

Are Your Exhibitors Happy?

Why exhibitors leave events and how to sell them on new ones.

By Margit B. Weisgal

Your exhibitors are savvier than you think. Even those small guys, the ones in the 10-by-10-foot or 10-by-20-foot spaces, know value when they see it. They're watching everything you do, from how you promote to who you bring to the show. As one organizer wisely remarked, "It's not about the number of exhibitors; it's about the number of quality people we put in front of them." That's all well and good, but the novices can't necessarily differentiate between quality and quantity. It's up to you to help them recognize the difference.

Back when I produced my first tradeshow in 1981, I had never attended a tradeshow, let alone exhibited at one. That event, in today's vernacular, could be called a user event, though it had all the characteristics of a tradeshow. We invited our vendors to exhibit, and I hand-addressed 700 invitations to our client and prospect base. As a result of this first venture, our business grew 40 percent in the year that followed.

What stood out for me from that first event were the reactions of those invited to exhibit. We decided that if we were going to do this, it would be first class all the way. We appreciated our vendors' participation because they were the ones who would really make this venture work. We provided thank-you baskets in their rooms at check in and, though it was only a one-day show, when it was over we took everyone out for dinner. The feedback we got stunned us. These exhibitors—old pros who did lots of these events—couldn't do enough for us simply because we treated them well.

As Keith Reznick, president of Creative Training Solutions, told me, "There are two types of show organizers: those who care about their exhibitors and those that don't."

Today, I am the president of the Trade Show Exhibitors Association (TSEA). But I've never forgotten the understanding gained from working both sides of conventions: producer and exhibitor.

What makes exhibitors drop a show, and how do they make the decision to add a new one to their already-full schedules? When TSEA asked members for input on these topics, they spoke out. Hear what they have to say and learn from them.

How to Keep an Exhibitor

Help them connect with quality leads.

Exhibitors know quality when they see it. Even in this economy, when I spoke with an exhibitor just before this article went to press, it came down to a single issue. Instead of the normal 40 to 50 solid leads, the staff came away with only 25. But this company knows that each customer is worth \$30,000 a year. Getting 10 of those solid leads to sign a credit application is indicative of interest and desire to use the company's products and services. Those buyers will translate into an average of \$300,000 in business—and that's only the first year. In addition, this number doesn't include customer relationship management benefits gained when exhibitors speak with the current clients who dropped by to say hello.

Educate them about exhibition ROI.

Most exhibitors won't close a sale during the show, but they are looking for either qualified prospects or a way to move the sales process forward. According to Ed Jones, president of Constellation Communications, there is far more gained through exhibit marketing than adding new leads to the sales pipeline. He details four components to exhibitors' return on investment and revenue impact:

1. New revenue development (near or long term).
2. Customer and partner relationship management.
3. Retention and growth of current revenue, which includes profitability improvement and cost savings achieved through event-related activities.

4. Promotion value, accomplished through event activity.

Promoting these benefits and helping your exhibitor customers understand them can increase your customer retention and give them even more reasons to be at your event.

Uphill battle though it often is, educating exhibitors returns your investment in them beyond measure. As they learn how to grow their companies during your event, you expand your value to them and solidify your worth as a partner. They'll invite more of their clientele, increasing your attendance; they'll provide knowledge and experience through seminars at your conference; and they will promote the benefits of participating in your event.

Understand exhibitors' needs as well as attendees'. Exhibitors and attendees both derive value through attendance, something not available through any other means and certainly not in such a cost-efficient manner. But when you focus on the attendee side, demeaning or simply ignoring exhibitors' needs, that's when erosion of all your audiences occurs.

It's incumbent upon you to understand what drives your exhibitor customers to be at your event. If that exhibitor cannot define the value to senior management, you—the show producer—will lose. One veteran exhibitor put it well: "We use an annual scorecard system integrating seven value attributes that measure qualitative and quantitative performance for each event. Based on return on objectives, the measurement evaluates successful attainment of tactical objectives that are aligned with key strategic business goals for event stakeholders. Numeric rankings assigned to the finished events provide great insight into an event's overall business value as well as areas of greatest strengths and weakness. If the show doesn't rank well when we've completed our evaluation, we leave."

