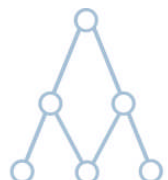


Managing Effective Tradeshows

The Do's and Don'ts of creating a
successful tradeshow outcome

Prepared by

Cam Wayland
Channel Dynamics Pty Ltd
April 2006



Managing Effective Tradeshows

Every exhibitor attending a tradeshow will have spent a considerable amount of time and money to be there, both directly and indirectly via the opportunity cost. Therefore it makes sense to do everything one can to maximise the impact and profitability of being at the event.

Once this commitment is made, there is often little thought given (until a couple of weeks before) as to how to maximise the sales and marketing returns from the event. Unfortunately by then it becomes a major panic to have everything completed in time for the stand, have the right stock and people available etc etc.

I can't tell you how many times I have been at a trade show setup the night before the opening and seen exhibitors in a major panic trying to get demonstration equipment to work, or find that a crucial "element" of the stand is nowhere to be found, or making frantic phone calls to confirm who is going to be on the stand the next day. It does not have to be like this.

Here are a few tips that may help with the actual running of the event from a sales and marketing perspective. This paper is not about the merits of trade shows, which or how many shows you should attend, but rather how to maximise the returns now that the decision to exhibit has been made.

Plan well ahead – Why are you doing this?

A number of our clients have taken a stand at the show and in some cases we have been working with them for many months prior on their stand design, company and product messages, who they will have on the stand, and what they will be exhibiting.

The first question we ask is "Why are you doing this?" In other words what or how will you define a successful show? Is it sales of a new product, press coverage, new partners signed up etc.

Once you have defined your objectives then you can start to think about the required tactics.

Needless to say the earlier you start planning the stand layout, stand logistics, products on show, supporting marketing events and material, sales resources required the easier it is.

I would recommend that an operational project team should commence this task at least 3 months prior to the show (assuming the person that booked the space is also clear as to why), depending on the scale of the show. For large scale or overseas events this may be up to 9 months or even longer.

Staff training

Before the event, all of the stand staff, both yours and any guest sales people such as partners, need to be adequately trained on all of the products that will be featured

over the event. Sounds like common sense, which it is, however, products are often rushed onto the show, sometimes in pre-release or beta format, and the first time the sales people see them is when the show opens.

When exhibiting ask yourself the following questions:

- Who will be the typical show attendee and how will they use the product?
- Will there be a combination of resellers and end users?
- Will there be any of your direct competitors attending the show?
- Will there be any complementary vendors exhibiting?

Therefore the training prior to the event should cover the appropriate positioning statements and specific benefits your products and company offers to each of these potential visitors. Therefore you should also work on a set of qualification questions for each of these potential visitors, but more on that later. You do not want to be telling an under cover competitor that drops by all of the new product “secrets”.

If you find yourself in a situation that it is nearly “show time”, then the following points may at least ease some of the pain as you can implement most of these on the stand, but of course nothing beats a through preparation.

Manage the stand

One of the keys to a successful tradeshow event is of course having the right people on the stand, who understand the products and can talk to visitors in a productive manner. Sounds simple but surprisingly not everyone manages to do this.

Rule number one is to appoint a Stand Manager responsible for all activities on the stand during the event, including pack up. Some of the functions this person should manage include:

- Stand rostering – No stand staff should leave the stand without first checking with the stand manager. When they leave ensure they understand how long before they have to be back. This is particularly important as a visitor may return to the stand at the expected time of return only to find the staff member not back, not very professional.
- Private conversations – tradeshow by their nature is where a large proportion of industry colleagues will be either exhibiting or attending. While it is great to catch up with a colleague and find out where and what they are up to, it should not be at the expense of a prospect. Private conversations need to occur off the stand during busy periods rather than blocking access to product displays and number of times managed appropriately
- Product & company knowledge - ensuring there are adequate sales, technical or management staff on the stand at any given time to meet the needs of the event. If you have non company guests on the stand make sure they know who everyone is and what their area of responsibility or expertise is in case they have to refer a prospect to another stand member

