705 vs. \$1140 from a lead that began in the field. From the latest Exhibit Surveys information reports, it takes \$129 to attract each customer entering an exhibit and \$223 for each attendee who enters into a dialogue with your staff – far less than a field sales call.

## Why it works

Exhibiting Works! It works because it's face-to-face. It provides us an opportunity to accelerate the selling cycle by matching attendee needs with your ability to fill their needs. It works because adults are visual learners and



exhibiting is a visual medium. The exhibit, your products, the graphics, collateral materials and promotional products are visual. Lastly, buyers are experiential. You can provide them an experience through the dynamics of the exhibiting process – interactive visual aids, challenges, and hands-on demonstrations.

### **They travel to see you**

We know that visitors travel to the shows and travel is an issue right now. According to studies that Exhibit Surveys have undertaken 62% of attendees travel more than 400 miles and spend an average of 8.5 hours on the floor of the show. That is down from 2002, but only slightly (.5%) This means that your show visitors will come to you regardless of travel issues, only in fewer numbers.

### **“C” level executives attend**

“C” level executives and management attend. (CEO, CMO, CTO, CIO) They attend to maintain their competitive edge. They go to shows because they can get an overview of their entire industry segment in a short period of time. They can gain insight into how well their marketing strategies are working compared to their competitors.

### **Trade shows and events create events in the minds of visitors that generate memorability that build brands**

All of this points to the magic of exhibiting. You can gather all of the tools in your marketing communications tool chest and bring them to bear to position yourself in the minds of your shows' visitors so they can see your differentiation. You can build your brand by creating preference through experiential marketing.

Rather than disengaging from the exhibiting process, go smarter. Don't stop going, just go differently.

### **Don't Stop Going to Shows, Go Smarter**

We are living in challenging times, therefore it is time to challenge your old ways of thinking about trade shows and events.

### **Make Trade Shows a Part of your Integrated Marketing Communications Plan**

Trade shows are an integrated part of your marketing communications mix and as such they need a plan to create a strategy and subordinate tactics to achieve



your goals. The best way to achieve a strategy is to ask yourself four key questions:

- Why are you going? What role do trade shows play in your marketing mix? Are you using them to increase name awareness, enter new markets, increase share of customer or increase market share? Gain agreement from everyone that has a vested interest in the outcome of the event as to the number one reason why you are exhibiting. Then the second and third. Three is enough.
- Who is your target audience? Who do you want to reach? Can you describe them?
- What do you want to communicate to them? What messages are you prepared to deliver in response to their stated needs? Are they the same messages that are in your direct mail or trade press advertising? Are they the same that your sales staff is communicating? Or are they different? Are they integrated with your other marketing communications so there is a mental link on and off the floor.
- What is your measure of success? What do you want to bring home with you that will determine if your exhibiting program was successful?

If you can answer these questions, you are miles ahead of those exhibitors who just show up.

### **Exhibit for the Right Reasons**

Too many exhibitors go to shows because they are part of an industry and expect they should participate. Or they go because their competition is going. Or they go because they have always exhibited. These are not the right reasons to exhibit. These are the reasons that get you in hot water with management since there is no way to measure whether exhibiting generated any results.

When asking yourself “ why are you going to the show?” experience has shown that there are four common objectives: (1) increase market share – find new customers, (2) increase share of customer – sell more products/services to existing customers (3) introduce new products – what better place to show your new products than to an audience that comes primarily to see what is NEW, and (4) position or reposition – change the market’s perception of your company or your brand.

### **Proactively Evaluate the Shows in Which You Participate**

Before deciding to exhibit or not to exhibit during this softening and questionable period, evaluate the shows which you are considering. Chances are that a thorough review might find that your audience is not in attendance. First, you might redefine who is in your target audience. Analyze the show’s demographics to determine if your target audience is included and how many attendees fit into the profile. Then, determine what other characteristics make it an “effective”



sales and marketing event and evaluate whether it does or not. You can then match your market niches with the show's profile.

According the TSW's Executive Outline Vol. 5, Number 3, Fall 2007, exhibitors look at the following, in order, when selecting what shows to attend.

1. Attendee demographics
2. Tradition (always exhibited)
3. Competition is there
4. Lead gathering opportunity
5. Attendance numbers, projection
6. ROI/ ROO opportunity

In today's uncertain times, you might find the order needs to be 1, 4, 5, 6.

### **Evaluate the Space You Occupy vs. Your Objectives**

Most exhibitors are in their physical space by default. They may have begun in a 10x10 and grown into a 10x20 or 20x20 without doing a "zero-based" analysis of their objectives as they relate to the space needed to achieve those objectives.

