

Exhibiting at a Trade Show

Best Practices in A&D Event Planning, Attendance and Measurement

Is your company ready to commit to taking a new approach to trade shows? If so, this document is a simple guide to help you get started. Adopting these principles and applying them at your company is the first step toward a more effective process and improved, measurable results. Consider this your manifesto for turning the tyranny of trade shows into a key component of business success.



OVERVIEW

Your company likely spends significant resources each year on industry trade show-related expenses in an effort to market its current business offerings and achieve future growth objectives. The purpose of the guidelines that follow is to bring greater strategic value to trade show participation, with the ultimate goal of optimizing return on the objectives set for each event.

OVERARCHING PRINCIPLES

Your company's Trade Show Marketing Strategy should be part of an integrated go-to-market strategy. For example, the messages that you send from the booth graphics and PR need to be aligned with those used in the marketing collateral promotions on the company's web site; what's stated in proposals; etc.

Key organizations (Marketing, Business Development, Communications, Operations, etc.) should work together in development of objectives, strategy, messaging, entertainment, sponsorships, etc. to maximize the effectiveness of each event. In addition, if appropriate, you should work with sister organizations to bring unified marketing and marketing communications to multi-group events.

It's important to set objectives for each show you attend, whether you are exhibiting or not. It is best to set one or two primary objectives, but not more than two to keep the effort focused. For example: "Give X number of product demonstrations," "Meet with X number of customers," "Introduce a particular technology or service to a new market."

Objectives should be realistic and measurable, and mapped to the go-to-market strategy. For example, one major defense contractor, who goes to about 30 shows a year, doesn't realistically expect to sell anything at a trade show. Instead, its primary objectives are centered on meeting specific people: "Conduct X meetings with customers" and "Establish X teaming arrangements with business partners." These objectives are mapped to a longer term and bigger picture company-wide market strategy.

It's also a good idea to link objectives to metrics to gauge the effectiveness of the preparations and execution. For example, the objective, "introduce a particular capability

into a new market," could be linked to the number of visitors to the booth and/or the number of demos given.

BDN recommends committing to an "At-Event-Strategy" for each show, based on the objective(s) and customer life-cycles of those attending. For example, you might demo a particular capability to a prospect or new customer, versus entertaining core customers (e.g., golf outing, after show hours client event, etc.) Or, part of your event strategy might be an analysis of what competitors are promoting at the show. Their marketing strategies and tactics are on display. This task should be assigned in the preshow strategy meeting.

Ensure accountability for the budget: Be clear about responsibilities regarding who will budget for exhibit space, exhibit logistics and meeting rooms. Plan for all associated items, such as customized exhibit graphics, marketing collateral, sponsorships, shipping, giveaways, etc.

THE PROCESS

CHOOSING THE RIGHT SHOWS

No. 1 in your selection criteria should be audience. If the right number of the right people aren't going, the rest of your selection criteria won't matter much.

Research: Key personnel need to ask customers, prospects and business partners what shows they attend and plan to attend. And, you need to determine the needs and requirements of the show attendees.

Ideally, Marketing should attend a new show before deciding to exhibit. Get profile information from show management. And talk to previous exhibitors (e.g., business partner) to determine quality and volume of attendance.

Research and selection should be completed 8–10 months before the show whenever possible.

If you participate in multiple trade shows that reach the same audience, Marketing should consider consolidation or elimination of the weaker ones.

Take a Zero-Based Approach: Choosing shows out of habit or just because the competition will be there is not in the best interest of the company. Our selection should be based on how the show supports your marketing strategy.

Establish a list of show attendees for the company. This process can get political and frustrating. See “Estimating Staffing Levels” on the last page for a data-driven approach.

Determine Need to Exhibit: It may be more effective to implement a “non-booth strategy,” such as a hospitality suite, meeting or demo room, client event in the evening, sponsorship (e.g., luncheon), golf outing, speaking engagement, etc.

[Check out our latest BDN Trade Show Evaluation Checklist.](#)

PRE-SHOW STRATEGY

Evites are sent to industry analysts and consultants, trade editors, business partners, and other market influencers.