Another exhibitor says, "If we are not getting the ROI that we predetermined we require, which may be leads, mailing list names, sales, meetings, etc., and

whatever we set as our goals, if we can't consistently attain them, it's time to leave that show, even if our competitors stay in!" And yet another says, "We drop a show because of poor association management of the show, poor traffic flow, and lack of floor time due to competing session and exhibition hours."

Don't sell your show as national if it isn't. According to the Center for Exhibition Industry Research, depending on the industry, 46 percent of attendees come from within 400 miles. There is the very real possibility that this percentage will go up as travel and entertainment budgets are cut. Since most attendees are seeking quality face-to-face interactions, don't promote something you don't provide.

As one exhibitor said to me, "With the economy, we are now gauging the travel distance our customer must take, sometimes opting for road shows where we can 'bring the solution to the customer.' Media and analyst participation is another factor, along with where we are in the sales cycle with regional customers. If we are better off with a private, targeted educational program, we will drop a tradeshow to focus on the specific needs of our regional customers."

Selling Prospective Exhibitors

Provide the right data in the right way.

Just as businesses need to differentiate themselves, so do conventions and exhibitions. If you need to grow your event by attracting new exhibitors, one exhibit manager clearly defined what needs to happen: "Show me direct show-to-show comparisons, if possible, particularly the quality and quantity of the buying audience, their spending power and such. Be as specific as possible about the buying interest of the audience for my particular products and services, not the traditional generalized audience demographics. The technology is out there to do this now."

This means you need to specifically define why an exhibitor would benefit from being at your show. Today's exhibitors demand more than the

numbers you deem important. You still have to answer the eternal—and infernal—question of “what’s in it for me?” which they in turn have to answer for their companies’ senior management.

With exhibit managers educating themselves on the value of exhibit marketing, they become internal salespeople for your show. But if

you’re not providing them with the data they need, they’ll go someplace else. And if you think you’re the only option, think again; they’ll create their own events that provide face-to-face interactions, such as the road shows and private programs mentioned above.

An exhibitor I spoke with addressed this issue directly: “What makes this

show different versus other shows in that arena? If I had to pick and choose, why would I choose yours to exhibit? We like to partner with associations that have their act together (exhibit hall via CAD drawings, online housing/registration process for exhibitors, and online forms for sponsorship opportunities such as giveaways and exhibit badges, etc.). Make it an easy

DO YOU WANT ME TO EXHIBIT OR DON'T YOU?

By David Withee

I sit here in my booth as other exhibitors bowl in the nearly empty aisle. What a lousy show. Six more hours (and two more days) to wonder why I came here.

Since I’ve got time on my hands (again), I’ll jot some notes on how to treat exhibitors. I worked for an association. I served on the board of our industry association. Maybe my ideas would help improve some shows.

Return on investment. I have more marketing options than budget. I look for programs (not just shows) that give the biggest bang for my buck. Even with an *acceptable* ROI, I may not return to your show because I can get a *better* return elsewhere. Give me a great ROI, and I’ll be back.

Fewer, but dedicated, hours. Don’t make me compete with other activities. It’s not the number of hours that matters, it’s the number of quality exhibit hours. This show is seven to eight hours per day for three days, with a major speaker each morning. Guess where your attendees are? I’d rather spend the morning working in my hotel or making sales calls than sit in my booth with no traffic. Another show began on Sunday with no competing activities except a spouse tour. Guess where the attendees went? Yep, with their spouses instead of the exhibits.

Exhibitors prefer fewer hours (and days) dedicated to the show. Remember, each day also increases our hotel and meal expenses. And I like to attend your workshops and seminars to better understand your needs to serve you better. I can’t do that if they conflict with show hours.

Get your people on the floor. Do your members understand how much they’d have to pay to attend your meeting if you had no exhibitors to help underwrite the cost? Why do they treat us like lepers?

Exhibitors are looking to do business. I serve a niche market; not everyone is interested in what I do, but a percentage is. A percentage of many people is better than the same percentage of few people. And I’ll help! I’ll do a preshow email or

mailing to woo people onto the floor and to my booth if you’ll just share the contact info.

Enforce the rules. Most shows don’t allow exhibitors to stand in the aisles to accost attendees. At my last show, not only did my neighbors do just that, but the conference management had a pleasant conversation with them as they did it! Other attendees had to go wide of them in the aisle, so they missed my booth.

Exhibitors don’t complain about our neighbors because, well, we have to live next to them. You set the rules; enforce them.

