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It Begins In The End: Effective Post-Show Activities

Trade Show 101 White Paper Series

It Begins In The End: Effective Post-Show Activities

There's money on the table…do you want it?

Companies and their exhibitors invest resources (human capital, financial and time) in trade shows and events every year with the sole intention of turning that investment into a profitable gain. It should go without saying that the more profitable the investment, the better. And in turn, the more significant the return on investment, the more likely and willing those companies and exhibitors are to invest even more resources in additional shows and events.

Unfortunately, however, most companies in the U.S. leave money on the table every time they attend a show. Rarely, if ever, do attendees pull out the company credit card to make a purchase on the showroom floor, especially when the product or service is a big-ticket item. The transaction takes place after the show, and that's when companies fail.

This white paper, the sixth of seven installments in the Trade Show 101 White Paper Series, not only focuses on the importance of an effective post-show strategy and execution of that plan, but also points out glaring statistics and facts that can help companies avoid leaving thousands, if not millions, of dollars on the table each year.

The last five white papers in the Trade Show 101 White Paper Series™ have each focused on a different stage of trade show planning and execution, from setting goals and objectives to flawlessly executing your at-show strategy. Previous white papers in our series include (in order of release date):

- Hitting the Mark: Setting Effective Goals and Objectives
- Designing Exhibits to Support Trade Show Goals
- Pre-Show Tactics that Support Trade show Goals
- Walk an Exhibition in Their Shoes
- Booth Staff Boot Camp

Now we turn our attention to what some consider the most important phase of the overall trade show strategy: post-show follow-up and activity.

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Follow-up? I'll get around to it…maybe.

It seems simple and rudimentary, yet many companies fail at this step. The reasons for it can vary greatly, from a lack of resources to a lack of execution to plain laziness. At the end of the day, does it really matter why it isn't getting done? Well…yes. If it turns out to be a laziness or incompetence issue, a solution is not likely to be found in this white paper. However, if it comes down to a lack of a plan / execution or resources (or even a perception of such a deficit, which is frequently the case), then you're in the right place.

Most exhibitors consider the last day of a show to be the day the booth is dismantled and when the team that had occupied it heads back to the office to assume their everyday responsibilities. We're going to change that mentality right now. The show continues well after the booth staff returns, but more importantly, the end of the show starts well before the team steps onto the showroom floor. It begins in the planning stages. Post-show activities and your follow-up strategy should be built into and designed as though it is part of your pre-show and at-show activities. Whatever your team plans to do after the show, including personal follow-up, should be part of an overall strategic plan that fits seamlessly into all of the pre-show activities.

However, for whatever reason, that doesn't always happen. Are you aware that 90 percent of attendees use exhibitions as their number one source of purchasing information?[1] Further, 76 percent of those attendees have a pre-set agenda, knowing exactly what they want and who they want to visit.[2] So if they are standing in your exhibit, odds are they have an interest in doing business with you. When that is the case, then why is it we allow nearly 80 percent of all show leads to either escape follow-up or be mishandled in some way?[3] Shouldn't it be important enough to make sure there is a plan in place and that someone is accountable for making sure it is executed effectively?

1 Siskind, Barry. "Planning For Follow-up—Ahead of Time." Guru Report, Center for Exhibition Industry Research.
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.

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Let's be clear—we understand that sales is challenging and that we're making it sound easy. That's not the case…or is it? According to the Center for Exhibition Industry Research (CEIR), 54 percent of all qualified show leads were converted to sales with a ***single*** telephone call.[4] Barry Siskind, a consultant, speaker and internationally recognized expert in trade and consumer shows, confirms that statistic, reporting that 48 percent of exhibitors only need to hear from an exhibitor once after a show to make a purchasing decision because they are already familiar with the product or service.[5] That should be a compelling reason to place a strong emphasis on what your team does when it returns from a show.

