Integrating Themes for a Successful Trade Show Exhibit
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Trade shows are an inexpensive way to meet many potential customers in a brief period of time. They are the ultimate in efficient networking.

This type of exhibition gets you in front of a highly targeted audience and allows you to develop face-to-face relationships with key prospects. Your visibility at a trade show is enhanced in a way that can support all of your year-round marketing, prospecting, and staff recruitment activities.

For smaller businesses, trade shows are a great way to level the playing field. With a well-executed booth and a comprehensive marketing strategy, you can create a presence on par (or better) with your larger competitors. No matter who you are, trade shows are your opportunity to make an impression.

Plan to Succeed
You’ve heard the saying, “He who fails to plan, plans to fail.” The most successful exhibitors are those who incorporate pre-show marketing, booth design, and event follow up into an integrated campaign. They brand their whole trade show experience around a theme or key product and carry that idea forward into multiple customer connections.

Theme
Your promotional strategy at a trade show needs thought and creativity. To tie your campaign together, develop a theme and a supporting message. This theme should promote your product or service in a way that can be educational and interactive. Incorporate your theme into all exhibit activities—your pre-show promotion, the booth itself, and your post-show follow-up. Themes and activities draw attention and attract people into your booth, helping you build new relationships and collect leads\(^1\). The longer you can keep people there and the larger the crowd, the better opportunity

you have to make a positive impression. Best yet are themes and promotional products that are so fun, other attendees start talking up your booth or sporting your giveaway around the trade show floor.

Superheroes: Consider your booth a Superhero training school and promote it as such: “Learn to be a Web Design Superhero with ACME Software.” Or market yourself as the heroes: “Bentley & Brown to the Cash Flow Rescue.” Batman and Robin offer lots of opportunity for fun interaction between your staff, if they’re up for it. (“Holy, drink line Batman. I think we should return to the Bat Booth and come back later.”) Give out clues and ask show attendees to help you solve a crime. Consider a cross-promotional game with your vendors where attendees pick up one clue at each of the specified booths. Give a prize to everyone with a correct answer and raffle off a premium award to one lucky winner.

Survivor: “Be the last one standing with TNT Components.” “Don’t Get Voted Off the Island. Use Speedy Delivery.” Make each one of your staffers a contestant, vying to be the last one voted out of the booth. (Figuratively of course, they’ll still need to work!) Invite trade show attendees to participate in the voting. Your booth staffers will have an automatic conversation starter and those who pass by will enjoy participating in the fun. Encourage people to visit you each day of the show by allowing one vote per person every day. If you can, announce the “losing” staffer over the show loud speaker at the end of each day. Find a fun way to designate who’s been voted off and who’s still in the running. Give two prizes—one to the winning employee and another to an attendee drawn at random from all the votes. Make it a “rescued from the island” themed prize like airline tickets, a tent, or a cooler full of food.

Sports: “You’ll Never Lose with Excel Training.” “Stay in the Game with Smith Distributing.” The opportunities are practically endless with a sports-themed booth. Choose one sport, like NASCAR, that’s particularly appropriate to the city you’re visiting. Or consider a whole “wide world of sports” theme with a little bit of everything. You could also hire a sports personality to make a scheduled appearance at your booth or at a VIP reception for key customers.
a. Booth Design

It takes someone just a few seconds to walk past your trade show booth, so you only have a brief amount of time to reel people in. Make your booth design inviting and easy to navigate. The Trade Show Exhibitors Association recommends keeping your message simple to avoid overloading attendees with too much information. It is also recommended to remove any barriers between you and your audience.

Well-lit, bright booths are especially attractive, and specialty lighting is a growing trend. Use gobo lights to project an image or pattern (e.g. Batman the symbol) onto the floor of your booth or the ceiling of the conference center. Be sure to get permission from the event organizer before using uplighting, as some shows have restrictions against it. Exhibitors are even using sensor control lighting that highlights specific areas of a booth as a visitor walks by.

Superheroes: If you’re able to use gobo lighting, the superhero tie-in is obvious. Carry this one step further and hand out illuminated buttons with your company logo. Make sure your staff wears them to evening events. Tell people you’ll be on the lookout for the buttons at the main evening social and a special award or discount will be given to anyone sporting your glowing logo.

Survivor: Give your booth the feel of a tiki-hut or an island shelter. Handing out punch or a fruit smoothie in coconut cups with little umbrellas will draw people in for your unique refreshment. Incorporate grass skirting, rope ladders, island masks, large silk leaves, bamboo, or palm matting.

Sports: People like a chance to get active and have some fun on the trade show floor. Portable basketball hoops, a football toss or putting green are attention-getting ideas to attract passersby. Encourage attendees to challenge their friends in mini-competitions and give out promotional prizes to the winners.

b. Technology

Technology is a great way to increase your presence and draw visitors to your booth. People are inquisitive, and interactive games are something they love playing with. Interactive technology is any media that responds to user involvement. Instead of a basic “plug and play” presentation that runs from start to finish, the user has to constantly make choices for the presentation to go further.
The trade show attendee transitions from “viewer” to “participant.”

