

Showing your hand

making the most of exhibitions...

As exhibition season gets into full swing, AC takes a look at some of the do's and don'ts of making effective use of your stand-space...

Exhibitions can be a great way to give exposure to your PR messages, showcase your products, meet customers, find agents and build trade relationships. They can also be a fast way to burn money for little return. However, if you plan carefully and take advantage of all publicity opportunities to maximise your investment, then a show can kick-start your business, or increase the rate at which it is expanding.

Thinking an exhibition to be like a market is really useful. Market traders use every trick in the book to attract potential buyers to their stalls. Visitors to your show will not be coming to window shop, they can do that by ordering a catalogue. They will be coming to learn about the products and services that are available to them. They will want to see, feel, taste, hear and experience what you have on offer. Your challenge is to appeal to as many of the five senses as possible; to create an experience.

“been there, done that”

Just because your members of staff have turned up at a great many exhibitions in the past, might lead them to believe they are “experts”. However, selling and marketing at a show is a skill that not many people have. Indeed, even your most gifted sales person might not actually be your most effective at an exhibition. Take time out to consider who is going to be there, and what their individual role should be. Some people are naturals, and engage new clients quickly and effectively. These can then be backed up by a more technical support person who can supply the detail, but perhaps is not keen to start the overall process, or feels uncomfortable doing so?

If you are making the decisions on who is going to go, don't simply rely on the most senior members of staff. Indeed on big stands, these can be off-putting for the staff working there – putting them under more pressure when they least need it.

Project planning

An effective plan, taking into account all the areas covered in this guide, will guarantee you maximise your potential. Planning an exhibition should take into account activity before, during and after the event.

Set yourself measurable objectives. Begin by thinking about the audiences that will be at the show. Which customers will be your primary concern? You might like to divide your stand to cater for different types of customer.

Remember that many existing customers may be coming along as well as potential ones. Your

objectives should be specific, measurable, accurate, realistic and time constrained.

An existing customer objective might be to meet with your top ten clients, 2 per day, to build your existing business relationship.

A potential customer objective might be to secure 20 contracts with new customers two months after the show.

Most importantly...let your staff know why they are there.

Ensure you make your staff aware of the objectives and the way the stand will be worked. They will need to know the key targets and the main messages you are wanting to convey. Make sure they aware that they will be the public face of your company and therefore must be cautious to portray the right image. Plan your activities in detail well in advance, draw up a schedule. Remember to include pre-show activity and actions to be carried out after the event.

Brief your staff each day, ensure they are reminded of the overall goals, key messages and their individual roles. Remind them to turn off their mobiles and not to eat on the stand. Use open questions when speaking to potential clients.

Make sure everyone on the stand has a lead-tracking form of some description for recording important information about potential and existing clients. Capturing the highlights of conversations can be quite difficult, encourage all those manning the stand to spend a couple of minutes ensuring all the relevant information is captured and that it makes sense.

It is also very important that you classify the leads you gain from the exhibition in terms of the potential of making a sale. This way it is quite clear which clients are a priority when you set about following them up.



Keep asking yourself, “Are we meeting our objectives?” throughout the show. For example your sales staff may be spending too much time entertaining existing clients when the main objective may be to attract an ambitious number of new leads. Think through how the stand is going to work in terms of your team. You might like to adopt a filter system to ensure your key sales people are dealing with the red-hot leads.

During the show there are a few opportunities for you to build on your existing promotion. The key journalists will be at the event so it is a good idea to visit the press office or any stands they have to tell them what you're doing on your stand and as a company. Ensure you are in conversation with the show organiser, do they know your plans?

Some key points to think about:

1. DON'T INTIMIDATE

Keep your stand user-friendly. Some companies will purchase space, and then over-design their stand to such a degree, it becomes almost impossible to determine exactly what they are selling! Flash lighting, gateways, brightly lit floors, spotlights etc can be very off-putting. Don't make customers think they are entering some high-tech boutique designer shop – they will neither thank you for it, nor will your staff who will be forced to stand under burning hot lights for 3 days, talking to themselves as customers

are too frightened to walk on! Keep your design user friendly, and above all, your basic sales message simple. A poster with 3,000 words on it describing your factory will not make people stop and look....especially if you're all sitting in front of it, staring at the reader!

