

# Secrets of Successful Shows

by Steve Miller

## Quickie Trade Show Tips

### *Don't Sit*

If you sit during a trade show, you give attendees the impression that you don't care, that you don't want to be bothered. Attendees will not interrupt your private time, as they perceive it. Remember, attendees are also looking for reasons to disqualify you. Don't give them any. In addition, as the saying goes, if you act enthusiastic, you'll be enthusiastic. The reverse is also true. If you act bored, you'll be bored...and boring.

### *Don't Read*

For every ten feet of linear space, you have just two to three seconds to impress an attendee enough to get him to stop. It's not impressive to see someone reading a newspaper or magazine. Save it for later.

### *Don't Smoke*

Not only is it impolite to smoke in your booth, but it can actually offend a prospective customer; it's okay, however, to keep ashtrays in the booth for attendee use. If you really need that cigarette, schedule breaks to go somewhere else to smoke.

### *Don't Eat or Drink in the Exhibit*

It's just plain rude and messy. Potential customers won't bother you while you're eating; they're too polite. And, of course, there are lots of other exhibits where people are waiting to sell. They don't need to talk to you.

### *Don't Chew Gum*

No one wants to talk with someone who's chomping away at a piece of gum. Plus, trade shows are noisy. You need to be able to speak clearly and, sometimes, loudly. You can't communicate well with something in your mouth. For the same reason, avoid breath mints or Lifesavers. It's a good idea to have some breath spray or drops handy, but avoid anything that takes up space in your mouth for any length of time.

### *Don't Ignore Prospects*

One of the rudest things you can do is ignore a prospect—even a few seconds. Nobody likes to be ignored. If you're busy when someone approaches, either acknowledge him or try to include him in your conversation. If you're talking to a boothmate or neighbor, break it off immediately.

### *Don't Talk on the Telephone*

Why do you need a phone in your booth anyway? Every minute you spend on the phone is one less minute you could be talking to prospects, and like other trade show don'ts, it's rude. Even if the show is slow, it only takes one good prospect to make it successful. If you're on the phone, you may miss that person.

### *Don't Be a Border Guard*

Although you want to stand close to the aisle to acknowledge attendees walking by, don't stand where you become a barricade or block the view. Stand near the aisle and off to the side, especially if you're in a ten-foot booth.

### *Don't Hand Out Literature to Everyone*

If you've ever walked through Manhattan, you've probably had the honor of being accosted by some not-so-great-looking person holding a pile of flyers, who, as you approach, thrusts one practically into your face. Even if the literature is potentially interesting, this bold approach is offensive. So, you walk quickly away, looking for the nearest trash can. Some people don't even wait to find one—they just drop the handout on the ground. When you think about it, it's not so very different from those people at trade shows who stand in the aisle in front of their booths and thrust pieces of literature at unsuspecting attendees. Do you really want prospective customers to see you in that light?

It's just not necessary to give literature to anybody at the show, even if they ask for it. Some specific reasons follow:

**Expense.** The cost of printing brochures and flyers is astronomical. Look at each brochure as money. Do you really want to pass out money to anybody who asks for it? Of course not. When you just arbitrarily give away your literature, you can bet most of it will end up in the circular file. The cost of shipping literature is astronomical. Shippers charge you by weight and paper is heavy. Therefore shipping is very expensive. Save your money.

**No attendee interest.** You don't want your expensive literature lost in the crowd. If the show is large, attendees may collect hundreds of pieces of literature. To avoid taking it back on the airplane, they'll cull through it at the hotel, spending about 1.3 seconds on each brochure, selecting the ones that interest them the most (about seven flyers) and tossing the other 153 four-color catalogs in the trash. Even if the show is small, it's still not practical to give out literature. No buyer wants to lug around a few pounds of unnecessary paper.

**Sending literature later is good business.** So how do you get valuable information to a hot prospect? Send it. Tell the prospect that you don't want to weigh her down with more literature, that you will send the requested information after the show. By doing so, you will accomplish the following objectives:

- ❑ First, you show how professional you are. By saying you're going to do something and then doing it, you show you are dependable. And, as Humphrey Bogart would tell you, "that's the beginning of a beautiful relationship."
- ❑ Second, you can personalize the follow-up with a letter. Mention some specific needs she brought out in your discussion; talk about something personal you remember from the show. Was she wearing a really sharp scarf? Did she mention playing golf? Referring to such things establishes a positive rapport.
- ❑ Last, it gives you a good reason to follow up by telephone. This technique creates a sense of obligation on the prospect's part to take your call. It's much easier to confirm

that she received the requested material than to call out of the blue and say you met at the show. Calling then gives you an open door for moving forward in the selling process. If you just arbitrarily give out literature, you're taking a big chance. If you call, she may or may not remember you, and she may or may not still have your literature.