For example, if you have set a lead generating objective of 75 qualified leads. In order to achieve that objective you need to talk to 10 visitors to find a qualified lead, therefore you need to engage and talk to 750 visitors. If you can communicate to 10 people per hour, then you need 75 selling hours. If the show is open 20 hours, then you need 3.75 or 4 people. A rule of thumb is 50 square feet for each staffer, plus your exhibit: 200 square feet for staff, plus 20 square feet for the exhibit, or 220 square feet – 200 or 300 square feet. So, you can go back to a 10x20 or a 10x30 and use the saved funds for other marketing opportunities. No longer is the decision of go / no go, it is how should we best go?

### **Focus on the objective: reducing your cost of ownership**

We know two facts about exhibiting: (1) it is expensive and (2) it works. Some estimates are that the cost to exhibit has increased over 400% in the past decade. We know that 23% of an average exhibitor's budget is nonproductive due to transportation and I&D. So what can you do about it?

- Use lightweight structure and graphics – structures that are made from space-age materials – fabrics, metals, plastics.
- Use flexible truss systems that can be used for architectural applications rather than just structural components.
- Reduce your installation and dismantle by having easy to assemble and disassemble systems.
- Use custom modular vs. traditional custom to reduce the cost of ownership.
- Design for reconfiguration.





- When you need to go to a show in a large way, one time, rent rather than buying more components. You can accomplish your one time bigger presence, yet not add to your permanent inventory.

## Invest in Graphics

Many of us invest in exhibit property, but neglect our graphics. An exhibit graphic is the magnet that attracts visitor attention into the exhibit. It creates an image, a memory, a message. A good graphic will pre-qualify a visitor before you can communicate with them. They begin to look at your exhibit 15-30 feet away and are making decisions about whether you have a solution for their needs. When attendees pre-qualify themselves, they save you having to physically reach out to everyone. Most importantly, your graphic communicates who you are, what you do and what is your offer. Your offer is what they are buying.

## It's the Quality of the Audience, not the Quantity

For many years, exhibitors have gone to shows with the objective of achieving more leads than the year before. When you put quantity before quality, you are putting the emphasis on the wrong syllable. It is the **quality** of each attendee that you need to be concerned about. A drop in attendance, in a way, is good news. The attendees that are coming are truly interested, they are pre-qualified and they have focused needs. They bring an agenda. In fact, 76% of an audience comes with a predetermined agenda. Since they are coming to talk to technical experts and are bringing issues. They are looking for solutions. This means they can leave you satisfied, with a lasting memory that can result in a future sale.

Many exhibitors are seeking smaller, more vertical audiences that have more qualified attendees rather than seeking larger, less qualified audiences. They can accomplish more in accelerating their selling cycle with a concentrated, qualified audience than with the quantity on which most exhibitors focus.

## Focus on Your Targeted Audience

In today's environment, you need to be proactive and attract an audience to your exhibit. Your "call for action" needs to provide attendees with a reason to visit you – what will they see to meet their needs and what will you offer them to take time to visit you? Your offer is not a promotional product. It is something that will benefit the attendee - Will you increase their productivity, their competitiveness, efficiency, or profit? One tactic that will drive qualified prospects and current customers to your exhibit is to have your top management a part of your program. What better place to meet your top management team?



If your target audience is getting younger, you need to rethink the tactics you are using to attract, educate, and communicate. The younger your audience, the more types of interactive tactics are required to get their attention, to maintain their interest, and communicate messages that stick.

According to the TSW (Executive Outlook Number 4, 2007), exhibitors are using their website, email, and then direct mail to drive attendance to their exhibits. Website usage jumped to 85% vs. 56% in a similar study conducted in 2006.

## **Don't Rely on Traditional Selling Techniques**

For years, we have relied on traditional “engage, qualify, communicate, close” approaches to exhibiting. The concept behind this technique was that visitors had to be attracted into the exhibit by “hooking ‘em” off the aisle. Try setting appointments in advance. If you can find out why they are coming, what their needs are, and then determine how you can meet those needs, you can prepare for their visits. When you know why they are coming, you can have the right people, products & services organized for their visit to have a more meaningful interaction. You want to position yourself to make the experience more meaningful for you and your prospect. When you do this, you can take the dialog to the next level.

### **Use 1:1 Relational Concepts**

In order to make this experience more meaningful, you need to completely define your prospects, why they want to visit you, and what they want to do when they visit you. If you can determine their needs before the show, you can get into a dialogue before the show which will make the interaction at the show more meaningful and get you one step closer to close than if you just “hook ‘em” off the aisle. By generating a dialogue before they get to the show, you can develop more target-rich tactics which will increase your ROI/ROO.

## **Invest in a Motivated Staff**

Now is the time to take your exhibiting program more seriously. No longer can you just show up. Most exhibitors start thinking about their show several weeks before the show, not enough time to prepare fully - Create objectives, themes and messages, integrate into the remainder of the marketing communications program, or create a preshow promotion program that will incite attendees to visit you. You can no longer just show up.

The most important ingredient in your exhibit marketing recipe is your staff. So what characteristics are important today for your staff?

