

Trade Show Marketing

Over the course of the last several months, I've given seminars at a number of printing industry trade shows, including The Gutenberg Festival in Southern California and Southwest Graphics in Dallas. From the number of printers attending these shows, it's pretty clear that there's a high value placed on the opportunity to see what's new and to meet with a number of current and/or potential suppliers under one roof.

Since printers so obviously seem to see the value in attending trade shows as purchasers, it puzzles me that so few are active in exhibiting in trade shows targeted at the print-buying public. There are plenty of these shows around, often sponsored by the local or regional Chamber of Commerce, or by another business or industry group.

Prospects Come To You

One of the great appeals of exhibiting at this sort of trade show is that it's an opportunity to let prospects come to you. I think any outside salesperson will tell you that it can be a nice change of pace to stand in one place and "hold court" for a while, as opposed to the often exasperating process of prospecting and follow up that it usually takes to get people to the point of serious sales discussion.

That's not to say that working a trade show is easy, because it's not. While it's nice to have prospects come to you in a trade show environment, you almost never get them coming in a smooth and easily manageable flow. My own experience is that "working the booth" tends to be feast or famine. You spend a lot of time standing around with no one to talk to except other exhibitors, then all of a sudden you're up to your ears in potential customers. Your feet and legs tend to get pretty sore too.

Secret To Success

The secret to success in trade show marketing is to understand things like this, and to build a plan and a set of expectations accordingly. Your plan should start with the determination of a goal. A printer isn't likely to sell anything at a trade show, or to accomplish all in one contact that it takes to create a customer, but a goal to identify and pave the way for future conversations with some number of prospects would be the kind of goal I'd have in mind.

The "feast or famine" syndrome tells you that it's impossible to staff a trade show booth or table perfectly...so you shouldn't even try. My advice is to make as many people available to talk with prospects as you can comfortably fit in the space you've taken—keeping in mind that the people you're talking to have to fit in there too—and simply accept the fact that you and your salespeople will probably spend a good part of your time in the booth with only yourselves to talk to.

Give some thought to the image you want to present, and be sure that everything about your participation in the trade show is consistent with that image. Think about the little things, like name tags for everyone in your booth, suits as opposed to sport coats, whether to permit your people to eat, drink, or smoke in the booth or table area. Think about scheduling and assigning each person to defined "shifts" in the booth, and building in enough break time to keep everyone fresh and at the top of their game.

It's also important to think about the level of information you want to provide to those who visit your booth. Do you want them to see samples of your work? Do you want them to leave with a copy of your corporate brochure or equipment list, or the business card of the person who's going to be calling to follow up with them?

Follow Up

One of the most common mistakes I see made in trade show planning is to not look beyond the show date itself. I can't tell you how many times I've heard about printers—or other trade show exhibitors—who go to a show and get lots of leads, but never follow up effectively. Sometimes the sheer quantity of leads causes a sort of "what do we do with all of this" paralysis that results in a complete lack of follow-up. To my mind, that's a complete waste of the money invested in exhibiting!

Go into the show with a plan in place for both short-term and long-term follow-up. A good plan might be to send an immediate thank you letter to everyone who visits your booth, and then to assign each prospect to a salesperson for some sort of measurable, longer-term follow up. The bottom line is this...you want to make sure that you're getting results from any marketing investment, and that's what a trade show represents to your business. Goals and performance against those goals can and should be measurable...and measured.

Trade shows provide a printer with a lot of opportunity for creative marketing and promotion.