

Maximize Your Trade Show Investment



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Introduction

Trade shows are fantastic venues for meeting with key customers, retailers, distributors and media — all in the same place, all at the same time. To ensure such a big financial and time investment truly pays off, it's important to use smart marketing before, during and after the show.

Vehr Communications' *Maximize Your Trade Show Investment* eBook outlines the best practices for trade show promotion, starting with pre-show planning and ending with post-show evaluation.



CharlesandHudson.com

Courtesy of Charles and Hudson.

Chapter 1: Develop a Plan

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First thing's first – although it may be tempting to go into implementation mode once you decide to participate in a trade show, the first, and most important, next step is to develop a plan. Trade shows come with lots of expenses and moving pieces. A plan will serve as your roadmap, helping you manage your budget, explore engagement opportunities and control the task list.

A. Determine Goals and Objectives

Does everyone on your team know how this particular trade show supports the overall business strategy? Is your team aware of the desired outcome? Without shared goals and objectives, it will be impossible to measure the return on investment. Sample objectives could be to meet with X number of potential partners or media outlets, to generate X number of leads or to close X number of sales.

B. Identify Your Audiences

Industry trade shows attract competitors, retailers, customers/consumers, partners and media. Clearly define who matters most to your product or service. Who do you want to draw to your booth?

C. Develop Show Strategies and Tactics

To achieve your goals and objectives, you need to create strategies and tactics for reaching your key audiences. Although different for every company, creating the right booth experience, reaching out to customers and partners, meeting with media and engaging on social media are some of the core activities that are essential to maximizing your investment.

D. Location, Location, Location

One important strategic decision in the planning process is to secure the best possible spot on the show floor, whether it is an aisle-end, island, stage left or at the entry. This is largely determined by budget and availability, however, you still need to evaluate the pros and cons of each option as it pertains to potential traffic AND potential disruption and negotiate accordingly.

E. Set Deadlines and Assign Responsibilities

Trade show manuals typically provide a list of all major deadlines. Make sure these deadlines don't get pushed aside by incorporating them into the plan and assigning responsibilities.

F. Have a Realistic Marketing Budget

Trade shows are substantial budget items. Booth design and construction, show fees, sponsorships, giveaways, material creation, entertainment, booth staffing and travel all come with hefty price tags. Research potential costs to ensure sufficient budget is allocated.

G. Formalize Measurement Systems

Now that you know WHAT to measure, make sure you have a system in place to collect the data, whether it is high-tech badge scanning, website analytics and social media monitoring or low-tech hand shaking and business card collecting.



Registration opens. Courtesy of KBIS 2014 Las Vegas.

Chapter 2:

..... Create Experiences

Out of the hundreds, and often thousands, of companies exhibiting at a trade show, why should someone seek out your booth from across the exhibit floor? Your awesome new product or friendly team of experts may not be compelling enough. Remember, as much as trade show attendees need information, they also desire a unique experience that they can't get from your website or brochure – regardless of their industry. A trade show is an opportunity to educate AND engage.

A. Create a Destination Booth

Sure, organized trade show attendees research exhibitors in advance – though there are plenty who simply venture into a booth for its coolness factor. A booth should be a bold, visual interpretation of your brand and should reflect what makes it unique. For example, a design company needs to have a booth that reflects a sophisticated design aesthetic, from the creative visuals and messaging to material choices, product displays and high-quality giveaways.

Although sometimes an afterthought, the attire of those working the booth also is part of the overall booth design. Khakis and polos send a different message than white shirts and blazers. What look aligns with your company culture and brand?



Booth design and photo courtesy of Kuhlmann Leavitt.

B. Bring the Right Team

Having the right team can make or break your trade show success. You'll likely assign people from sales or product development, but are they equipped to handle event coordination, media interviews and social media outreach? Probably not. Make sure you have a healthy mix of sales AND brand support by adding a few marketing and communications team members to the mix.

C. Pull In Key Audiences

Once you have a destination booth, invest in activities that amplify the energy:

- **Product demonstrations.** If you have a product or service that can be demonstrated, don't leave it sitting on a shelf or worse yet, in a brochure! Fire up the tools and let attendees play. Encourage interaction with your new technology. Show why your product or service is innovative and relevant. The more hands-on experiences, the better.
- **Entertainers and celebrities.** Who doesn't love a brush with fame? Many celebrities and entertainers work the trade show circuit. Find one who is in alignment with your brand and host them in your booth.
- **Live media broadcasts.** Popular bloggers, editors and television hosts have celebrity appeal AND add credibility to your brand. Many media are already attending national industry shows and make time in their schedules for paid appearances. In some cases, they'll report live from your booth. Not only will your company benefit from the air time, your booth will benefit from the buzz.