LOOKING TO EASILY INCREASE TRADE SHOW ROI? CONSIDER THIS…

- ✓ Ninety percent of attendees use exhibitions as their number one source of purchasing information.
- ✓ Forty-eight percent of attendees only need to hear from an exhibitor once to make a purchasing decision because they have already seen the products and services.
- ✓ Nearly 80% of all show leads are not handled properly. In other words, four out of five leads might never get called.
- ✓ An astounding 43% of prospective buyers receive materials after they have made a buying decision with another vendor.

Even more startling is that we struggle just to get prospects the collateral, brochures and information they requested while in your exhibit. According to a study conducted by the University of Massachusetts' Center for Marketing Communications, 43 percent of prospective buyers receive material they request after they have already made a buying decision. How can that be?

Regardless of the reasons for allowing some of the aforementioned hiccups to occur, we all know there are areas in which even the most successful exhibitors can improve. The key to avoiding much of what has been discussed is to approach each event holistically, with sufficient planning and integration at every phase of the show. While there are various approaches and tactics that can be employed in a post-show strategy, let's review an example that covers the basic principles and elements included in most post-show activities.

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4 Dallmeyer, Robert F. "Turning Leads Into Sales." Center for Exhibition Industry Research.
5 Siskind, Barry. "Planning For Follow-up—Ahead of Time." Guru Report, Center for Exhibition Industry Research.

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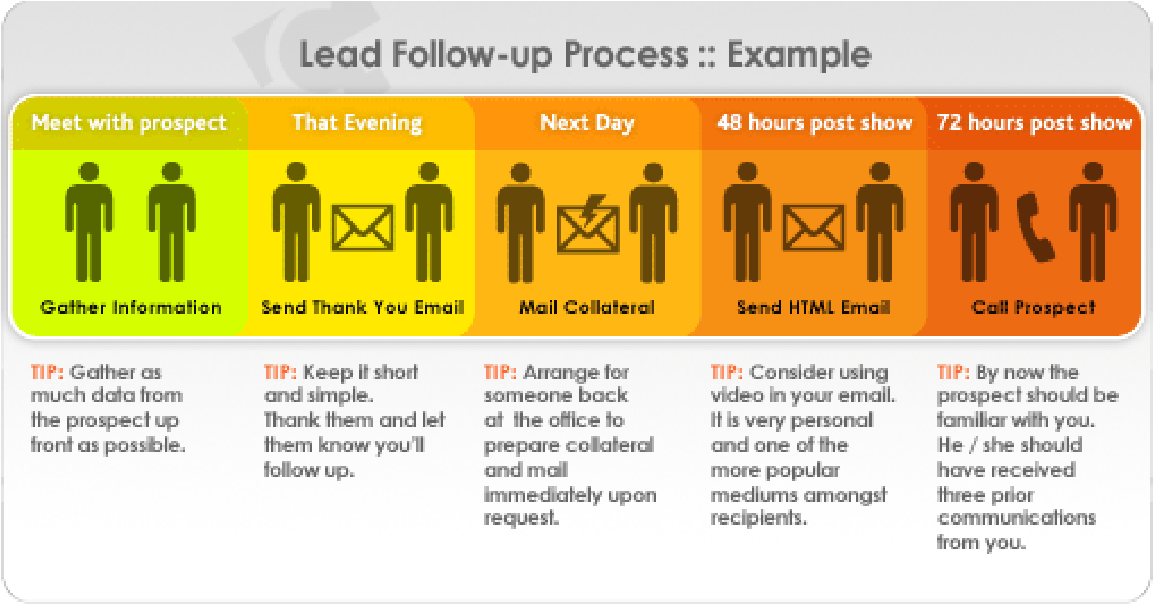
Plan the end before you begin

As mentioned in a previous white paper in this series, "Hitting the Mark: Setting Effective Goals and Objectives," planning for post-show activities should occur in conjunction with all of your pre- and at-show planning. All post-show activities should be tied to all of your sales and marketing communications and activities up to that point. For instance, much of what many would consider post-show or follow-up activities can actually take place while you are still exhibiting. Let's explore a broad plan that can be applied in almost every exhibitor's strategy.



