

9 Key Steps to a Successful Tradeshow

Trade shows give small businesses a really big bang for a marketing buck. But you can also waste a lot of time and money attending trade shows and conferences and community events. So what's the secret of having a successful event?

- 1. Choose the right show.** Look for conferences or shows where customers you're targeting – especially decision makers – are likely to attend. Ask your customers which shows they go to. Read "Exhibitor Information" on websites or brochures, see who else has exhibited, talk to conference organizers, ask about the attendees and other exhibitors. Also check to make sure when the exhibit hall will be open. Search online for events for your industry association for upcoming events and for larger shows at Trade Show News Network.
- 2. Tell people you'll be there.** Most conferences and many trade shows provide you with a pre-show list of registered attendees and their email addresses. Send attendees a notice ahead of time, with your booth number – and, ideally, an incentive to come by ("We're giving away an iPad!"). Definitely try to arrange meetings with key customers or prospects ahead of time.
- 3. Create an effective booth.** Every attendee who walks by your booth – even without stopping – should immediately see the name of your company, and an image of your product or service. At the minimum, have a banner made with your company name, perhaps a picture of your product, something eye-catching. Booth-size banners can be made for just a few hundred dollars at most print shops or office superstores.
- 4. Have giveaways.** Your most important give-away is your print collateral – a leaflet, catalog or sales sheet. If you make sales on the show floor, have order forms on hand and get a credit-card reader for your phone or tablet from Intuit, Square, PayPal or another provider. And don't forget "swag." People love free stuff. Just make sure your product name, contact info and website is printed on everything you hand out.
- 5. Make the first move.** Don't sit back in your booth, waiting for people to come to you. People are generally shy. So make the first move: stand up, say hi to people passing by your booth, be approachable and friendly.
- 6. Hone your pitch.** You'll often have only 30 seconds to capture someone who comes by your booth. Have a quick sentence or two prepared that lets people know about your product or company. Learn to politely end a conversation with someone who's not a qualified lead who wants to monopolize your time.
- 7. Bring help.** It's important for you to walk the trade show floor to check out competitors, new products, suppliers and more. When appropriate, bring a team member or friend to help. It also looks good to see you have a "deep bench" – a team working to take care of their business.
- 8. Take care of yourself.** Remember to drink plenty of water, eat breakfast, keep breath mints on hand, and take breaks. And absolutely remember to wear comfortable shoes.
- 9. Follow up.** Your first inclination when you get back to the office is to tackle everything that's accumulated in your absence. Wait. Schedule an hour or two – or even a day – just for trip followup. Contact all leads as quickly as possible. They're busy, and it's easy for them to forget about you. If you've told a customer or prospect you'd send them something on your return to the office, do it the first day you get back. A week or two later, most shows will send you a list of all attendees, and that's another good time to send a follow-up email to everyone.

