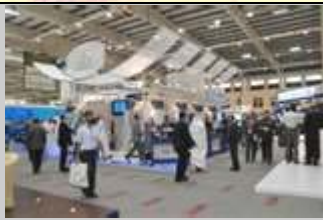




Exhibitions



Are you getting value for money?

One of the largest parts of any marketing budget can be exhibitions, whether they are one man booths in a local hotel or major international fairs with 'double decker' design and what looks like an army of people to service your every need. Regardless of size and type they still represent substantial financial outlay and more importantly significant risk in terms of brand representation.

As I walk the floors both locally and internationally, I am constantly amazed and usually disappointed on how many companies represent themselves at these 'showcase' events.

Before you commit yourself to such an investment there are some questions you need to answer, and some basic rules you should apply to ensure a good return on that capital.

Why am I exhibiting?

[Just to say to get more business is not an answer]

- Is it to get new contacts/customers?
- To launch a new product range?
- To generate leads?
- Support local distributors?
- To sell products? [Either directly or take orders].
- Projecting your image? [Just for this purpose is often costly and generally unwise].

It may be a combination of all of these, however each question has to be addressed individually to ensure a satisfactory plan of action.

Having done your homework and feel you still want to push ahead, there are more questions that need to be answered.

- Is this the right venue? [If possible speak with other people in your field that have previously attended]
- Is the timing right? [If it doesn't fit in with your launch plans is it worth being there?].
- Will your budget allow you to portray the image that you need to achieve?
- Is it the **right show**? [Organisers will always tell you how good a show it will be. Do your own research].

If you are still convinced you want to proceed, then the work really begins.

One thing you must plan very carefully is budget. It can easily runaway. Try to split it into sections i.e. space, construction, staffing, hotels, catering, transport etc. this way you are best able to see which areas are overspending and balance it with other parts that can be reduced. Try to keep within the overall budget. However, a word of warning. Just a few extra pounds can make the difference between a stand looking impressive and professional or a half finished [run out of money] shell. Get the balance right.

Book early

The best spaces are the most costly and go very quickly. However it is better to spend a little more to be 'in amongst it', rather than be down some blind alley where potential customers fear to tread.

Study carefully the locations offered. Try to get near competitors, it will bring in their customers and there is a good chance you will get some of their business. Also compatible products/services attract more potential customers to that area.

The style of the stand is also very important. Only one side open to the public/trade is poor. Three sides are good, an island site is perfect.

There has been much research undertaken on 'traffic flow'. Analysis has shown that in the UK 70% will turn to the left when entering a hall, whilst in the USA 70% go to the right [reflecting which side of the road we drive on]. A strong impactful stand early in the visit will have a lasting impression.

If possible visit the venue before agreeing to a location. You will be able to see any obvious pitfalls and as importantly any thing that will slow people down, allowing for more time to look at your stand. Nearby restaurants/coffee bars/rest areas are also useful for allowing potential customers to spend a little longer viewing your stand.

Check the small print in the contract. What's included? Type of insurance required? Services supplied? Set up and access times? Breakdown deadlines? The list is endless but all must be addressed.

Publicity

Having made the commitment you need to ensure the best possible return. For this you have to make sure that your target customers are fully aware of your participation. You will probably have your own data base of customers and potential customers, however you can

buy mailing lists by business sector. For smaller industry specific exhibitions the organisers will have their own mailing list. This can be extremely useful to reinforce your marketing message linked in with the overall exhibition image.

According to research 76% of visitors decide who they want to see **prior** to attending. It is therefore paramount that every attempt is made to be on their lists. They need a reason to come and see you. We know some customers like to visit a stand where there are friendly faces and a place for a cup of tea and a chat, but remember our main reason for being there. Whilst we know this is all part of the relationship building process, do not be sidetracked from your ultimate goal.

If your purpose for the show is to launch new products/services then make sure your mailings include as much detail to gain their interest without giving the whole game away [and of course letting our competitors pre-empt the launch]. If you intend to have special offers on the stand, or are planning some special giveaways [more about that later] these also need to be included in the mailing, but once again not giving the full detail.

