

## Tradeshow Tips ~ Beyond the Lemonade Stand

My brother and I showed our entrepreneurial spirits at an early age. He had a paper route, did lawn mowing and then shoveled snow in the winter. I was a little less industrious, but had a lemonade stand in our front yard. Who was the primary market for both of us? People who traveled through our neighborhood and of course, our family. My first business lesson was that to expand business, we needed to reach beyond the neighborhood, 'out to them.'

To 'find them', often we need to do some market research. Everyone in business does market research, even on a rudimentary level. Think about my lemonade stand. My market research would confirm that people don't buy cold lemonade in the winter and buy lots of it on hot summer days. We can take that one step further with demographic research. I could have figured out which folks in the neighborhood were more likely to buy and which were not. Perhaps I could have based some of this knowledge on lemonade sales from the previous summer. Your business is larger than my lemonade stand, but you may not have the money to hire a high-powered market research firm. But, you could conduct your own market research, simply and effectively.

Let's say you want to put together a tradeshow which would benefit your business or your organization. Using this as an example, let's take a look at several inexpensive ways to learn about your target audience, your potential exhibitors. The information you learn can help you select the best venues, acquire a customer database for your next trade show, and discover how to improve your operations. These market research suggestions fall into three categories: before the show, on-site, and after the show.

**Before the Show** ~ You may have access to demographic information that shows the past performance of your prospective exhibitors as well as their stability and credibility as companies. But, you need to go beyond anecdotal information, you need to be proactive and define strengths and weaknesses of your prospects and the appropriateness of their becoming part of your show. The most important results of research should be part of your decision of whether to launch your show at a particular location. Here are some pre-show tools:

- Acquire a list of businesses that exhibited at previous shows in the area or in locations with similar demographic trends and facilities. Ask businesses about show attendance, traffic patterns, their relationship with show management, and what they did in partnership with show management to market the show. Offer to share your research data with them and ask them to provide you with their customer databases.
- Use the internet to find out about the show's market area. Contact the businesses in the area and invite them to the show. Give them a reason to attend the show.
- Contact the local Chamber in the show region and create a mailer inviting appropriate business members to exhibit in your show.
- Establish a close working partnership with exhibitors, such as advisor or assisting exhibitors with marketing efforts.

**On-Site Market Research** ~ While you want to generate a high attendance figure, you also should help maximize your exhibitors' on-site sales, acquire leads for future exhibiting businesses, and create and maintain a customer database. The obvious and easiest on-site data tools are customer business cards.

- Business cards, instead of simply having a fish bowl for collection, be a little more creative. Encourage exhibitors to offer a free gift certificate in exchange for a business card. When customers hand over their cards, exhibitors could fill out a brief survey that provides additional information for a database that you might share with your exhibitors. You could also promote a contest for the most graphically interesting or compelling business card. This could generate show-wide interest. Add in advertising the promotion in local papers, and you might obtain future leads and bolster attendance at the same time.
- Customer attitude surveys. It is important to find out how your exhibitors perceive your presentation. This will help you improve your management approaches and capitalize on your strengths. Your survey should ask what exhibitors liked and disliked, what about the venue and your services impressed them, what they'd like to see in the future, and why they do or do not plan to exhibit with you again. You can provide an incentive for filling out the surveys by giving away promotional pens, buttons, bumper stickers, or exhibitor discounts at future shows.
- Go out on the floor. Don't just stay anchored to the show office. Work the show! Take plenty of notes and stay in close contact with your exhibitors to provide on-site assistance.

**After the Show** ~ Remember that you cannot run a tradeshow in a vacuum. You must take the information you've acquired to help create a compelling advertising and publicity campaign that will help you 'sell' other venues. The name of the game is market research. So, following the show,

- Debriefing sessions. When the show is over, gather your troops for debriefing sessions. Review your triumphs and defeats, analyze what you could have done better, and outline systems for maximizing the many things you did right.

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- Post-show mailers (email and snail mail). You're in the relationship-building business. Not only are post-show direct mail campaigns excellent ways to build relationships, but they are golden opportunities to gather additional market research. Implement your post-show direct mail campaign immediately after the show so that the experience is fresh in the minds of your exhibitors.
- Work the phones. Call your past exhibitors as well as new prospects. Thank them for participating in your show and collect more research data by asking them for suggestions on improving the show. Ask them to refer other businesses to you and offer incentives when a new exhibitor signs up as a result of their referral.

My past advertising guru-mentor, David Ogilvie once said, *"We all have a tendency to use research as a drunkard uses a lamppost — for support, but not for illumination."* Yes, you can lean on your research, but make sure the data you acquire tells you something significant. In fact, research done in all three phases can greatly contribute to future success both for your business or organization, as well as your tradeshow event, and your business exhibitors.



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