

**Trade shows are not dead, but exhibitors are killing them one show at a time.**

On December 3, I was entering the Orange County Convention Center in Orlando, and struck up a conversation with an exhibitor from Louisiana. He asked me what I thought of this year's show. Before I responded, he said he thought trade shows were dying. He couldn't see their value since he witnessed attendance dropping, exhibits becoming smaller, and his customers not attending.

My retort: Trade shows are alive and well. It's we exhibitors who are killing them.

They maybe not as healthy as they have been over the past several years, but they are one of only two ways we marketers can get in front of our prospects and customers face-to-face. The other is a direct sales call, and according to Sales and Marketing International, we are making less direct sales calls today than we did five years ago. All other marketing-communications vehicles are indirect.

How are exhibitors killing tradeshow? By not respecting the medium as a strategically important marketing-communication tool.

- ❑ We continue to look at them logistically, not strategically.
- ❑ We don't set measurable objectives that support our organizations' marketing mission.
- ❑ We employ mindless gimmicks that don't further the sales process.
- ❑ We don't select and prepare staff who can execute the exhibiting objectives.

Yes, we are killing trade shows ourselves without much help. And, when we don't plan, execute, and follow-up our shows, our management teams find ways to invest our budgets in other forms of marketing communications or just cut the budgets because we haven't given them any good reasons not to do so.

If we are to curtail this trend, we need to take on four very specific actions.

1. We need to think and act strategically. Face-to-face marketing is all about creating an experience for our attendees — current and potential customers — so that when they have a need, they think of us. It is positioning, but more so it is all about creating an environment that helps us convert attendee behavior to buying. This means clearly creating exhibit plans that support our organizations' marketing mission, not just filling out papers, moving crates from show to show, and making sure everyone who forgot to register has a badge and room. It means creating strategies and then supporting tactics in that order, not vice versa.
2. We, all of us, need to sit down and answer the question, "Why are we exhibiting, and specifically why are we participating at this show, conference, event or convention?" Having defined measurable objectives will form the basis for all future strategy and tactic development. Without this understanding, upfront, we are merely showing up. And, that is a waste of company resources. Your management will see this and cut your budget.
3. We continue to employ mindless gimmicks to attract visitors to our exhibits. According to an industry friend, exhibiting is all about selective attraction. And, having a neat and nifty promotional item or a carnival wheel to win the prize of your choice is only not only over-attractive and non-selective, it is a waste of money. There is a place for promotional items, but they should not be a crutch to wow visitors as they explore the show. Time is the competition at a show, and you want as many qualified visitors as possible in your exhibit at all times to achieve your event objectives, not ones interested in a free gift. So instead of a prize wheel, charge your field sales force to talk up your participation at the show with customers and prospects. Invite them to visit your exhibit, and/or encourage them to make an appointment to meet at the booth during the

show. This kind of targeted pre-show communication is far more likely to move prospects along the sales cycle than a prize wheel or random giveaway item.

4. Exhibiting at a trade show is different from what your personnel typically do every day. They need to understand those differences. If you don't help them transition their skills, they will either do what they do in the field or just sit around in your exhibit feeling uncomfortable and ignoring those that can impact your ROI. Selecting staffers who are open, friendly, knowledgeable, good communicators (listening, as well as speaking), and are interested in working the show is the first step. (Proximity of personnel to the event is only one consideration in selecting staff.) The second is to take the time before the show to prepare them. Some think that "training" is demeaning. However, you have an investment that demands a return, and only the staff can sell. Everything else in the exhibit is in support of your staff. If they are uncomfortable or don't understand the process of exhibit selling, they will blow the experience and merely take up space in your exhibit. Even 30 minutes of orientation regarding the key differences between selling at a show and selling in the field will help them develop the engaging, qualifying, communicating, and closing techniques that will benefit your top line.

Exhibiting today is all about converting — converting opportunities to potential sales. Exhibiting is not dead, but if we don't start looking at what we are doing more strategically, we will surely kill the medium.

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