- Someone who is open, warm, friendly, personable and confident





- An individual who is approachable
- A person that has a good attitude about working the show
- Someone who has good working knowledge of the company, its products and services, and can communicate it effectively and efficiently
- From a mix of functions and a mix of locations – not just because they are available and close
- Understand the process of exhibiting- Getting information before Giving information, then Getting Commitment

### **Recruit Management as Part of your Exhibiting Team**

Management has a role in trade shows. If they sit on the sideline, they will just take shots because they are not part of the plan. not part of the execution, not part of the results. So, make them part of your planning. Invite them to your meetings, and make meetings at a time when they can participate. Give them a role in your show. Ask them what they want to do and then delegate that responsibility to them. Help management help themselves become a more visible part of the sales process. By giving them a role they can help you communicate your message, create a bridge between the show and the sale, and set the standard for staffer performance.

### **Exhibiting is Not Just Collecting Names or Swiping Badges**

Many exhibitors go to shows to generate leads. How many? Lots of leads. But exhibiting is not just about “swiping badges”. It is about generating qualified leads. And creating qualified leads is about interviewing, gathering information both objective and subjective. It is all about recording the information so someone can follow up on the sales opportunity. It is about generating an agreement with the prospect on the next action that will get you one step closer to close.

### **Create a “Follow-up TEAM”**

86% of exhibitors go to shows to generate leads and 79% of leads are not followed up. (CEIR) They are not followed up because either the information is too inadequate to start the conversation from where it ended at the show or there is no lead follow system in place so that the leads can be followed, reported upon and tracked. In TSW’s Executive Outlook Vol. 5, Number 4, 61% of exhibitors surveyed who conduct lead follow, followed up in 1-2 weeks after the show. This should be the standard. One week after the attendees arrive back from the show, they should be receiving your first follow-up.



Instead of using your standard internal system of lead tracking, recruit your own special TEAM to take the leads that are generated, post show requalify them, and then follow them. Then make the team accountable for the results of the leads. At some point they need to be turned over to your sales force for close, but take the time to get it as near to close as possible. You then can close the loop and generate return on investment calculations to show the true value of exhibiting in the marketing mix. (Another option is to contact [www.leads-to-sales.com](http://www.leads-to-sales.com) - a lead fulfillment and qualification company)

## **What is Your Measure of Success? Measure the Results**

Every form of marketing communications is measurable. When you invest in a direct mail campaign you have an objective return you are seeking against the industry benchmark – 3%. When you place an ad in a trade press magazine, you look at cost per impression. (Ad cost / subscribers = cost per impression) When you exhibit, you cannot be afraid to measure your results. Some objectives are more specific than others and therefore more easily measured. Cost per leads is easily measured. But, generating increased brand awareness is harder to measure. Whatever your objective, find a metric. This is a requirement of this uncertain economic time. According to Mike Westcott, there are 8 Ways to Measure:

1. Lead Quantity and Quality
2. Audience Quality and Quantity
3. Message Effectiveness
4. Competitive Audits
5. Audience Behavior & Event Performance
6. Sales / Sales Opportunities
7. Press Impact
8. Brand Loyalty Impact

Measuring is important, but don't forget to report the results to those who have a vested interest in your program. Senior management needs a "real time" view of your exhibiting investment. Your post event report is the first step in delivering the results. What should your report include?

- Lead generation results
- Attendee breakdown
- Demonstrations conducted and feedback
- Promotions – how well did they work
- Competitive Intelligence – what did you learn
- Media successes – meetings with editors
- Customer interaction
- Trends – what did you see or hear
- Sessions attended



- Recommendations for the future

And, don't forget, management is getting used to having “dashboards” to review results from show-to-show and year-to-year.

### **Plan to Work the Show Every Moment the Show is Open**

Studies by InComm International found that 68% of exhibitors found a good prospect in the last half hour of the show and 21% obtained a sale in the last 30 minutes of a show. The moral – work the show every moment it is open. You are “on” 24 hours a day. You are selling when you are walking down an aisle, in the restaurant, in an elevator or on an escalator. From start to finish is selling time. Don't give up. Keep working the show for all it is worth. It will work for you.

### **Think Bigger – Think Beyond the Trade Show Floor**

Most of us are caught in a rut. We are stuck in status quo. We hate change and avoid it. In order to rise to the top and survive this economic softness, you need to think big. Think bigger than you did yesterday. Think about other ways that you can bring your story to your customers and prospects: hospitalities that are focused; private events where you can have proprietary communications and demonstrations; road shows where you take your message to your audience. User meetings and special events all communicate your messages in ways that are face-to-face.

Non-traditional events extend your influence and expand your share of customer. When you couple them with shows, you are able to communicate in many dimensions. They need to have objectives, separate and distinct from your exhibit and you have to let your staff know that working these events is different and needs even more refined skills than at your shows.

### **Trade Shows Work!**

- Plan completely
- Execute Aggressively & Enthusiastically
- Follow up thoroughly

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