### ***Don't Talk With Other Booth Personnel***

I can't repeat this enough. If you give attendees a reason not to stop by your exhibit, they won't. If you look like you're busy having a conversation with someone else, they won't bother you. Keep your conversation with your boothmates and neighboring exhibit staff to the bare minimum. Talk to your potential prospects, not buddies.

### ***Don't Underestimate Prospects***

I affectionately call this the Edith Goldman Syndrome. I believe Edith started the trend of women wearing athletic shoes for the walk to work. Edith has been doing this for years at trade shows. One day, after attending a few hundred trade shows around the world as a buyer, she finally got fed up with aching, tired feet. So she began to wear athletic shoes. Edith didn't care what she looked like. She just wanted to be comfortable. But not all exhibitors accepted Edith with open arms. She didn't look like a buyer. But Edith is a buyer, a big buyer, one of the head buyers for Leavitt Advertising/Hanover House Industries, one of the largest mail order catalog houses in the world. They have over 20 different catalogs, including Adam York, Synchronics and Tapestry. She was also instrumental in the start-up of one of TV's shopping channels.

Edith has the authority to buy for any part of Leavitt, which gives her considerable buying influence. But, because she wears running shoes to trade shows, not everyone takes her seriously. But Edith is philosophical about it. "If they don't take me seriously, that's their loss, not mine." And she's right.

The only people who have to look good at the trade show are the exhibit staffers. Buyers can be as comfortable as they want—blue jeans, sports shirts, slacks, whatever. Don't underestimate them.

### ***Don't Cluster***

The subliminal aspects of trade shows cannot be over-emphasized. If you get into a group discussion with two or more boothmates or other non-prospects, you're clustering. In the eyes of an attendee, you look like a corner street gang. He or she will steer clear of you, because it's very intimidating to approach a group of strangers. Create a warm, open, inviting atmosphere in your exhibit.

### ***Be Enthusiastic***

Platitudes about enthusiasm are widespread, but there's a reason for that. Enthusiasm works and it's contagious. It's not necessary to jump up and down to be enthusiastic; in fact, enthusiasm can be defined as an activity in which a lively and absorbing interest is shown. Be enthusiastic about the show and its potential. Don't let others bring you down with negative attitudes. A truly successful person doesn't look at any project without enthusiasm.

Be enthusiastic about your company and its products. To the attendee, you are your company; however you look, act and talk will have a major influence on how the attendee perceives your company. Besides, if you're not enthusiastic about your company and its products, how can you possibly expect anybody else to be?

Be enthusiastic about yourself. One person can make a difference.

### ***Be Carefully Groomed***

Wear a suit, not a sportcoat and tie. Wear ironed, starched white shirts. Wear good ties or scarves. Get your hair cut just before you leave for the show. Make sure you have a close shave in the morning. Don't wear anything that will detract from the exhibit. Wear blues and grays; they denote professionalism, confidence and power. Other colors turn people off. Wear black socks (men) or

nude pantyhose (women). Get your shoes shined every morning. If there isn't a shoeshine stand at the show, shine them yourself. As a last resort, get one of those pocket shoe polishers. If you don't have one, send me your business card and I'll send one as a gift.

Visualize in your mind what a well-dressed person looks like and dress like that. Just remember, your clothes are not making the statement at a trade show, your company's product is. Your goal should be to wear something that the attendee won't remember. You only want them to remember your product.

### ***Use the Prospect's Name***

People love to hear their own names. Make an attendee feel important by making a concerted effort to remember his name, and then use it in the conversation from time to time.

If you have trouble pronouncing a name, ask. Tell the attendee you want to be sure and get his or her name right because you know how important your own name is to you. Most attendees will be happy to teach you the proper pronunciation. And if it's a particularly unusual name, it might prove a great opener for you.

### ***Keep Moving in Your Booth***

This is more for your own well-being than it is a selling tip, but it will make a difference if your booth is an island. By walking from one end of the booth to the other from time to time, you'll stimulate the blood flow in your legs and feet. Of course, I'm not talking about pacing back and forth; just plan to walk across the booth and back every few minutes or so. Standing for several hours creates a lot of strain on your lower body. Your legs can cramp up and your feet will be aching for days. By exercising them periodically, you'll do yourself a big favor.