2. MAXIMISE YOUR APPEARANCE

Don't think that an exhibition is about “what you can get away with”. Most companies that have poor shows have spent little time and effort in getting their marketing message across. They apply the same tactics to each and every show they go to, regardless of the end-user audience. Statistics clearly show that every penny spent on marketing at an exhibition – not just on your stand, but in driving traffic to it and putting your message and brand in people's faces all round the show – gives clear results. Indeed many companies can actually appear much bigger than the sum of their parts, simply by taking advantage of the myriad opportunities that avail themselves during an exhibition.

3. DON'T CUT CORNERS!

Ultimately, you've already done the hard part, and that is make the decision to travel to a foreign country and put your message across to a potentially new, and exciting audience. However, so many companies fail in this regard, simply because having spent their money on a

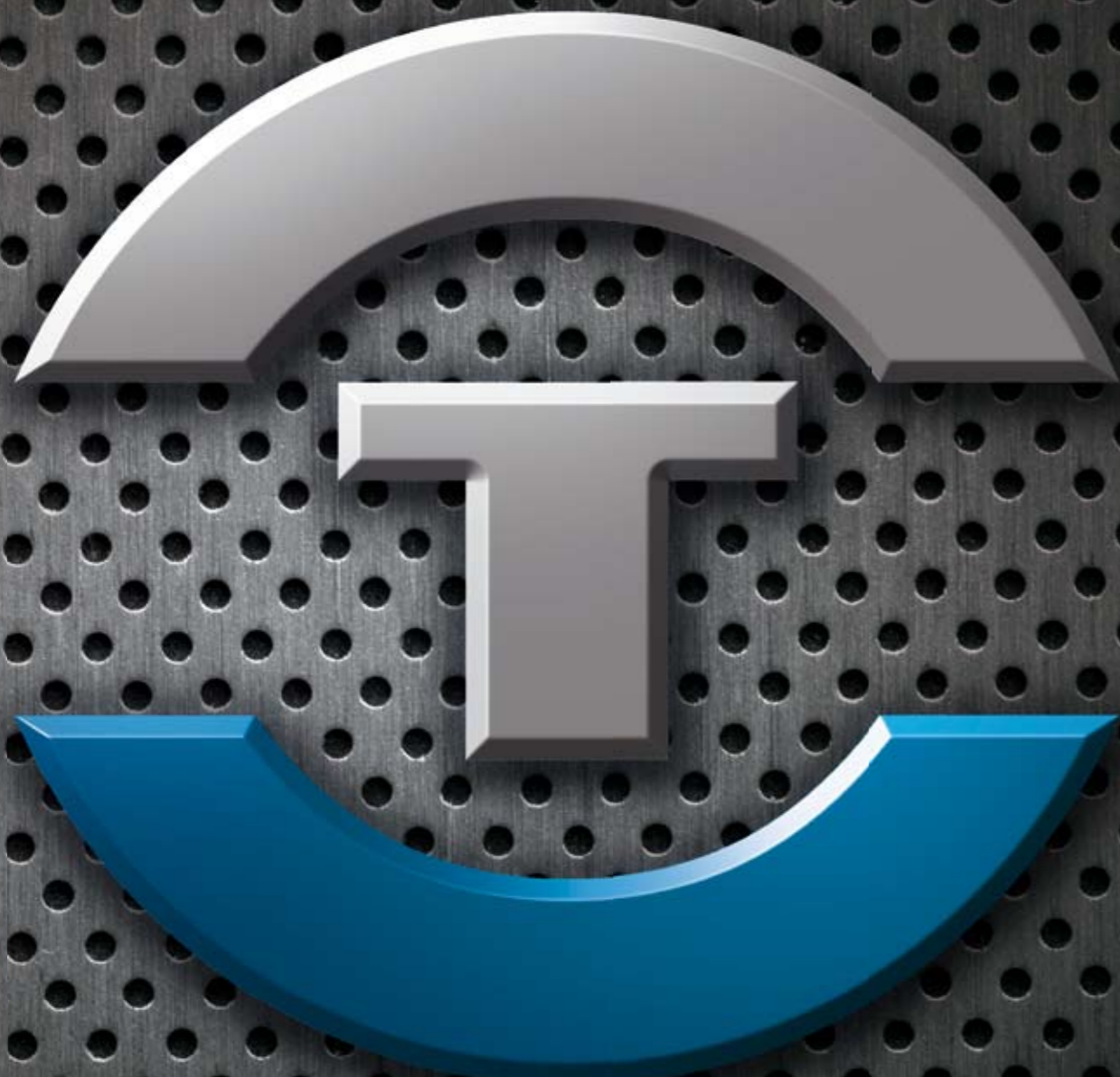
stand and travel, they feel there is little left to spend on marketing. This is one of the biggest mistakes any company can make. After a show has finished, it will be the literature that is taken away – especially if there is a quality catalogue etc – that will remind YOUR potential customers on who was there. If you decide to “save a bit” here and there, you will be rapidly be forgotten. An exhibition is a great way to meet new and existing customers face to face, and it gives the only chance to get your message across in person. So what if you have a smaller stand than your competitor? Think on ways of outdoing them using other marketing means. Exhibitions are full of perfect opportunities to test all sorts of marketing, using directional signage, hoardings, logo placement, catalogue foci and so on. Make sure you take every chance possible and stamp your authority on a show. It's pointless to spend large sums getting there, and not going the final 20% towards making a real, impressive impact. If you have saved on the stand, spend on the presence...take every chance to be as big and high profile as you can....this is YOUR time in the spotlight.