Pre-Show Publicity: There are various ways to draw attention to your participation in the event, and help drive qualified traffic to your booth and/or meeting room. Here are a few channels to consider:

- Media relations
- Targeted trade pub ad in special pre-show issue
- Targeted banner ad on web homepage (with a link to show registration)
- Targeted direct mail/e-mail campaign (e.g., to registered attendees)
- Show/event sponsorship (might earn ad/ad banner from show management)
- The key is reaching/attracting qualified prospects and existing customers

Exhibitors who conduct pre-show advertising, direct mail or e-mail campaigns raise by 46% their “attraction efficiency” (the quality of the audience they were able to attract to their booths). Likewise, the conversion of booth visitors to qualified leads rose 50%.

Most companies overspend on the obvious elements—the exhibit, entertainment, giveaways—and under-spend where it’s really needed—on the planning, promotion, data capture, post-show follow-up, and metrics.

Prep the Exhibit Staff: Prior to the show, meet to review objectives and strategies; staffing assignments; booth do’s and don’ts, basic information about the show; collateral to be handed out; sponsorships, intelligence gathering; related events, etc.

AT-SHOW STRATEGY

How you present yourself and behave while staffing a booth or participating in an industry trade show or marketing event are critical to fulfilling the promise (aka your goals) for the event. This checklist should help:

- Ensure that staff is easily identifiable
- Instruct staff to focus on speaking to customers and not to one another. No cell phones
- Utilize cheat sheets or briefings – to present a unified message (elevator pitch)
- Ensure that products displayed are properly branded
- Have literature available for customers
- Ensure that products are professionally displayed; this is not a yard sale, it’s a marketing opportunity
- Qualify and track leads
- Establish and maintain a staffing schedule and contact information for staff
- Coordinated meeting schedules and meeting areas
- Daily briefing – prior to opening – consistent messages
- Schedule client dinners, drinks, meals, and meetings – do not have dinner with one another
- Be prepared to leverage PR opportunities, including photo opps. Is a press conference appropriate?
- Keep it clean – throw out trash, don’t eat in your booth (publicly)
- Business cards – don’t forget them
- Networking – know who you want to meet (tied to goals), schedule meetings
- Assess the need for entertainment, drawings, sponsorships, ads. If they support our goals, do them right. If they don’t support our goals we won’t do them
- Consider in-booth demos or presentations
- The show can be a great opportunity to conduct customer surveys
- Arrange for booth photography or video, if appropriate
- Recap the day before leaving the venue, while topics of concern or opportunity are still fresh

ESTIMATING STAFFING LEVELS

This calculation starts with your estimate of how many people will stop by your booth and take the time of one of your staff members over the course of the entire show.

Now divide that number by the total number of hours that the booth will be "open." This result will be how many visitors you can expect to come to your booth each hour.

How long does a staff member spend with the average attendee? Multiply this number of minutes by the number of expected hourly visitors. This is how many staff-minutes you will need to have available per hour.

Divide that number by sixty and you'll see how many staff-hours you'll need per hour, on average. That's how many staff people you'll need, recognizing there will be high and low visitation periods during the exhibit schedule.

Attendees Interacting with Your Staff

÷

Total Number of "Booth" Hours

=

Interacting Attendees per Hour

x

Minutes of Interaction per Staff

÷

60 (minutes per hour)

=

Number of Staff Needed for Interaction

POST-SHOW STRATEGY

Every trade show should be evaluated on its own merit every year. Key organizations need to meet within 1-2 months after the show to evaluate attendance, quality of booth traffic, exhibit graphics, achievement of marketing objectives, metrics used, etc. They also need to set objectives and strategy for following year, determine booth size, need for meeting room, etc. Marketing should produce a written debrief no later than 30 days following the end of the show.

SUMMARY

Because trade shows/conferences consume vast amounts of company resources and personnel time, perform careful analysis of each opportunity before signing up to participate; set objectives and measures for each individual show; followed by thorough planning and execution of strategies; and ending with a review of what we actually achieved. Though your company's trade shows are coordinated by the Marketing organization, they require the full support of all participants to be successful.

ABOUT BDN AEROSPACE MARKETING

As the world's premier aerospace marketing agency, BDN works with clients to brand and market their companies, products and services. Agency capabilities encompass branding and strategy, design, advertising, trade shows, multimedia, PR/writing, and more.