When you take a break, don't just go somewhere and sit down. Give your legs a chance to limber up. Go outside, walk around, and get some fresh air. You'll be surprised at the difference in how you'll feel at the end of the four days.

For those of you working island booths and peninsulas, you absolutely must keep moving. Your exhibit can act as a barricade to attendees. If you're on one side and an attendee approaches from the other, you might never see him/her if you don't move around. Stay out toward the perimeter and keep moving. Don't stay in one place too long—you might miss somebody completely.

### ***Be on Time for Your Shift and Be Ready***

Ideally, no one should work more than four hours a day at a trade show, but for some of us it's just not possible to have more than one shift. Many companies can only afford to send one or two people to a show and they must be in the booth at all times. In these cases, being on time means being ready when the show opens.

Even on a small budget, you can still project an image of professionalism to prospects and customers. Every action you make in front of a prospective customer sends a message. Do you really want to project an image of someone who's always late or whose booth is messy with boxes not yet put away? What type of message do attendees receive when they see such things?

If your exhibit is all ready to go, get to the show at least 15 minutes before it opens. Put away your briefcase and coat and make sure the booth is clean. If you've stored product overnight, then be there at least 30 minutes early to prepare. Use any extra time to prepare yourself mentally for the coming day. If you're working all day on your feet, you'll need to program yourself mentally to have a good, positive attitude for the next eight hours.

If your company can afford to bring enough people to work shifts, then make sure the staff shows up at least 15 minutes before their shift begins. A good idea is to overlap the shifts. If, for example, a show has hours of 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., you might run shifts like this:

9:30 a.m. - 12 Noon—Silver Team  
11:45 a.m. - 2 p.m.—Gold Team  
1:45 p.m. - 4 p.m.—Silver Team  
3:45 p.m. - 6:30 p.m.—Gold Team

This type of schedule allows enough time in the morning to set up before the doors open, a 15 minute overlap for shift change and some extra time at the end of the day to store for overnight and clean up. Although it may be a little crowded during changeover, it's a lot better to have too many salespeople than to have too few.

Be firm about the schedule. Demand that your people be on time and don't put up with laggards. A trade show is no place for someone who isn't going to support your system. I've known sales managers who actually sent salespeople home early rather than allow them to become a bad influence on the rest of the staff.

### ***Get a Good Night's Sleep***

It's common for salespeople to get together at night when they're out of town to have a little fun. There's no harm in that, but staying up late has no place at a trade show. A trade show is hard, hard work. And it's extremely hard on the body—the feet, the legs, the lower back, the eyes and the voice. You need to give your body a chance to recuperate before the next day's onslaught. Don't go out partying until the wee hours; you'll pay for it the next day. You can't risk losing a new customer because you aren't mentally sharp enough.

Make a concerted effort to plan rest time into your trade show calendar. Take a Jacuzzi or short walk to loosen up. Bring a good bedtime book to read, and I don't mean a business book. Give the right side of your brain a chance to calm down from the overload it went through during the day. And then get a good night's sleep. You'll feel better the next day.

### ***Don't Drink Alcohol Anytime During the Trade Show Week***

Alcohol is a depressant that slows down the physical and mental processes. Alcohol causes your brain to go into slow motion. Your lips stop working, even though your mouth might not. You might accidentally slip and let out confidential information. You might embarrass yourself in front of a customer or your boss. You could wake the next morning with a hangover

and be a total waste at the show. Worse still, you might not be able to work the show. It's already been established that trade shows are hard work; don't do anything that will limit your potential for success.

If you're out with a customer or prospect, drink soft drinks, or, better still, lots of water. Trade shows dehydrate the body, so drinking water replenishes your natural fluids.

### ***Don't Eat Strange or Exotic Foods***

When you travel out of town to a trade show, you don't have any choice but to eat out. Do your body a favor and stick to boring, non-greasy foods. You're only asking for trouble when you try something new and different at an exotic new restaurant or local favorite. If you're not used to eating dim sum, Cajun meat loaf, or Buffalo wings, then don't try them. Your body has a hard enough time when traveling, without stuffing it with a lot of foreign substances.

### ***Appoint One Person to Work with the Media***

There's always a chance that the media might come by your booth for a story. They may be following up a lead your own company sent to them, or they may have heard about some new development or unusual products your company has introduced at the show. They may even have just strolled by and randomly selected your exhibit as one to cover for the 11:00 news. In any case, make sure you have one person assigned as the media's liaison with your company. That way you guarantee that the same story is being told at all times. If you allow anyone in your exhibit to talk with the press, you're asking for trouble. No matter how effectively you train your staff, the stories will never come out the same. In addition, the media appreciate having a special contact within the company. They know this person has been assigned to work with them, and they know they can contact this same person for a possible follow-up. The person assigned should know exactly what information is available to the media and what is not, and then stick to those guidelines.

