

Tradeshow Tips ~ Spread the Word with PreShow Marketing

Fewer than one in five exhibitors engage in any type of pre-show marketing. Yet those exhibitors who take the time to reach out to attendees before the show even starts consistently report greater satisfaction with their trade show participation: increased sales, larger number of quality leads, and improved ROI. You're right to sense that you must promote yourself at the show in order to get good results. Many first-timers think that if they simply set up shop they will do oodles of business with the sea of humanity passing by their booth at a trade show. Not true, says Susan Friedmann, www.thetradeshowcoach.com, author of the newly released *Meeting & Event Planning for Dummies* and the woman behind thetradeshowhost.com. "First, determine what you are looking to get out of this show," Friedmann advises. "Set a realistic, quantifiable goal in terms of number of orders you want to write, or number of qualified leads collected, so you can measure how you did."

What are they doing? Every exhibitor has a slightly different approach, but here are three unifying traits:

1. Have an irresistible offer. What can you use to lure hot prospects and valuable customers to your tradeshow booth? Is it a chance to be the first to see the new prototype -- and enjoy 'invitation only' savings? Is it an exclusive educational seminar with an industry superstar? Find an attraction that your target audience will find irresistible.

If you have time, find out which trade journals will be covering the event and see if you can interest them in doing a story on your company. Find a good angle -- perhaps about your own history, or involving a unique aspect of your product line -- that you can pitch to the editors. The trade publications typically put out special editions that are circulated at the larger shows, and if you can get a feature story about yourself in one of those, that would be a marvelous boost for your booth's profile. You might even be able to get a trade journal to send a reporter over to your booth to do a feature on your company. The story will run after the show is over, but it will still be a good way to reach your target audience.

2. Send out invitations. Send invitations to those prospects you really want to see. Make sure you include the following information: what show you're talking about, what booth you'll be exhibiting in, the irresistible lure you're offering them, and how much you'd really like to spend some time with them during the show. If you've still got some time before the show, you can use various promotional vehicles to get word out about your booth, but advance planning is key. You should call or send personal notes to existing customers whom you know will be attending the show and invite them to stop by. You might treat them to a meal or drinks, or ask them to come to your booth at a specific time, when you can speak with them at length. Always give people an incentive to visit your booth, Friedmann says. Trade shows are hectic, there's a lot of competition, and you have to make your booth a magnet that draws in your target audience.

Request the show's mailing list from the organizer, but don't make the mistake of sending out promotional materials to the entire list, which might be thousands of names! "Know your target audience and identify it off the list," says Friedman. "You might wind up sending something to just 10% or 5% of the total attendees and exhibitors. That's fine. In fact, it's much better to send to 100 people who are truly potential customers than to spend the time and money sending junk mail to 10,000 who aren't your customers and will just be annoyed with you." If you have the time, Friedmann highly recommends postcards. She refers her clients to cheap, fast sites like modernpostcards.com, printsmadeeasy.com and 1800postcards.com. If you don't have the time to order and mail personalized postcards, just go to a drugstore and buy cute, generic postcards, she says, or use faxes and old-fashioned phone calls to spread the word a few days ahead of the show.

3. Follow up. Always call to follow up on invitations. You can use this time to schedule appointments -- or to simply spur further interest in your booth. It's always better to speak to someone in person, but if you can't, leave an enticing voice mail message.

Reaching the right people, your potential customers, and giving them a reason to check out your wares is the key, stresses Friedmann, who suggests asking yourself these questions: What makes you different from your competitors? Do you know and understand what that difference is? "If you do," she adds, "your products will be much easier to sell. Be creative, think outside of the box, intrigue your customers, and educate them. You want people to see your promotional materials and think, 'Wow! I've got to see that!'"