- Traffic flow – make sure the staff on the stand do not act as a “barrier” by standing either in front of the stand (arms folded of course) or in front of key exhibits so the prospects can’t see your offering
- Product demonstrations – If there are scheduled product demonstrations or stand events then they should be clearly sign posted and need to start at the given time. This means any preparation such as AV equipment, marketing material and of course the presenter needs to be prepared prior to the appointed starting time
- Lead collection and management – generally the primary purpose of why you are attending the show. The stand manager should ensure that all staff use a consistent approach to collecting and recording leads and that lead data is secured appropriately. More on leads later
- Stand security – do not leave any product on display that could be easily picked up and dropped into a show bag, otherwise it will happen. If you have small or valuable products secure and display appropriately and the stand manager should be the only person with the key. At the end of each evening the stand manager should be responsible for securing the stand and any of the demonstration products
- Pack up - the end of the exhibit time does not mean the end of the show. Make sure there are enough people rostered on to assist with the tear down. Pre-book your courier, have pre-prepared address labels, packing tape, textas, and any other packing material required for delicate items. Once everything is packed then head off for a well deserved beer!

Sales leads and qualification

Unfortunately at every IT show there will be a percentage of “tyre kickers” or visitors that are interested in the technology, but for the sake of the technology, and have no intention of ever purchasing your product or service.

I have seen many vendors boast about the busy buzz at their stand and how many leads they generated. But don't succumb to temptation. You will be so much better off if you pay attention to lead quality instead of quantity.

One secret to tradeshow success is your ability to qualify prospects on the tradeshow floor. Here's why:

- Not all visitors will ever be in a position to buy from you or refer you business. There is no point in spending time on unproductive conversations.
- Mere contact names are no more valuable than a mailing list. Contacts and inquiries must be converted to qualified leads before they will convert to sales revenue. Never just place a “fish bowl” on the stand to collect cards.

- If you don't qualify the contact on the tradeshow floor, you will have to invest significant resources in follow-up qualification after the event, at a time you will be least able to afford it.

Focusing on quantity over quality is, in fact, the kiss of death for a valuable and productive tradeshow program.

Partner staff on the stand

A number of vendors will have sales staff from some of their key partners on the stand to assist with resourcing over the event. While this can be a worthwhile exercise in building product knowledge and loyalty, if not managed correctly it has the potential to damage the partner relationship. A couple of things to remember if you are doing this:

- It should be a privilege, not a right for the partner to be on your stand.
- Partner staff must be carefully selected as being the right “fit” and have the skill required for the event and the stand
- They must be adequately trained on all and any of your new products on display
- An agreement must be reached before the show how any leads will be divided up or passed on to the partner
- Any leads that get passed to the partner must be acted upon within a specified time and specified manner, including reporting back as to the success or otherwise
- Any breach of the rules or unprofessional behaviour will see them removed from the stand, and/or not invited back to future events

Opening the conversation

Often the first thing a tradeshow sales person will ask me is “Can I help you?”, to which I often reply “No” , or words to that effect. This is a lame and unprofessional approach - the reason I stopped by their stand is that I may want to find out more about the company's products, services or market they serve, and see if it relates to my needs. I don't yet know if I need help with their product offering.

Start your opening conversation with a question that provides the prospect with the opportunity to engage with you and provide some information that starts the qualification process. This could be as simple as “what have you seen or interests you the most at this show?” etc. Alternatively you can start with a statement or a fact about you company, product or service “Did you know that we have just won the show award for product XYZ, is ABC a problem for your business?” Bottom line is know your market and competition and I am sure you can think of more engaging first conversations than “can I help you”.

Qualification categories

So how do you develop qualification criteria? At a tradeshow, the meaning of "qualified" differs somewhat from its traditional context. In that world, you are trying to ensure that the prospect is ready to see a salesperson—according to a very tight set of criteria.

In the case of a business tradeshow event, however, all you are trying to do is separate the wheat from the chaff. You want to eliminate visitors with whom you can never do business. So you might screen out students, spouses, or hangers-on.

But you want to begin a relationship with any prospect who might eventually become a partner, buyer, influencer, or specifier—or those who might be a good source of referrals, in their own companies or elsewhere. So, your stand level qualification criteria are likely to be fairly broad. Go back to the original event objectives you have set and your qualification criteria should reflect the first step to attaining these objectives.

Most sales professionals are looking for qualification around the following categories. The degree of detail needed will be a function of the complexity of the buying process.