The last words on mailings. Try to stagger the timings. Ideally three months prior to the show, then followed up one month before and then finally approximately 10 days before. The last one should include clear directions on how to get to the venue. If there is an entrance fee for exhibition you may wish to consider some free tickets for your key visitors.

Advertisements in exhibition catalogues is also a consideration. These can be quite costly and you need to be sure that they will clearly be seen.

Press releases to any relevant publications should be included in you publicity plans.

Design and construction

This is an area where you do need professional help, especially in the purpose built venues. The regulations alone can be daunting. An experienced designer/constructor will be very aware of the local conditions and can save considerable time [and heartache].

Decide which products are to be displayed. If you have a large range, do not try to include all of these on the stand. The result is often at best confusing, but more likely to look disorganised and cluttered. If you are launching new products, look to do a special feature to emphasise the salient points. Most importantly ensure the constructor know accurately the sizes of the products to be displayed. I know this may sound obvious, but I have seen with my own eyes a new product arriving on the stand only to discover it will not fit on the display. It then ends up on the floor looking like an afterthought.

The use of quality graphics is very important. They add real impact to the stand and reduce the amount of products required on the stand. Any product/graphic, movement on the stand will also attract the eye. The use of models/ costumes can also work very well in the right venues.

Lighting is also of vital importance. Avoid dark spaces and corners. Try to get lighting that does not throw out too much heat. Staff working in hot conditions become tired, ineffective and unfortunately it sometimes challenges their deodorant capabilities.

Some storage space is a must for coats, brief cases etc. An exhibition stand can quickly become untidy without these items left lying about. You will also need space for additional literature and sensitive paperwork such as pricelists and marketing plans.

If you are planning to offer catering on the stand, think it through very carefully. Where will it be served from? Will it interfere with product demonstrations? If this area is not managed properly, it can quickly become very messy. Of course dishes of sweets and chocolates [particularly good ones] left strategically around the stand will encourage people to stop. Mints are also helpful in keeping everyone's breath that little bit fresher.

Set up and breakdown

Allow plenty of time and ensure you have enough staff to complete the task in the time required. If people are still building the display when visitors arrive, it looks less than professional. If the set up is the day before and you are using the staff which will be working the stand, it doesn't help in 'getting them fired up and motivated' if they are piecing together the display late into the evening.

The timing of transport is also vital. It is no good having everybody there waiting to get started if the vehicle bringing the stock is stuck on the motorway, or more likely in a queue trying to get into the venue. Some venues need special passes to allow delivery vehicles in [check your contract]. The same thing applies for the breakdown. Staff are never amused when after having worked hard on the stand for a few days and eager to get home they are stood waiting for the collection vehicle to arrive.

If the plan is to have new products on the stand, make sure **well** before hand that the samples will be there. Once again I have seen it happen many times when the all important production sample has missed the flight, or the factory has not been able to get it finished in time. From the day you agree to exhibit you need to notify all concerned of the relevant deadlines. Having done this check regularly as to the progress.

Literature

Some of the things you will need on the stand [there may be others dependent on your business].

- Product brochures/catalogues
- Price lists
- Order forms/receipts [if applicable]
- Business cards
- Press packs [also some left at the press office]
- Contact reports. To record all the visitors contact details and importantly what follow up is required
- A method of recording the number of visitors and any relevant results

Other things you may need to consider are staplers/note pads/pens/cleaning materials

Earlier we touched on the topic of **giveaways**. This is an excellent way to encourage people to visit your stand, particularly if you have advised well beforehand that they are available. If this is an activity you are considering then think about some of the following points;

- Is the giveaway in keeping with the quality of your product/service?

- Can it be printed on to keep a lasting memory?
- Does it link in with the image that you trying to achieve at the exhibition?
- To ease the budget restrictions, is it possible to offer a quality gift for the key visitors and something of a lesser value to others? [Be careful how you handle the mechanics].

Show discounts can often be used to good effect. This encourages both new and existing customers to visit the stand. If your business is structured in such a way that your existing customers are regularly called upon by your sales team, try not to let the customers fall into the trap of 'I will not order this time I will wait for the show'.

