

Ten Traps: Avoid These Common Exhibit Marketing Mistakes

by Susan Friedman

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 10 of the most common marketing mistakes exhibitors often make. Learn to avoid them and you will increase your chances for a successful show.

Trap 1: Failing to have a proper exhibit marketing plan

Having both a strategic exhibit marketing plan and tactical plan of action is a critical starting point. In order to make tradeshow a powerful dimension of your company's overall marketing operation, there must be total alignment between the strategic marketing and your exhibit marketing plan. Trade shows should not be a stand-alone venture. Know and understand exactly what you wish to achieve—increasing market share with existing users or introducing new products/services into existing markets or into new markets. This is the nucleus on which to build.

Trap 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 who 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, sponsorships and the internet as possible ways to reach your target audience.

Trap 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. Whenever possible, use first class mail. There's nothing worse than a mailing that arrives after the show is over.

Trap 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/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/service to introduce, think about a new angle to promote your offerings.

Trap 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 giveaway items should be designed to increase your memorability, 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/service related and 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, such as an executive report, 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.

Trap 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 what publications are planning a special show edition. Send out newsworthy press releases focusing on what's new about your product/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 product information. Also include good product photos and key company contacts. Have staff members at the booth who are specifically assigned to interact with the media.

Trap 7: Failing to differentiate

Too many exhibitors are happy to use the "me too" marketing approach. Examine their marketing plans and there's 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.

Trap 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 can do and how you do it. The purpose of the exhibit is to attract visitors so that you can achieve your marketing objectives. In addition to 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 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 the senses as possible. This will help encourage memorability.

Trap 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 that they sell instead of tell; don't try to do too much; understand visitors needs; don't spend too much time; 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. Assign specific tasks for company executives working the show.

Trap 10: Failing to follow-up promptly

The key to your trade show success is wrapped up in the lead-management process. The best time to plan for follow-up is 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, use a computerized database for tracking, make sales representatives accountable for leads given to them and then measure your results.

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