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PLANNING A SUCCESSFUL EXHIBITION

Spring and summer are traditionally peak season for business-to-business exhibitions, trade shows and regional business showcase events. And whether you have already booked your stand space, or you are still thinking about it here are a few tips and ideas on how to get the best out of an exhibition.

A good exhibition creates something akin to a retail environment, which for many companies working in the business-to-business arena, and especially for service sector firms, is unique. The beauty of an exhibition is that it is a neutral environment in which to do business. The visitor feels, and to some extent is, in control and therefore is more at ease and less pressured. Which is a good attitude for them to have when you open up a business dialogue with them.

Exhibitions give you a substantial opportunity to meet new prospects and sometimes even close a few sales. In most instances of course you will only be at stage one of the buying process – which is all about getting to know your prospect, and them getting to know you and your products, it's about finding out what they need, what kind of problems they have and need to solve, getting an idea of whether they have money to spend and who else they are talking to – and not necessarily the time to go in for the kill.

Event based marketing gives you an opportunity to make a high impact impression on clients and prospects because you have the opportunity to attack all of their senses and they can engage interactively with you and potentially with your products, through demonstrations and trials.

As an added bonus, through exhibitions you can do some hands on research, see and talk to: competitors, potential suppliers, sector lead bodies and of course talk informally to potential customers themselves. For many businesses with new ideas in the pipeline exhibitions can be a great opportunity to find out what your market is 'thinking' at a moment in time.

OK – so now you're convinced that exhibiting might be a good thing. What next?

The key to success, as you'll often see me write in Practical Marketing, is thorough planning.

Purpose

What is your primary reason for exhibiting? Your objectives might include:

- to raise awareness of your business in a given geographic location or industry sector
- to collect leads to follow up or to generate a mailing list
- to make direct sales
- to launch or promote a new product or service
- to meet and/or entertain existing customers
- to meet potential suppliers/partners/agents/distributors

Whatever your objectives, the important thing is to quantify. How many visitors do you want to be exposed to overall? How many visitors do you expect on your stand? How many will take your literature, or leave their business card? Think about the budget you are prepared to spend to achieve these objectives. Think through how you can best achieve your objectives and make sure you have the practical tools there on the day to help you achieve them – so if you want to build a mailing list is it enough just to collect business cards or do you want an intelligent database that gives you a little bit more information so that you can target any mailings to specific needs. A soft approach is often very effective – ask their permission to keep them informed about changes to your product range, special offers or send them useful information. If people have a genuine need they are likely to want such information, if they are time wasters you don't want them on your prospect list or database anyway. Remember it's not just a numbers game – the quality of lead is also really important.

Presence

Now you know whether you are focusing on leads, awareness, prospects or existing customers you can decide the type of physical presence you want at the event. And it will be quite different depending on your objectives. For a product launch for example you may have a far more dramatic stand and plan hi-impact, media appealing activities around the stand. The people manning the stand might be from your PR team, to handle media enquiries, or technicians if you are launching to a technically well informed audience.

In contrast, if your main purpose is to generate leads you need to think more about the type of lead you want, presumably you need leads to be as well qualified as possible. What does that mean for your business? Should the individual be the budget holder or main decision maker, looking to buy in the next few months, willing to agree to a sales appointment, leave a business card, fill out an enquiry

form, take or request a brochure? As you can imagine there will be varying degrees of interest and commitment amongst these different categories of visitor. It's worth thinking through how you will follow up leads and therefore what type of information you need to gather. Make sure you collect sufficient details to make a meaningful follow up – they may visit and speak to a dozen other suppliers – make sure you have made an impression and that when you call them you can use a simple reminder which enables you to start from where you left off. For example 'When we met at the Midlands Database Exhibition you mentioned to me how difficult it was to find a customer database system that was cost effective, easy to use and could be shared by 4 salesmen. I wanted to come and see you to explain something we have that I think does all of that and more.' If you haven't had a fairly detailed and client centred conversation you won't have found out about their needs and will be approaching them with a product rather than a solution. So spend time wisely and collect and record valuable information with a view to follow up.

Impact

When designing the stand make sure it passes the 30 second test – 30 seconds is roughly how long people will look at your stand before they decide to visit or walk on. So the message must be loud and clear. Don't be tempted to cover too much on the stand itself, but do make sure there's a reason to stop and talk to you or pick up literature. And if you are handing out literature on the stand, think seriously about what you give out and what you want readers to do next. The danger of giving out standard product or corporate literature is that it gets put in the obligatory plastic bag that all exhibition visitors seems to acquire as soon as they walk through the door, and if it finds it's way out it gets a 10 second skim through. So think about having literature produced specifically for the event, with messages targeted to the type of visitors you expect and maybe even special offers or exclusive deals. That way visitors are more likely to read, and more likely to respond.