



The Art of Exhibitionism

David Freedman, IT sector head of Huthwaite International, looks at why people are key to making the most of your exhibition investment.

For many IT companies, trade shows form the single biggest part of their annual sales and marketing budget. Yet how often do you come away with the nagging feeling that it was not worth the time and money in exhibiting – a question which may regularly be asked, rather more pointedly, by your board of directors?

The reality is not encouraging. Independent research carried out in the UK, Germany and Italy, for example, has shown that the majority of exhibitors do not get the payback they expect.

In the IT world, as in many other markets of course, there will always be a belief that it is essential to maintain a level of visibility simply by continuing to appear at major industry showcases. Equally, there are many well-catalogued examples of companies winning huge contracts and achieving an enviable level of return on their show-stand investment.

Misplaced focus

So where do things go wrong for so many exhibitors? The problem begins with the misconception that exhibitions are all about the products or services on display – which has been described as the ‘instant result’ approach.

This is not surprising: after all, all the advanced effort has been on getting the products there, setting up and testing, ensuring datasheets are racked up and supporting launch

material (where relevant) is available and in place.

The problem with this exclusive focus on the product and its features is that it completely ignores two other major components which are at least as important in making your presence at the show a success: the people you are likely to meet and the people you use to engage with them.

Tyre kicker or wheeler-dealer?

A number of studies throughout the 1990s have shown that, although the majority of visitors to exhibitions go with business-related aims, as few as 25 percent typically are decision-makers with objectives directly related to making purchases in the near or mid-term. And there is little or no independent research to indicate that this picture has changed.

The exhibitor will thus be faced with a range of visitors, from the ‘tyre kickers’ – those with no purchasing power but who pretend they do – and casual ‘day-trippers’ – students, retirees and employees on a day out – to the ‘foxes’ (competitors in disguise), technocrats and serious buyers or ‘wheeler dealer’ negotiators. At one level, few sales teams are fully capable of differentiating between these various types of visitors to the stand. This is essential in order to maximise the potential pay-off from each one, at

the same time minimising the length of time spent with those who cannot further your business – without damaging your company image.

However, there is a far more debilitating weakness which results from a myopic concentration on the physical aspects of the company’s presentation – namely, all visitors are treated the same and the standardised approach fails to work on any of them!

With such an imbalance of sales to technical staff, having got the visitor on the stand – the equivalent of securing a sales appointment – the ‘meet and greet’ salesperson will tend to push the visitor straight onto the technician doing the laptop demonstration.

Having a large number of people on the stand may superficially look good: yet, without having engaged each visitor by identifying their needs and linking those to the capabilities of the product, the resulting demo will be no more than a ‘feature dump’ and is just as likely to fail as it would on the customer’s own premises.

‘Mystery shopper’ experience

Two years ago, I attended a major exhibition in the guise of ‘mystery shopper’, together with a colleague whose role was to behaviourally analyse the consultative selling skills of some 20 companies’ sales teams whose stands we planned to visit –

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assessing their ability to ask relevant questions, uncover possible needs and relate these to the products on their stand.

Upon completion, we were to rank each experience in order of ability and publish a league table of results and advise the companies concerned as to how they performed. Sad to relate, after six calls we had to abandon the exercise: having visited the exhibition stands of both well-known international IT companies and smaller companies looking to build a brand in a crowded marketplace, without exception those manning the stands scored zero in their ability to uncover user needs.

Not uncommon was the immediate 'hello, can I tell you about...' approach, with no attempt to explore the issues which might make their solution appropriate.

A trainable solution

It would appear therefore that many exhibitors have some way to go in realising the undoubted benefits which their presence can deliver. So what is required?

First, it is important to recognise the two primary sales roles which will be undertaken at an exhibition, both of which can be trained. Second, a level of training investment in this area should be

considered seriously by exhibiting companies of all sizes, as the likelihood is that it will more than pay for itself in terms of achieving an improved return on the overall marketing investment in attending shows.

At any exhibition, the primary sales role will be on the stand itself. Here, sales techniques - such as Huthwaite's SPIN[®] approach - are designed to move the client from generalised statements of dissatisfaction to a much more focused desire for a solution which the vendor can satisfy: or, in Huthwaite terminology, converting implied into explicit needs.

This can be achieved through a structured questioning process starting with background situation questions and ending with 'need-payoff' questions, which seek to get the client to consider the benefits of solving the problems identified and unequivocally express a need to do so. With the groundwork prepared in this way, the laptop demo then suddenly has a commonly agreed context and purpose against which the vendor's solution can be judged.

At larger shows in particular, a level of corporate entertaining also takes place, creating further opportunities to engage with customers and prospects in a social context. You need to make the

most of this rare opportunity with a captive audience, to ensure your generosity is rewarded. It may not be the time to sign contracts, yet once again research shows that, properly handled, such events can - and should - significantly advance the overall persuasive process that leads to a sale.

And the research similarly shows that your customers and prospects actually prefer to have 'purposeful' interactions rather than simply accept the giveaways and have an enjoyable chat. After all, they too have to justify time out of the office.

By acquiring what at Huthwaite we call effective social influencing skills therefore, as a vendor your representatives will gain the confidence, processes and skills to enjoy themselves, ensure your customers enjoy themselves, at the same time progressing your business agenda.

After all, in today's tough commercial world, no-one expects - nor indeed enjoys - a free lunch.

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