This post-show plan takes into consideration a few things. First, we take into account the fact that effective sales and marketing revolve around two things—timeliness and relevancy. Because members of those two teams execute the majority of post-show communications and activities, every communication in our plan must be both timely and relevant to the prospect.

Second, the plan is built with the knowledge that 90 percent of attendees who visit your booth use exhibitions as their primary source of information in making a purchasing decision (as we mentioned earlier). Knowing those two things, we want to make sure we provide prospects with everything they need to not only remember us, but choose us as well.

The pre-show plan

Now that we have planned all of our goals for the show, designed and executed our pre-show marketing communications and flawlessly carried out the show for three days, we are finally returning back to our offices. But as we said before, the show has not yet concluded—we still have a lot left to do.

Before we left for the show, we assigned a resource to assist us while we were away. This individual was to be responsible for any collateral or material that needed to be mailed to a prospect as they requested. We wanted to be able to mail any requested material within 24 hours of the time they asked for it. This put the package on their desk before they returned to their office. By doing this, we ensured a couple of things. First, the prospect now looks at our company in a very positive light. They likely requested material from several potential vendors, but your material was the first to arrive. This shows we're on top of things and attentive to their requests. With this strategy, you no longer have to worry about being a part of the dreadful 43 percent that will send them material after they've already made a decision. Second, you now know the material has been sent to the prospect and don't have to worry if your team is mailing these out instead of attending to important voicemails and emails sent to them while they were out. If you don't have an additional resource to handle the responsibility, hire some part-time help. It will be worth getting these out on time.

So here is how the post-show plan progressed.

As a member of the exhibit staff met with a prospect at the show, he or she gathered relevant information—who they were, what company they were with, what pains they were experiencing or looking to solve, etc. Once the prospect and our staff member completed their conversation, our staff member made sure all of the requests and notes were captured with action items. At the end of the day, our staff member gathered all of his or her notes and sent an email to all of the prospects that he or she met with that day.

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We had already created an email template for staff members that contained basic information and a section for them to recap next steps to ensure that the prospect and our staff member are on the same page. Not all of our staff members are sales reps, so sometimes there needed to be an introduction. This email can serve as that email as well. Once that email was taken care of, the staff member then sent an email to our trade show assistant back at the office to relay the prospect's name and what material they requested, ensuring that it was sent the next day. The prospect received an email from us summing up the next steps and had a package waiting for them upon returning to his or her office.

Forty-eight hours after the show concluded, we sent an email to all of the prospects our team met with at the show, as well as those we were expecting to drop in but who couldn't make it by to visit. However, we didn't send one mass email to these individuals. As you most likely remember, prior to the show we determined how we wanted to classify or categorize leads. Each different category received a separate email (HTML or text) customized to that category's needs and requests. Keep in mind that we want all of our communications to be relevant to each individual, and not everyone in these different categories cares about the same things.

Seventy-two hours after the show concluded, our sales reps contacted each prospect as he or she requested. We're able to be so responsive and call on prospects so quickly following the show because we utilize technology such as FISH to categorize leads and route them to the appropriate person in real time. The program enables exhibitors to collect leads in a centralized database in real time via the Internet, automatically distribute them to the sales force and email personalized messages with embedded links and attachments. By using this technology, we're able to start this process on the show floor. Because of our planning sessions prior to the show and based on the categorization of each lead, the sales rep should know exactly what to do with that lead and what marketing will be doing simultaneously. To learn more about FISH Software, visit www.fishsoftware.com.

Tip: *Try incorporating video into your email. Videos are becoming more and more effective as they grow in popularity and are a relatively cheap and personal way to interact with prospects. We've found response rates to be much higher than normal when incorporating a personal video message.*

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This process can be altered based on your overall show strategy, but it should paint a picture of the importance of quickly and effectively following up with prospects that your team met with at the show.