MyFixitUpLife adds personality to booths at industry trade shows.

- **Giveaways.** Pens and keychains are nice, but if you really want to capture attendee attention, give away something with personality and brand relevance. Celebrating an anniversary? Pass out cupcakes. Launching an eco-friendly product? Offer a sustainable bag printed with your logo that also serves as a walking advertisement.



- **Sweepstakes.** Sweepstakes can be a great way to generate booth traffic, though it is important to be strategic. Offering your new product as a daily prize reinforces your message and attracts a relevant audience to your booth. Offering a Vespa, iPad® or Caribbean cruise attracts everyone to your booth, even the occasional competitor. Your trade show leads will grow exponentially; however, your qualified leads may not warrant the hefty investment.

Chapter 3:

..... Promote Your Presence

You've heard about the tree falling in the forest, right? Simply being at a trade show isn't enough to capture leads. You have to market your presence to key audiences well in advance of the show.

A. Create Materials to Market Your Booth

Many marketing managers can attest: In the absence of having materials, the sales team will create its own. Rather than open the door for inconsistent and off-brand messages, create a suite of printed and digital materials such as letters, eblasts, postcards or invitations that can be personalized for each contact.

B. Make Personal Contact

For critical contacts, personally schedule at-show meetings. You'll be able to prepare in advance and arrange for privacy, if necessary.

C. Host After-Hours Entertainment

Many important discussions take place *after* trade show hours. Help facilitate such conversations and deepen personal relationships in a fun, casual environment by hosting a happy hour in a private suite, a dinner at a nearby restaurant or an excursion to a local sporting event or venue.



D. Recognize Your Partners

Critical industry partners such as retailers and distributors also frequent trade shows. Take advantage of the shared location and host an evening awards banquet or a private party where you can deliver important messages, hand out swag and treat everyone to a good time.

Chapter 4:

..... Connect With Media

Trade shows are great places to connect with industry media contacts – luckily, there are a lot of opportunities for making a good impression.

A. Befriend the Show PR Team

Almost every trade show has a PR team working overtime. As such, they rely on exhibitors to provide news to include in pre-show news releases, blogs and exhibitor eblasts. The PR team also manages the show press room (more on that later) and the list of media registered for the show (they often will share this list with exhibitors). Review your exhibitor manual to learn how to work with the PR team and meet their key deadlines.

B. Create Press Materials

Simply put, think small and digital! Media can't possibly carry a load of brochures, overstuffed folders and samples, nor do they have time to read through a lot of copy while on deadline. Make your news travel-friendly and scannable by pre-loading new product or service information and high-resolution, print-ready images on thumb drives, which are both PC and iPad® friendly.

C. Reach Out to Media in Advance

Bloggers and editors attend trade shows to learn more about new products and services and to identify emerging trends. In some cases, they gather information by walking the show. In other cases, they prefer to schedule in-booth briefings or interviews with company representatives. If your company news warrants a one-on-one meeting, make contact at least one month before the show. Media can't possibly meet with all exhibitors requesting face time; make sure your pitch is compelling.



D. Stock the Press Room

A press room is the place where editors go to access exhibitor information. Press rooms may be online and require you to upload press materials and images or may be located in a suite onsite. Press room rules vary from show to show; for example, some have strict deadlines and quantity limits for press materials and do not allow exhibitors to restock materials once the show begins. A good best practice – always keep a back-up supply of media kits in your booth so visiting media have everything needed to write about your company's product or service.

E. Plan a Media Event

Are you announcing a product innovation that will truly change your industry ... something never seen, or even conceptualized, before? If you can wholeheartedly answer “yes!,” then you should consider making your announcement at a formal, invite-only media event such as a press conference or pre-show breakfast. Unlike one-on-one meetings, formal media events allow for all media to get the same news at the same time. Please note: use media events sparingly — if your big announcement turns out to be run-of-the-mill, you'll damage your credibility and look like the brand that cried wolf.

F. Enter Sponsored Award Competitions

Some media and industry associations sponsor free competitions, such as Innovative Booths or Hot Products, during industry trade shows. Not only do winners receive an award to display in the booth, they also get social media shout-outs and ink in the blog, weekly e-newsletter or publication.



Chapter 5:

..... Identify Sponsorships

Trade shows can be a sea of sameness. Looking in from the outside, attendees could easily get lost in the seemingly endless rows of booths, each just tall enough to block the one coming next. Unless someone specifically seeks your booth number in advance, will they know you exist? Your show manual will provide all the available paid exposure opportunities at the show.