Many stands use the 'Prize draw' gambit. It has some merit particularly if the prize has a high perceived value. However the usual bottle does not do it for most serious buyers.

Manning the stand

And now I come to the area which generally gives me the biggest disappointment. You have done all the work detailed above, spent your money, made some real commitments and now you hand it all over to a team that you hope will act as ambassadors for your company and turn all that investment into hard business. **Easier said than done.**

There are some very basic rules you need to apply. They may seem blatantly obvious but a brisk walk around any exhibition venue will give you a good example of how not to do it.

Here are some of the common examples;

- Eating and drinking in full view of visitors
- Reading newspapers
- Talking to each other in groups [who would want to disturb them?]
- Stood on the edge of the stand like nightclub bouncers [standby to repel all borders]
- Displays with dirty finger marks on them
- Empty teacups left on the stand
- Samples taken from a display to show a customer and then left on a table
- Constantly on the telephone
- Towards the end of the day some staff look like they need a long holiday [that's being gentle]

My approach for getting the best results;

Appoint a stand manager. This does not have to be the most senior person on the stand, but somebody who will be there for the entirety of the exhibition. The trouble with appointing the most senior is that they will find many excuses for leaving the stand and will not want to get involved in the minor detail.

Have a meeting with all the staff prior to the show to familiarise them with the location of products and the features/benefits of any new items.

This should be followed by brief meetings after each day to view results and to discuss any relevant feedback. Before the start of each new day a brief outline of the days objectives should be planned. A simple league table for most orders/highest value etc. with maybe a small prize for the winners, can keep your team 'on the ball'.

Ensure that every member of the team is fully aware of the 'rules' regarding breaks, cleaning duties, reporting, attendance times and dress codes [in my view shirts, underwear and socks do not last consecutive days on a busy show].

Undertake training on how best to approach visitors and avoid opening statements such as 'can I help you'. Get them to engage in conversations with meaningful open questions. Train them to approach from the side without pouncing on them, or scaring them half to death by attacking them from behind. Teach them to allow the visitor to settle before launching into a full presentation at the very first eye contact, but NEVER let them ignore them.

If you have very senior personnel on the stand get them involved with your visitors. It adds credibility and demonstrates their commitment to the event.

If the team are staying in hotels make sure they keep the alcohol intake to a minimum and avoid late nights. The effects will show towards in the end of the next day [if not before]. Also keep them away from spicy foods such as curries. A visitor will not appreciate stale garlic breath first thing in the morning.

Finally if you have staff that have been involved in the preparation but not working on the stand, if possible try and get them to visit the show. They can see the end results of their hard work. It's good for morale and helps them better understand why and how things are done. It also helps for future shows.

Write a report

As soon as possible after the show has finished you need to write a full report whilst everything is still fresh in the mind, weeks after the event is over is too late. The report should have the facility to be updated after all the follow-ups have been completed to achieve a full and accurate analysis of the exhibition.

The report should include detail such as;

- The number of visitors seen [this should be compared with your expectations and your mail out counts]
- The number of orders [by day, by total]
- The value of the orders [by day, by total]
- Comparison with previous years if applicable

Other information should include, how did the stand work? The general impression of the stand [yours and your visitors], what needs to change for next year? Should we do it again next year? The memory is very selective, so the sooner you commit your thoughts to paper the better.

Follow up

A critical part of the exercise and yet so often neglected.

Your team is now armed with these 'hot leads' from the contact reports. Hopefully these will detail the follow up requirements. How easy can it be? Ideally these leads should be followed up within three to five days after the show. Even the smallest request should be completed. It may seem small to you but by acting quickly once again demonstrates your efficiency and professionalism.

The requested information should be followed by a telephone call a few days later to check everything was as required and of course to discuss the next stage.

Line managers should monitor these follow-ups are being completed. What a tragedy if after investing all that time and money on attending these exhibitions, visitors have taken the trouble to visit your stand and talk to your people only to find they have been ignored. IT DOES HAPPEN I promise you. Don't let it be your business that suffers.

For more information on how to get the best from your sales activities please contact;

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