ALTERNATE MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS THAT CAN BE USED THROUGHOUT YOUR SHOW STRATEGY:

- ✓ Marketing press release
- ✓ Email campaign
- ✓ Direct mail campaign
- ✓ Incomplete offers
- ✓ Mini website with show announcements and news
- ✓ Personal video embedded in email

Take it across the finish line

As we've pointed out throughout this white paper, the most difficult part of a trade show is the follow-up process. For whatever reason, teams are able to flawlessly execute all parts of the trade show plan except the follow-up activities, so we need to establish some buy-in and accountability early on in the process. Getting the sales team that is responsible for following up on leads involved in the early stages of the planning process will go a long way in motivating them to follow-up with every lead. By getting their input on what information is important to them as they follow up on leads, you are helping them be more committed to calling on those leads simply by providing them with the answers to the questions they need.

Immediately upon returning from a trade show, round up all team members who attended the show. Talk about how everything went—what went smoothly, what was a little rough around the edges, what could be improved and how to do so, what (if anything) the prospects mentioned about the exhibit or the process, etc. Gather as much information from your team as possible. Don't wait a week or two to have that meeting—talk about it while it's fresh on everyone's mind.

The astute event manager (or whoever is responsible for proving ROI) will establish a system to help them monitor the leads and effectively report on the status of every lead. It is important to set up your CRM or SFA system to help you monitor the progress of each deal, otherwise it will be next to impossible to establish a true ROI, especially in deals with longer sales cycles. For the first month, request a report from each rep on a weekly basis that details what actions were taken and what the next steps are. For the following months, or until the deals closes or is lost, have the rep provide the same detailed monthly report.

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Sales reps are often tasked with providing numerous reports to executives and managers throughout the organization, so getting yet another report could be challenging. It is incredibly important, however, that you set up some system to constantly monitor the progress of each lead. At the end of the day, the most important thing is to create avenues of information between you and the sales team. Building those channels of communication and personal relationships with your sales team will have a big impact on the success of this part of the process.

Conclusion

Even in the most challenging and competitive industries, there is plenty of business to be had, and it is usually rewarded to the company that is most responsive to prospects' needs. We attend trade shows and events to generate business. Regardless of how a show is approached, the sole purpose is to acquire new business. Considering some of the outstanding statistics we mentioned earlier in the white paper, it is easy to understand how some companies walk away from shows scratching their heads and wondering how they closed so few deals when they had more than enough leads when they left. A company can have the most creative and exciting pre-show marketing communications, the best exhibit that money can buy and an impeccable exhibit staff, but if their post-show strategy and execution isn't equally as flawless and brilliant, they'll have a hard time justifying the investment to the executives who weren't able to see all the pre-show and at-show brilliance for which the team was responsible.

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The Trade Group® Trade Show 101 White Paper Series

This white paper, "It Begins In The End: Effective Post-Show Activities™," is the sixth in a series of white papers that The Trade Group® will be publishing over the course of the year. The purpose of the Trade Show 101 White Paper Series is to provide our marketing community with valuable knowledge and expertise that will ultimately help exhibitors maximize their potential at their next event. The series explores exhibitors' challenges and provides valuable advice on how to overcome them. Each white paper will focus on a different and unique challenge ranging from setting effective goals and objectives, to pre-show marketing, to measurement and ROI. For more information visit www.tradegroup.com.

About The Trade Group®

The Trade Group® is among the Southwest's largest providers of exhibit products and services for trade shows, conventions and other business events. Founded in 1986, The Trade Group has delivered more than 40,000 exhibits to more than 15,000 customers. The Trade Group occupies 100,000 square feet in Dallas, San Antonio, Austin, Oklahoma City and Las Vegas. The company's reputation is built on obsessive customer service and creativity.