



Ten Traps: Avoid These Common Exhibit Marketing Mistakes

By Susan Friedmann

The key to great exhibiting is marketing. But marketing is a very inexact science that leaves room for a multitude of errors to occur. The following are ten of the most common marketing mistakes exhibitors often make. Learn to avoid them and you will increase your chances for a successful show.

- 1. Failing to have a proper exhibit marketing plan.** Having both a strategic exhibit marketing and tactical plan of action is a critical starting point. To make trade shows a powerful dimension in your company's overall marketing operation, there must be total alignment between the strategic marketing and your exhibit marketing plans. Trade shows should not be a stand-alone venture. Know and understand exactly what you wish to achieve: increasing market share with existing users, introducing new products and services into existing markets, or introducing new or existing products and services into new markets. This is the nucleus around which to build.
- 2. Failing to have a well-defined promotional plan.** A significant part of your marketing includes promotion—pre-show, at-show and post-show. Most exhibitors fail to have a plan that encompasses all three areas. Budget is naturally going to play a major role in deciding what and how much promotional activity is possible. Developing a meaningful theme or message that ties into your strategic marketing plan will then help to guide promotional decisions. Know whom you want to target and then consider having different promotional programs aimed at the different groups you are interested in attracting. Include direct mail, broadcast faxes, advertising, PR, sponsorship and the Internet as possible ways to reach your target audience.
- 3. Failing to use direct mail effectively.** Direct mail is still one of the most popular promotional vehicles exhibitors use. From postcards to multi-piece mailings, attendees are deluged with invitations to visit booths. Many of the mailings come from show management's lists and as a result, everyone gets everything. To target the people you want to visit your booth, use your own list of customers and prospects—it's the best one available. Design a piece that is totally benefit-oriented and makes an impact. Mail three pieces at regular intervals prior to the show, starting about four weeks out, to help ensure your invitation is seen. When possible, use first-class mail. There's nothing worse than a mailing that arrives after the show is over.

- 4. Failing to give visitors an incentive to visit your booth.** Whatever promotional vehicles you use, make sure that you give visitors a reason to come and visit you. With a hall overflowing with fascinating products and services combined with time constraints, people need an incentive to come and visit your booth. First and foremost their primary interest is in what's new! They are eager to learn about the latest technologies, new applications, or anything that will help save them time and/or money. Even if you don't have a new product or service to introduce, think about a new angle from which to promote your offerings.
- 5. Failing to have giveaways that work.** Tied into giving visitors an incentive to visit your booth is the opportunity to offer a premium item that will entice them. Your giveaways should be designed to increase your memorability and communicate, motivate, promote or increase recognition of your company. Developing a dynamite giveaway takes thought and creativity. Consider what your target audience wants, what will help them do their job better, what they can't get elsewhere, what is product or service related and what is educational. Think about having different gifts for different types of visitors. Use your Web site to make an offer for visitors to collect important information when they visit your booth. Giveaways should be used as a reward or token of appreciation for visitors participating in a demonstration, presentation or contest, or as a thank-you for qualifying information about specific needs, etc.
- 6. Failing to use press relations effectively.** Public relations is one of the most cost-effective and successful methods for generating large volumes of direct inquiries and sales. Before the show, ask show management for a comprehensive media list and find out which publications are planning a special show edition. Send out newsworthy press releases focusing on what's new about your product or service, or highlighting a new application or market venture. Compile press kits for the press office that include information about industry trends, statistics, new technology or production information. Include good product photos and key company contacts. Have staff members at the booth who are specifically assigned to interact with the media.
- 7. Failing to differentiate.** Too many exhibitors are happy to use the "me too" marketing approach. Examine their marketing plans and you will find an underlying sameness about them. With shows that attract hundreds of exhibitors, there are very few that seem to stand out from the crowd. Since memorability is an integral part of a visitor's show experience, you should be looking at what makes you different and why a prospect should buy from you. This is of particular concern with generic products in your industry. Every aspect of your exhibit marketing plan, including your promotions, your booth and your people should be aimed at making an impact and creating curiosity.
- 8. Failing to use the booth as an effective marketing tool.** On the show floor, your exhibit makes a strong statement about who your company is, what you do and how you do it. The purpose of your exhibit is to attract visitors so that you can achieve your marketing objectives. In addition to it being an open, welcoming and friendly space, there needs to be a focal point and a strong key message that communicates a significant benefit to your prospect. Opt for large graphics rather than reams of copy. Pictures paint a thousand words, while very few exhibitors will take the time to read. Your presentations

or demonstrations are a critical part of your exhibit marketing. Create an experience that allows visitors to use as many of their senses as possible. This will help enhance memorability.

- 9. Failing to realize that your people are your marketing team.** Your people are your ambassadors. They represent everything your company stands for, so choose them well. Brief them beforehand and make sure that they know why you are exhibiting, what you are exhibiting and what you expect from them. Exhibit staff training is essential for a unified and professional image. Make sure they sell instead of tell, don't try to do too much, understand visitor needs, don't spend more time than is necessary and know how to close the interaction with a commitment to follow up. Avoid overcrowding the booth with company representatives. Have strict rules regarding employees visiting the show and insist staffers not scheduled for booth duty stay away until their assigned time.
- 10. Failing to follow up promptly.** The key to your trade show success is wrapped up in the lead management process. Plan for follow-up before the show. Show leads often take second place to other management activities that occur after being out of the office for several days. The longer leads are left unattended, the colder and more mediocre they become. It is to your advantage to develop an organized, systematic approach to follow-up. Establish a lead handling system, set timelines for follow-up, use a computerized database for tracking, makes sales representatives accountable for leads given to them and measure your results.

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