

TAking the decision to attend a trade show is usually based upon the balance of how much it will cost to attend against what the expected return will be. Whilst both of these factors seem to be simple to define, it is worth examining both in more detail to make the decision to attend and to really get the most out of attending.

Be Honest About The Costs

The obvious costs of attending an exhibition includes the registration fee, accommodation and travel but many others are often ignored or put down to 'usual business expenses'. Staff will need feeding during their days at the exhibition and of course the nights out maybe spent entertaining prospective clients. All of these reclaimable expenses should be set against attending the show.

Another, more difficult to measure, cost is what financial investors would call the Opportunity Cost. Simply, what would you and your staff be doing if you weren't attending the show and what value would you be generating? Difficult to measure accurately but worth putting an approximate figure against to help your decision.

Before we move on it is worth remembering that the printed rate for attending should be viewed as the maximum you are going to pay and that even if you cannot get a reduction in the price you should be looking at negotiating add-ons if you are going to attend. Can you get a copy of the attendee list or work with the organiser to do some pre-event marketing together? Be inventive and maximise what you get for your money.

Define Success Carefully

The exhibition sales team will be keen to highlight the key-people who will be attending the show but will they visit your stand and, if they do is that what you need to declare the show a success? When you get back to the office, is the count up of business cards what matters or are you attending to make a statement to the rest of the market?

All of these (and many others) are valid reasons to attend but it is key to define the reason for attending as this will drive everything that you do before, during and after the show.

Once you have decided that it is worth attending it is crucial that work begins early and all your efforts work to achieving the stated target. Additionally, by completing the planning phase, you will know exactly what money is available for marketing, entertaining etc.

Now it is time to come up with some ideas...

What's That Over There?

How many times has your attention been drawn to the crowd watching a street performer because they are clapping or laughing. The performer knows that a crowd will soon be a bigger crowd if people think they are missing out. Your stand should be exactly the same and what your stand looks like is only a small part of creating that atmosphere.

I am sure you have been at exhibitions where football field sized stands are completely empty of people whilst a 3 by 3 in the corner is impossible to get near for the throng. Ok, so that maybe an exaggeration but creating a buzz around your stand starts months before the show.

As soon as you have made the decision to attend your clients and prospects need to know. Would the show organisers be willing to offer a reduce price of entry if you invite your clients? Should your stand have a section for meetings and if so organise those meetings before you set foot in the exhibition hall. Dont just think giveaways to get people on the stand, they tend just to take the giveaways.

Your contacts also need to know why they should attend. Give them a strong reason to give up their time; an incentive or offer is a good start but be inventive - bring this invitation with you to claim a gift or an extension to your support contract (these are only examples).

Invention is Key

Buliding on the last point above, unusual ideas are very often successful and dont be constrained by the thought that because it hasnt been done, means it cant be done. We once gave away branded boxer shorts from a stand and to ensure that the men knew about this we sponsored the space above the urinals - impossible to miss!

Create Your Own Press

Sending out press releases before the show are a good idea but again it needs to be a good story to catch the attention. Just that you're attending is not interesting. That you are attending and that you will be giving away gold on the stand will catch people's attention. Something in between these two examples will do well.

Since the press tend to send people to shows why not coordinate their time and either invite them all at the same time, again creating a good buzz on the stand or schedule interviews throughout the time of the show.

Extend the Show

Think about what you are going to do once the conference is closed for the evening. Many shows have their own ice breakers or events but maybe you could run your own event in partnership or away from the conference hall. This could be as simple as running a tab in a local pub and inviting key people along. It is often these social meetings create excellent professional relationships.

Follow Up Like A Bloodhound

The worst possible thing to do after a show is to let the concentration drop and not follow up with as much effort as you put in before and during the show. Actually the worst thing is not to follow up at all but you get the point. It is vital that the momentum, that you have spent so much time and energy to start, is maintained.

Same Time Next Year?

If the show was a success, based on the work you did all those months ago consider what you could do better before you rebook. Where could you reduce costs, get more out of the show, increase exposure etc..?

Dont leave this exercise for too long after the show as details will be lost over time. Get the ideas down on paper and remember that it is never to early to start planning or promoting next year's show.