Obviously a solid interactive display will require a larger investment and some specialty programming assistance. But the same interactive program you create for your booth can be distributed on DVD or shown on your Web site the rest of the year. Instead of bringing a large piece of machinery to the exhibit floor, manufacturers, for example, could take guests on a virtual tour of the machine’s inner workings. You could offer panoramic images that allow visitors to pan across a 360-degree view of your workshop and zoom in on specific areas. Users can choose the areas they want to see or the things they want to know more about, so in the process you get them actively involved. Line up a couple kiosks or laptops at a trade show and you could have people there all the time.

One way to create big impact without a big budget is with an LCD projector. Standard LCD projectors range in cost from $1000 to $5000. By projecting your image onto a blank wall in your booth, instead of a laptop or TV, your screen size increases exponentially. Projectors are easily transported to and from the booth each day, saving you the worry or hassle of locking down an expensive plasma screen in the exhibit hall each night.

If you do incorporate technology into your booth, be sure it doesn’t take the place of personal conversations and one-on-one interaction.

c. Pre-Show Promotion

According to the Trade Show Exhibitors Association, people come to trade shows with a set agenda of exhibits to visit. Use pre-show advertising as a way to drive those attendees to your booth. Give people a valuable and attractive reason to visit you. You might draw them in with a celebrity guest appearance, new product demonstrations, a complimentary industry tips guide, or free promotional gifts.

Let people know you’re going to be at the trade show and invite them to join you. Contact your suppliers, customers, and prospects from your database. If you can get the exhibitor list, consider mailing them also. You could notify a targeted prospect list in whatever city the trade show is located, as well. Be sure to give people your booth number so they know where to find you. If you send out postcards ahead of time, tell recipients to exchange them for a free gift at your booth or to drop their card in your raffle. Because the cards are pre-addressed, you have an immediate record of who responded to your mailing.

Promote your trade show participation in various ways. Include show information at the bottom of your email messages; add it in to your voice mail message.
and into the “on-hold” script on the company phones. Promote it on the home page of your Web site. Use stickers or labels to get the message on outgoing mail and faxes. Issue a press release announcing new products or special show promotions.

Consider using a promotional item in your pre-show direct mail campaign. A Georgia Southern University study has shown attendee response increases when a promotional item is included with a pre-show mailer². There are lots of small, inexpensive items that can be mailed at a low cost. Customized promotional products will draw special attention to your booth before the show even starts and will help differentiate you from anyone else doing pre-show mailings. Customers who receive a mailing and a gift before the show are dramatically more likely to visit your booth. Xcite Privacy Bag Tags or Grip-It Luggage Identifiers are great pre-show promotions when your attendees are likely to travel to the show by plane.

Superheroes: For a catch-the-bad-guy themed superhero booth, mail your promotional materials in brown envelopes labeled “TOP SECRET.” Give out a clue or send a pocket-sized detective notepad. Or, if budget allows, do a professional photo shoot with your key sales people dressed in superhero costumes, and incorporate this into your print materials. You could even have large cardboard superheroes made to set up at your booth. Your regular customers will get a kick out of seeing their vendor dressed up in a funny costume, and the campaign will be lively enough to catch others’ attention. Hiring an artist to draw a few comic strip panels incorporating your product would turn a few heads. Leave the bubbles blank and ask attendees to fill in the story in exchange for a free gift. At the show post the completed comics for other attendees to read and give booth visitors a chance to join your fun.

Survivor: If you’re going to vote your salespeople off your “island,” play this up in a pre-show mailing. Write player bios just like those used for the Survivor television show. Include a quote from each player about why he or she should be the last survivor.

Sports: Create football-style cards featuring your products and mail

those in advance of the show. For a NASCAR themed event, send Race Tracker and Fan Guides. Other great sport-related pre-show mailers include Suncare Kits, Bottle Holders, or Tee Packets. If you’re hosting a sport’s celebrity at your booth, send out a photo with a Sharpie Retractable Marker along with a signing schedule.

d. Staff Presence
Talk to show staff about proper show etiquette and review attendance expectations. If, for example, the trade show is held in an attractive resort location, set rules about time spent away from the show. Motivate them to do their best with incentives or friendly-competitions. If staffing a trade show booth is new or uncomfortable for some of your employees, spend some time in training beforehand and partner them with more experienced staffers. If you can, send only those people who are outgoing, confident and extroverted.

Order custom imprinted shirts for each member in your booth. Not only does it give you a professional appearance, it advertises your company each time you walk the trade show floor. Wearing this “uniform” may also keep booth workers in a professional frame of mind. Order custom lanyards to complete the cohesive look.

Superheroes: Know your exhibit staff and decide how far everyone is willing to go for your theme. All-out costumes probably aren’t appropriate or professional enough for most trade shows, but they might be comfortable wearing a superhero cape along with your company shirt. What about t-shirts with your superhero slogan? You could hire someone to dress up as a superhero and walk the showroom floor handing out fliers for your booth.