A. Secure Space in the Show Directory

One of the most cost-effective sponsorship opportunities, show directories help attendees navigate the show through maps, event schedules and exhibitor listings. By inserting an ad or creating an enhanced company or product listing, you'll increase visibility for your booth and/or booth activities.

B. Get a Sign

There's no shortage of signage options at trade shows. If you find your booth stuck in a corner, consider directional floor graphics. If you're surrounded on all sides, think about ceiling-mounted banners.



Courtesy of KBIS 2013 New Orleans.

C. Participate in New Product Pavilions

If you are launching a new product that needs mass exposure, new product pavilions are great opportunities. Not only are they heavily promoted by trade shows, pavilions are highly frequented by attendees (including media) on the search for the next great thing.

D. Underwrite a Special Event

Unlike other sponsorship opportunities, events allow your brand to actively engage with attendees – especially if you can incorporate your products and team into the fun. Consider pre-show networking events, at-show conferences, blogger tours and post-show happy hours.



Courtesy of KBIS 2014 Las Vegas.

E. Brand Bags, Lanyards and More

Trade shows capitalize on creating and selling opportunities for just about everything ... from bags, lanyards and hotel door hangers to WiFi access. Although such sponsorships can broadly announce a new product or service, they can easily get lost among the trade show clutter (can you recall who sponsored the WiFi at the last trade show you attended?) and don't offer opportunities for robust brand positioning. Since such sponsorships are often some of the most expensive, you really need to evaluate potential ROI before writing the check.

Chapter 6: Get Social

Even the most niche trade shows are social media machines that use Pinterest, Twitter, Instagram and Facebook to communicate to exhibitors and attendees alike up to nine months prior to the event. In return, trade shows garner an impressive social media following that you can leverage.

A. Follow and Use Hashtags

Know which social media channels the show will use as its communications platforms and start to follow the hashtags. The show PR team, editors and bloggers often push out trade show-related interview requests via social media prior to the event by hashtagging their posts. By following the show hashtag, you'll be able to make pre-show connections and fulfill information needs.

In addition, as you post about your participation and booth activities, use show hashtags to make sure your posts are seen by others searching for and following the show.

B. Engage Social Influencers

Trade shows are ripe for opportunities to engage bloggers. Host your own blogger roundtable or after-hours event, coordinate or sponsor in-booth TweetUps and Twitter chats and be a stop on the show's blog tour.



C. Post Real-Time Content

You've promoted your show participation in the months leading up to the show and you likely have a nice following. Social media is a great way to drive traffic to your booth and make those at home virtually experience the show with you. Post images of your people, products and booth as well as show attendees interacting with your brand; promote activities such as celebrity appearances or giveaways; and demonstrate thought leadership by identifying trends and sharing information from the speakers and panels you attend. Whenever possible, engage with booth visitors online; mention them in tweets or tag them in a Facebook post.

D. Extend the Engagement

Continue reaping benefits of your trade show investment by sharing a post-show recap on your social media channels that outlines your booth activity and identifies emerging trends or favorite products. In addition to traditional show follow up, consider connecting with trade show contacts online by following their company on Facebook and Twitter and finding ways to keep the conversation going.

Chapter 7: Evaluate ROI

Trade show marketing doesn't end once the team is back at home. Ask those who attended to report on what worked and missed opportunities. Capture how many key audience members came to the booth. Confirm new leads and closed deals. Pull social media analytics to see if your content was viewed and shared and if your follower count increased. Use Google Analytics or other web tracking software to see if your website traffic increased, both directly and through referral sources. Track media coverage for your new products.



Courtesy of Chasen West.

And, remember the trade show plan you created at the very beginning of the process? Refer back to it and determine whether these outcomes moved your company closer to achieving its overall business goals and objectives. Did trade show participation present opportunities for new (or improved) relationships or leads? More importantly, are you prepared to build upon the momentum and fully integrate future outreach with company marketing efforts?

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About Vehr Communications

Vehr Communications, LLC seeks to be a strategic partner with its clients to help them manage their reputations, build valued relationships and deliver meaningful results.

We offer our clients:

Refreshing Attitude: We partner, we listen, we challenge. We learn. We work hard. We make a difference. And we have fun in the process.

Resourceful Approach: We approach each client opportunity with creativity, energy and discipline to build relationships that matter.

Global Reach: We're an IPREX partner ... 75 strategic communications agencies with 1,500 staff and 100 offices from 33 countries working as one to support global communications programs for our clients.



To learn more about who we are, what we do and how we think, visit us at www.vehrcommunications.com. While you're there, sign up for our monthly e-newsletter, visit our blog or download any of our publications designed to help you make the most of your strategic communications activities.

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