



4 Trade Show Myths Dispelled

Focus on the facts to keep your trade show program rooted on solid ground.

How often have you heard someone say they didn't get any business from a trade show? Or that trade shows were a waste of time? Some senior level managers – and even a few marketers – remain skeptical about the real value of exhibiting at trade shows. Displaying a lack of business respect for this unique marketing and sales medium can seriously hamper your organization's exhibit success. This can keep your company from realizing a return on what could be a lucrative investment.

Why don't more companies succeed at trade shows? Because even well-intentioned companies let certain myths and misconceptions block their paths to success. Don't let this happen to your trade show program. Use this in-depth look at four common trade show myths to help you refute them before they affect you.

Myth #1: "Trade shows are a waste of time and money."

Fact #1: More and more companies are sending decision-makers to trade shows. An overwhelming 91% of decision-makers polled by the Center for Exhibition Industry Research say exhibitions are "extremely useful" sources of purchasing information. These same decision-makers ranked trade shows number one for gathering purchasing information from among 13 sales and marketing options.

Properly planned exhibiting is by no means a "waste of time and money". Research has shown that successful exhibitors spend about three times more of their marketing budgets (26.7%) on trade shows than unsuccessful exhibitors, who spend an average of 6.7%. The same research reveals that successful exhibitors participate in more trade shows than unsuccessful exhibitors. The difference between successful and unsuccessful exhibitors is driven by how the resources are directed and managed, not necessarily by how much is spent.

Trade shows are a proven way to generate sales leads, increase orders and introduce new products and services, often more effectively than business-to-business advertising, direct mail, public relations and telemarketing. In a recent CEIR study, 83% of exhibition attendees polled said trade shows and exhibitions bring them up-to-date on the latest trends and developments in their industries. Eighty-five percent attend to save time and money on purchases.

Having dispelled this first myth, you must now figure out how your company can capitalize on trade show opportunities. The answer: Implement a carefully integrated trade show marketing strategy. First, you must internally cultivate the idea that trade shows play a vital role in your company's overall marketing strategy and sales plan. When this approach is taken, companies of all sizes can maximize their return on investment.



Second, you should set objectives. Some companies have a tendency to let the sales function set the show objectives. The problem with this approach is that you end up with a singular myopic focus on sales and lead generation as a yardstick of success. Research shows companies that allow sales departments to set the objectives experienced unsuccessful trade shows more often than those organizations that took a more integrated approach. A successful show objective should not be based solely on closing sales and obtaining leads. It should be comprehensive enough to include competition comparisons, exposure level to new products, brand and company promotions and the exploration of new markets.

As a smart exhibitor, you know that how you measure success is key. Someone with show expertise should create and monitor trade show performance, establishing quantifiable performance measurements. This person must possess the corporate authority and responsibility to correctly evaluate and improve the entire show program.

Generally, there are several available measures. One way is to track total qualified leads, followed by the total number of visitors and totals leads. Of course, tracking direct/indirect sales that result from the show is essential. Exhibitors may also use previous trade show results as benchmarks to evaluate current show performance. Again, there are a number of ways to measure success but it must be deployed across the board and tracked pre-show, on-site, and post-show.

Today's successful companies are leveraging their competitive advantage through thorough planning and setting objectives. As one company executive succinctly stated, "if you're in business and don't take full advantage of trade shows, you ought to have your head examined."

Myth #2: "Any one of our employees can work the booth."

Fact #2: This couldn't be further from the truth. At one time or another, most companies that exhibit at trade shows have fallen victim to this commonly held myth. This is typically because most do not screen or train their staff to work within this unique selling environment. They simply send people to work the booth. The day before the show, a booth-duty schedule appears, the staffers show up and the show goes on. Unfortunately, this approach isn't going to get you the ROI numbers you're looking for.

A successful exhibit manager trains staffers even when they are experienced salespeople, because they know that selling at trade shows is unique. Trade shows are not sales calls. And the proper technique is not "selling" per se. It's developing, in a very short time, a relationship that ultimately will pave an avenue for future business.

Staff training should focus on what St. John's University's Business Research Institute calls "relationship selling". This type of selling is based on the idea that no one sale or single contact is more important than the collective contacts that make up a long-term relationship. The key is to identify real (i.e., qualified) prospects. There's simply no better opportunity in which to meet prospects than trade shows.