Survivor: Print jungle-style bandannas for your booth workers and encourage staffers to wear them however they like (as a do-rag or neck scarf, tucked into a back pocket or wrapped around a hat). Have them wear cargo shorts/pants and matching shirts to complete the look.

Sports: Outgoing staff can have a lot of fun with pom poms and whistles at your booth. Shake your company-colored pom poms as people walk by to show enthusiasm at your booth. Other people are sure to be attracted by the cheering and commotion. Encourage your staff to continue the fun throughout the show, rooting for someone that drew in the most customers or wrote up the biggest order.
e. Promotional Products

Has anyone ever walked up to you and asked you to run another spot on the radio or put up another billboard? Not likely. But people are clamoring for your promotional products all the time. Everyone likes a freebie. The trick is to make sure your promotional products hit the right market and aren’t simply collected by “trick-or-treaters” at the trade show.

Use promotional products to heighten visibility and generate leads. Studies have shown that promotional products help drive traffic to your booth and create good feelings about your company. According to Incomm Center for Trade Show Research and Sales Training, promotional products can increase traffic to your booth by as much as 52 percent. Attendees who receive a promotional product are more likely to remember your company and more likely to think favorably of it.

Promotional products are valuable to your organization. They help generate leads, they build customer loyalty, and they increase company awareness. Don’t just leave these items stacked up on a table for anyone to take. Use your promotional products as a way of saying “thank you” to someone who showed serious interest, shared information about his or her own company, and gave you contact information to follow up on.

You can also use promotional products in conjunction with games or competitions. Be aware that games will attract all sorts of visitors to your booth, including people who may not have a use for your product or service. In this case, you may want to lower the price point of your promotional product, because you’ll be giving them to a wider audience. Nevertheless, games are still a good idea because they attract visitors, including many qualified leads.

Have a variety of promotional products on hand and give attendees their choice. Some exhibitors hand out two levels of promotional items, giving $5-10 items to more serious prospects. Just be aware of your current customers and remember to give them the same courtesy as your prospects.

Give items that are reusable. Your gift says “thank you” every time your prospect or customer sees it, keeping your company top of mind. Consider items related to your booth theme as well as items directly related to your service or product. Either one can be successful, as long as your gift has value.

to the recipient. It’s okay to give out child-appropriate gifts as well, even if you’re not a “kid-friendly” business. Many trade show attendees appreciate having something to bring back home for their little ones.

Superheroes: Think about Batman-gadgets and plan your promos accordingly. Give away “Bat Beacon” flashlights or “Bat Block” umbrellas. Come up with other fun superhero-like names for promotional items directly connected to your industry.

Survivor: For a premium give-away, consider outdoor survival kits packed inside a water bottle or a multi-function knife. Smaller survival-themed promotional items include compasses, pocket knives, carabineers, first aide kits, or an emergency rain poncho.

Sports: Give out stadium blankets and whistles, golf towels, golf balls, pedometers, or binoculars. 4imprint also carries adorable sport-themed rubber ducks made to look like a football, soccer ball, or basketball. The kiddies will love ‘em.

f. Lead Gathering
Each visitor to your booth is a potential client. Know who they are! Greet each guest with a handshake and ask for a card when appropriate. Qualify your prospects to determine the serious customers; take time afterwards to make notes after the visitor has left your booth.

While you don’t see it too often at local trade shows, most national events will incorporate some type of lead-retrieval system. At these events, everyone who registered for the show is entered into a database. Attendees carry a name badge with some form of electronic coding or transmitter on it. As a visitor stops at your booth, you can scan his/her badge with their information already embedded on it. You then have an electronic record of who you talked to, including complete contact information. You can also enter notes into your own contact management system immediately after making a connection.

g. Post-Show Follow Up
After the show and back in the office, everyone is eager to catch up on work they missed while they were gone. While you’re busying answering emails and finishing paperwork, your leads are growing colder and colder. Failing to provide meaningful, prompt follow up is the cardinal sin for trade show exhibitors. Have a systemized follow-up plan in place, BEFORE you go to the show. Enlist the help of your administrative team and hold your sales
representatives accountable for pursuing leads.

By taking detailed notes during the trade show, you should be able to make personalized contact with your most qualified prospects. If you’ve received a lot of business cards, through a raffle or game for example, you can send out a semi-personalized form letter thanking people for visiting your booth, and enter their information in your database or mailing lists.

Another critical post-show activity is a staff debriefing. Gather everyone involved in the show for a download session and review the event right after the show. Find out what went right and what the challenges were. This is also a good time for people to share any new information about key customers and the competition.

**Trade Show Success**

A well-executed trade show can reap dividends in new leads and enhanced customer relationships. Plan ahead, incorporate an element of fun, and think about innovative ways to attract visitors and gain new leads. Use promotional products to generate interest and to say thank you for an attendee’s time. Integrate an overall theme or message into your trade show and pre-show promotion to help differentiate your company. Above all, take quality notes and follow up promptly.