4. BE SENSITIVE

What works in Europe, for example, might not be so well received in China or India. Always be culturally aware – a few choice local phrases of welcome (or even a local linguist) go a long way to establishing rapport with a new client.

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THE 5 STAR TREATMENT

- * **Plan well ahead.** Many annual shows have web sites and quarterly newsletters that review the show that has gone and signpost the next. Keep the publicity flowing.
- * **Emphasise what's new.** Regular visitors may pass you by at a show unless they have a genuine reason to visit.
- * **Inject some life.** Live demonstrations, rolling seminars, competitions, overseas visitors, celebrities - a bit of creative showmanship can generate a bit more buzz.
- * **Rotate staff.** The sales person who has been three days on his feet at the show and three nights propping up the hotel bar is not the best person to greet your customers on day four. If you rotate the staff, you can present a fresh and lively face each day.
- * **Gather leads and follow-up promptly.** Ensure everyone has lead pads, knows to collect business cards and takes detailed notes of what visitors want. Many companies will have a back-up in the office to ship samples, price lists and literature daily so that the enquirer receives relevant information while they are still keen.

BUSINESS TO BUSINESS EXHIBITIONS: IN NUMBERS...

83% of all visitors to a trade show have the authority to purchase or are a decisive influence

72% of trade show visitors intend to make a purchase either at the show or in the near future.

EXHIBITIONS ARE EFFECTIVE BECAUSE

54% of visitors come specifically to see new products and services

48% come for information

40% to keep up to date with technology

15% to make business contacts

DID YOU KNOW?

46% of people planning to visit a trade show make the decision to attend more than 2 weeks before the show.

25% of visitors decided to attend the trade show because they had attended the same event before

82% of trade show visitors are aged over 25

An average expenditure of 9% of companies' marketing budgets was measured as returning 23% of business.

5. DON'T STAND CHATTING TO YOUR FRIENDS!

Nothing puts off a stand visitor more than seeing groups of your staff in little clusters laughing and joking about the night before. This is particularly the case in countries where there might be a natural reticence to engage with strangers - because for all new customers, that's what you are -

! Always make sure you are open faced and smiling, not standing in big groups or sat having discussions behind a desk. An open hand and a smiling face can make any new visitor extremely welcome, and maybe clinch a new deal? Build bridges....don't put up barriers!

6. BE CONSISTENT...

Many companies come away from a show thinking "well, we got some leads, but not enough, so we might miss it next time"....Nothing could be worse! Your subsequent absence might lead would-be customers to thinking that:

1. You've gone bust
2. You're not really serious about them, and can't be bothered to turn up to visit them
3. You're smaller than your competitors, and have no long term commitment to the region

What you will not always realise is the amount your brand managed to penetrate the psyche of ALL visitors. An exhibition is not just about the people you DID speak to, but also a great deal about those who saw you, registered your brand, and made a decision to come back to you at a later date when they are ready to build their new factory. When they come looking for you 12 months later, you'd better be there, or see your lead disappear into someone else's inventory.

THE FOLLOW-UP

The first step is to follow your leads immediately. Be careful to read through them paying particular attention to any special note like; "This customer is very busy at the moment, contact in a month's time". Being the first to follow up is not always a good thing.

Remember that tracking your leads does not stop when you've collated all the lead forms after the show. Leads may take several months to convert so ensure you are tracking their progress at regular intervals after the event and capturing information throughout the process.

Assess how successful the event was. What worked well? What areas could have been better and how? What have you learnt? What would you change next time round? Get all this information down while it's fresh in your mind - it is easily forgotten once you're back in the office.