Assuming that a company recognizes the need for training, the next fatal flaw is to have a senior level sales executive perform the training function. Because trade shows are not traditional sales functions or environments, a trade show marketing expert should handle the training. The trainer should understand the company's positioning and image, as well as what styles work best with the booth staff, the industry, the audience, etc. Training methods to accomplish these tasks vary widely from classroom training, to one-on-one training, to active role-playing and participation. Like athletes, sales people are goal-oriented and thrive on motivation and competition. Challenge them and reward individual achievements while instilling team success.

Myth #3: "You need a 'cool' giveaway to get attention."

Fact #3: Collectors of trade show trinkets and memorabilia are precisely the crowd you want to avoid, especially if the giveaway contributes nothing toward company image or product recognition. In truth, there's no better, more consistent attention-grabber than proper branding of your product or service. Brands sell. It's that simple. Branding is an essential part of a successful trade show strategy. Brands can be powerful motivators since customers associate strong brands with quality and value. Brands also can strike an emotional chord, resonating into tangible value.

For effective branding, ask yourself what values your company's products and services evoke. What are the differences between you and the competition? What is the emotion or value you want to convey? Keep these in mind as you plan your show presence. While branding and positioning can sometimes be more art than science, once it's accomplished, it's more a matter of managing and executing your trade show to effectively communicate the key themes.

Giveaways can be an effective part of your trade show strategy if they add to your branding and overall image. Serious prospects are not interested in refrigerator magnets and key chains. They are interested in obtaining solid information about your products or services in the least amount of time. To make the most of giveaways, think of them as small touches to complement your efforts.

When selecting a promotional giveaway, keep in mind not only your company's image, but also your target audience's demographic profile. Use giveaways that enhance your branding and stay away from controversial giveaways that may offend or alienate a particular segment of your audience.

Myth #4: "Sponsorships are a waste of time and money."

Fact #4: Sponsorships are one of the fastest growing forms of marketing, earning companies unparalleled market growth and return on investment. For the past decade, sponsorships have consistently outpaced media and sales promotions every year. This unprecedented growth and maturity is not just taking place within the sports world, but in a vast array of corporate venues, include trade shows.

Like other promotional tools, sponsorships must be a part of an integrated marketing plan to fully capitalize on their potential. Effective sponsorship efforts synergize all of the marketing media (public relations, advertising, etc.) to maximize reaching trade show audiences. Trade show-related sponsorships also can work in connection with branding and marketing efforts by adding sustained high yield brand/image associate and recognition for attendees.

There are many philosophies on what types of activities can be successfully developed as value-added sponsorship programs, including co-op sponsorships, pre- and post-show support, educational opportunities, demonstrations, and industry-specific presentations and lectures. These questions from BDS Sponsorship Ltd., a London-based sponsorship specialist, will help you focus your sponsorship efforts:

- Is sponsorship an integral part of your business planning or an ad-hoc decision?
- Do you have sufficient data and knowledge in-house to professionally research and assess sponsorship opportunities?
- Have you set clear objectives on the use of sponsorships based on proper research?
- Do you have experienced staff in-house to handle budgeting and implementation?
- Is your sponsorship activity fully integrated into your overall marketing program?
- Do you exploit your investment to the fullest and make it work in conjunction with other promotions?

It is essential in understanding sponsorship success that you objectively evaluate the results, since sponsorships can yield quantifiable data. There are several ways to measure these results and provide rationale for those who doubt their value. The most obvious measuring gauge is an increase in sales. Another important but less defined evaluation is to compare the amount of sponsorship-generated media coverage and exposure against similar exposure using other marketing tools. Finally, sponsorship success can be measured through attitudinal changes, although this can only be accurately assessed over time.

Sponsorships can be uncharted waters for some companies, but the effort and investment are well worth the yield. They influence the consumer just as powerfully as other marketing disciplines in meeting business objectives. Integrated with your company's other marketing tools, sponsorships can become an essential part of your marketing strategy.

As part of your trade show strategy, sponsorships can build recognition of your show presence and draw show attendees in to see what you have to offer.

Just the Facts



Trade shows can be a very rewarding marketing tool if used properly. No other venue gives your company a chance to meet so many customers and potential customers in such a short time frame. But in order to make the most of show opportunities, you have to plan ahead. Formulate a strategy for your trade show program, based on measurable goals and objectives. Train your staff to handle the unique environment created by a trade show. Use a strong, integrated branding strategy to enamor show attendees with your company. And consider how you might benefit from show sponsorship opportunities. Dispel these four trade show myths and improve your company's chance to realize success at your next show.

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