



## 8 Tricks of the Trade Show

### 1. Be on the offense, not the defense.

Some companies who think of trade shows as an expense attend to defend their turf from new competition. Others see trade shows as

investments: Those are the companies that end up building real relationships on the floor. "Don't just buy space and expect miracles because that's like Russian roulette," says trade show coach Susan Friedmann. "Maybe you win, maybe you won't. It's an expensive exercise just to find out it doesn't work." In order to make your trade show experience an investment, set measurable objectives before the event and stick to them

### 2. Focus on quality over quantity.

"People have this idea that a successful trade show is one where you have 10,000 people walking past your booth," says Malcom Gilvar, vice president of sales for the Trade Group, a trade show design and consulting service. "But that can be a barrier to your success." Getting the right kind of traffic to your booth starts before the trade show, with pre-show activity such as e-mail blasts or marketing campaigns. "Define who you want to come to your exhibit and target them specifically," Gilvar continues. "If people did nothing but that, it would be an amazingly successful event."

### 3. Strut your (new) stuff.

Showing something new to your customer is an easy way to succeed at a trade show. Only shows aren't exactly timed to fit with the launch of your new product or service. You can circumvent this in two ways. First, try promoting an established product you've never featured before. Or, if you have a new prototype, feature it digitally. "You have to make your product fit with the timing of the trade show," says Peter Stevenson, president of Realtime Technology, a 3D visualization company that designs models for trade shows. "That's the beauty of digital information."

### 4. Let them play.

Putting customers in an industry trade show is like putting kids in a candy store: they're going to want to touch things. So let them. Monster.com engages its trade show audiences by creating a booth entirely out of touch screens. "They don't have to wait for a guided demo," says Phil Cavanaugh, Monster.com's vice president of events. "They can approach our product right away." For companies with more limited funding, iPads simulate the same interaction, says Stevenson: "You put three or four on your stand and people will pick them up."

### 5. Train early and often.

"The No. 1 thing people remember about your exhibit isn't the great graphics, it's the staff," says Gilvar. Even the most experienced or dynamic staff needs training before each trade show they attend. "I have no doubt companies' sales staffs are

terrific at doing what they do every day. But a well-trained staff is the most important part of your trade show experience." Make sure your staff understands and agrees with the trade show objectives before attending and offer refreshers on both goals and manners once there.

#### **6. Throw away the stress balls.**

Giveaways are a point of contention for veteran trade show attendees. For some, it's a valid reminder of your brand. For others, it's a waste of money. Whichever camp you fall into, make sure any freebie serves a purpose. "I'm hoping the heyday of stress balls has come and gone," says Cavanaugh. "We still believe in giving people something tangible to walk away with, but you want something beyond the useless tchotchke." If you do use a giveaway, think critically about how that item represents your product or your company.

#### **7. Watch out for spies.**

Trade shows provide the perfect environment for espionage. You and your competition are in close quarters for several days, each demonstrating the best or newest features of your product or service. Take some time to size up your competition. And more importantly, make sure you know your competition is sizing you up as well. "If they come to the booth in disguise, they often give themselves away by being too clever," Friedmann says. "They ask questions the average person won't ask." Ensure your staff has enough observational savvy to distinguish these plants from ordinary customers

**8. When a show is almost over**, the crowds have dwindled, and energy is drained. But you couldn't be more wrong if you think your job's over. "Somebody who is really serious is walking around the show floor because they know they can spend more time with you when you're less busy," says Friedmann. "If you look like you're waiting for the minute to tick by, this person is going to ask: 'Is this someone I want to do business with?'" Staying energized and engaged until the trade show is officially over (or longer) proves to customers that you are a company committed to the trade show and to their business.

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