PAs don’t work. I’m talking to a visitor in my booth when you make an unintelligible announcement over the PA system. Hello—I’m trying to do business!

Thank us. In person. While we exhibit. Survey us to make your show better and then use our feedback.

A recent show emailed a postshow survey to exhibitors. On page one, I was asked for my name and badge number. Are you kidding? Do you really believe I saved my badge as a memento? I deleted the survey.

Remember, you’re selling. When you ask me to exhibit, you are not bestowing a privilege. You want me to spend limited budget dollars on your event. So understand my needs and do your best to meet them.

Some shows are great and I return. Some shows have the perfect audience, but I don’t return because of the above points. I just do a 10-by-10-foot booth, as do most of your exhibitors. Remember, it’s easier to sell to existing satisfied customers than to find new customers.

Well, writing this down killed some time. Only five hours to go. This could have been a great show. I’ll submit this for publication; maybe someone will actually read it and make their show better. It can’t hurt—and it can’t get any worse than this show!

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business decision for me.”

Another manager voiced how important the partnership aspect is to her. “No one wants to be sold. I want to buy into a new show which can deliver the right audience, the right number of possibilities, unopposed exhibiting hours, and opportunities to educate in both the aisle and the classroom.”

Give them independently audited figures. We hear it every day from our members at TSEA: Where are the facts, the independent evaluations that substantiate and corroborate what you write in your prospectuses? One show organizer said to me, indignantly, “My exhibitors should trust me!” I retorted, “That’s what they all say.”

We all have choices, exhibiting companies as much as anyone. In some ways, you are no more than any other vendor and have to do more than differentiate yourself; you need to justify what you’re selling on their terms. Another manager listed, in order of preference:

1. Third-party, independent measurement.
2. Competitive landscape.
3. Peer review.
4. Event location related to target market demographics and geographic location.

It’s that third-party, independent valuation that carries weight, not just with this manager but with many others. Even those who didn’t know audits were available are in awe of what’s possible when they see a sample report. Glenn Hansen, CEO of BPA Worldwide, a nonprofit association providing audits for show organizers, stresses that the cost can be recouped

quickly and easily in customer retention and partnership opportunities. An exhibit manager made similar comments: “I need to know what the audited attendance numbers look like; I need to know what differentiates this show from another similar show at which I may already exhibit; I need to know what education is involved and, of course, how much booth space is going to cost!”

And another says, “It depends if the organizer audits their shows with a third party or if I have to trust them. Why should I trust them? Is there history? If I need to do my own research, I am more apt to go slow and take time, up to a year or more. I can’t make decisions that fast on a new show unless there are real, credible statistics to support their claims.”

Let them see for themselves.

Onsite investigation is another way prospects evaluate your event. An exhibitor told me, “There is very little that a space sales team can say to convince us to add a show. Onsite investigation is critical before purchase of space. Seeing is believing.”

Just as we sell face-to-face interactions as the benefit of exhibitions, there is nothing like visiting an event prior to booking space. Several years ago, our company found what seemed to be a great venue for us to promote our services. It was only after a site visit that we discovered the attendees, although decision makers for most of what was available on the show floor, did not make the choice when it came to what we sold. If we had depended solely on the prospectus and information from the show sales team, we would have been disappointed in the

results. You don’t want disenchanted former customers telling everyone they know about a less-than-perfect experience, especially when you weren’t really at fault.

The Bottom Line

TSEA members—your customers—recognize exhibit marketing as a primary tool in their business arsenal and have choices in which shows they participate. You, the association show producer, can make this a partnership or an adversarial venture; it’s up to you. How you communicate and what you communicate make the difference in how you are perceived and whether or not you are believable.

- Inform your exhibitors. Educate them. Partner with them.
- Inform your customers that decision makers are present.
- Educate them. Teach them that there is more to exhibit marketing than just sales leads. There is a great deal of value that abounds at shows through customer relationship management, promotion, and the ability to get in front of the people that matter.
- Partner with them. Listen—really listen—to what they have to say, a skill most of us don’t employ often enough. Prove to them you’re on their side, and help them reach their goals and objectives. Experienced booth staff personnel will tell you that by asking the right questions, visitors will tell you all you need to sell them.

Take a page from their book, and review these words: Give exhibitors the right reasons to buy into your show and they will. **an**

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