Here are some media interview tips offered by Marilyn Hawkins, a principal in Hawkins Vander

Houwen, a Seattle-based marketing and management communications agency:

- ❑ Listen as much as you talk. Understand what the reporter is asking you.
- ❑ Be friendly and engaging, but neither deferential nor defensive.
- ❑ Make your key points as simply—and as often—as possible.
- ❑ Don't ramble. Make your point and stop.
- ❑ If necessary, take time and educate the reporter. But don't do it condescendingly.
- ❑ Be quotable. Think in terms of attention-getting headlines and lead paragraphs.
- ❑ Never lie or intentionally mislead.
- ❑ Don't say anything off the record, unless you possess incredible media savvy.
- ❑ Avoid defaming anyone or anything. If the interview is about someone in particular, don't get sidetracked into talking about other people and other issues, especially negatively.
- ❑ If you don't understand the reporter's question, don't try to answer it. Politely ask for clarification.
- ❑ Never give a reporter words with which to hang yourself: "I am not a crook." "I am not a bimbo." "Go ahead and follow me, you'll be bored."
- ❑ If you don't know the answer to a question, admit it. Offer to get the answer as soon as possible, and then be sure and follow up.
- ❑ Avoid at all costs the words "No comment." There are a million ways to address a tough question short of raising that red flag.
- ❑ At the conclusion of the interview, ask the reporter if he or she got everything he or she needed.
- ❑ If the story turns out well, send the reporter a brief note of acknowledgment.

### ***Wear Your Badge on the Right***

Most people are right-handed, so they automatically put their nametag on the left side of their coat or blouse. At a show, you don't

want to make it difficult for an attendee to read your name, but when you wear it on the left side, that's exactly what you're doing. The place to wear it is on the right side, near the face. The reason for this practice is that hands are shaken with the right hand. Consequently, the right shoulder leans toward the person and the left moves away. A badge on the right side moves toward the person being met. In addition, wearing it high makes it even easier for the attendee to read.

### ***Keep Your Exhibit Clean***

There are three things that an attendee observes immediately in every exhibit: the overall display, the personnel and the booth's appearance. Even though you might have a service that cleans at night or comes by periodically during the day, your booth can still get cluttered and dirty. Make it a habit to inspect your booth on an ongoing basis. Empty ashtrays and trash cans; clear the area of unnecessary loose literature and other print materials; put briefcases and coats out of sight; and pick up cups and trash left behind by attendees. You might want to assign a new person during each shift to keep the booth clean. That way, everybody will participate in an important, but seemingly demeaning activity.

### ***When You're Awake, You're Working***

One of the biggest myths about trade shows is that they are some sort of a vacation. Trade shows, no matter where they are, are not vacations. When done correctly, they are hard work. The hours can be long. You stand on your feet all day. You meet hundreds, possibly thousands of stranger, taking you out of your comfort zone. You eat poorly and irregularly; convention food services have never been known for their gourmet cuisine. You get headaches from working your brain overtime. Your eyes burn from the lighting, not to mention the smoke in the arena. Your hand throbs from shaking other hands all day long. You're burned out from giving the same sales pitch over and over. You lose patience with the lookie-loos who just take up your time asking stupid questions, not to mention the kids under 18 who snuck in past the guards.

Trade shows are not a reward, but they can be rewarding. You can take away enough business to

last you several months, maybe several years. The catch is that, at a trade show, when you're awake, you're working. There are no working hours during the week of a trade show. It's not a 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. job, after which you go out with your buddies for dinner and drinks. You have to take advantage of every opportunity to contact your customers and potential prospects. Meet somebody for breakfast. Offer someone a ride to the show in your rental car, or, if you don't have one, share a taxi. At least sit next to a buyer on the bus.

When you take a break at the show, the break isn't from working, it's from standing. Take a prospect away with you for a cup of coffee. Schedule lunch with a member of the media. Arrange to meet a new customer for drinks after the show closes. And, of course, schedule dinner with someone important. Your rest period comes after dinner, in your room.

If this concept turns you off to trade shows, don't let it. It's usually only for a few days. For the amount of potential new business, you can sacrifice yourself for a few days!

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