- **Budget.** Is the purchase budgeted, and what size of budget does the prospect have available? You will want to set up categories or ranges, for easier scoring. Some companies also request information about the company's credit history.
- **Authority.** Does the prospect have the authority to make the purchase decision? If not, you should try to find out who does, and capture the additional contact information. You may also ask about other roles in the buying process: who is the specifier, the influencer, the end-user, the purchasing agent, etc.
- **Need.** How important is the product or solution to the company? This criterion may be difficult to ask directly, but it can be approached by roundabout methods: "What is the problem to be solved?" "What alternative solutions are you considering?" "How many do you need?" "What product do you currently use?"
- **Timeframe.** What is their readiness to buy? When is the purchase likely to be? Depending on industry and sales cycle length, this can be broken into days, months, or even years.
- **Potential sales volume.** How many departments in the company might use this product? How much of, or how often, might they need the product?
- **Account characteristics.** Company size (whether number of employees or revenue amount), industry, parent company.
- **Contact history.** Is this a current or past customer?

- Potential partner. You should have a complete set of partner profiling questions pre-prepared which will of course be entirely different from these customer qualification questions or criteria
- Desire to meet with a salesperson. A desire to continue the discussion may be such a powerful indicator that it trumps all other qualification questions. Don't forget to ask.

It's important to find the right balance between lead quality and the stand staff's ability to run through the questions efficiently. The tradeshow floor can be a noisy, distracting environment. You can't expect visitors to answer a lengthy survey. During busy hours, you may want to have a fall-back strategy that focuses on capturing the basics and postponing the other qualification questions for later outbound communications. In such a crunch situation, these are the essential elements to capture:

- Contact information (name, title, company, address, email, phone)
- Preferred method of contact
- Agreed upon next steps (send product information, have a sales person call, etc.)

On the other hand, the tradeshow floor is a fertile environment for initiating sales conversations. Stand staff should be encouraged to record as much information about the prospect as possible. A detailed account of the conversation becomes, in itself, part of the qualification criteria.

The nuances and the insights enhance follow-up and make the next stage in the relationship easier to achieve. And don't forget that if the information is recorded, the prospect will be annoyed at being asked the same questions by a representative of the same company in the future, therefore ensure you have a method of sharing and/or recovering the data easily.

Immediate follow-up

Occasionally, miracles happen, and a visitor at your stand proves on the spot to be qualified. In that situation, you want to act on the lead immediately. Have copies of any appropriate paperwork, contracts, partner terms etc available at the stand. If the right sales resource is already at the tradeshow, you can arrange for a sales appointment or further conversation on site. If the right person is back at the office, then the lead needs to be transferred by email, phone, or fax for rapid follow up. If the tradeshow is over a number of days, potentially in conjunction with a conference stream, it is likely that the prospect will be visiting the show floor again either later that day or the following day. If possible arrange an appointment where they can return to the stand and meet the appropriate company sales contact at a specified time.

Automated capture systems

A variety of new automated computer based solutions are available to allow you to capture the results of your qualification discussion for easy access, storage, and transfer. The data can be entered by booth staff or by booth visitors themselves such as swipe cards.

The cards are typically preloaded with attendee registration data, so the first step is asking the visitor to confirm the data that comes up is correct. Then, you can move into the predetermined qualification questions, like products currently used, communication preferences, and so forth.

Just as with offline methods, the questions or the “tick boxes” must be relevant and provide enough information so you know what the conversation or enquiry was about - keep them limited to the most essential.

Post show follow up

While the aim at the event itself is to qualify and process prospects as quickly as possible after the show a more methodical approach needs to be taken. This is only possible if the logging of the leads was done systematically at the show in the first place. Otherwise you will have no way of knowing which lead has the greatest importance, from a time frame, strategic alignment or revenue perspective.

I am constantly amazed after attending various trade shows all over the world where I have had my card swiped and requested more information (or even those super keen with “gold fish bowl” approaches) where I have not even received a follow up email, let alone printed material or a phone call. I am assuming the main reason the company attended the trade show in the first place was as a method of interacting with a pool of prospects, if not don't bother to take the prospect information, which in fact is a promise by the company to act.

Bottom line is act quickly and sort your leads into the appropriate “piles” which may be customer, partner prospect, end user prospect etc. Everyone that attended your stand and left their contact details should be at least be sent an email within 2 weeks of the conclusion of the event.

This email can be no more than a high level reminder of what you were exhibiting, informing the prospect that a representative will contact them personally in the coming weeks (if this was the original request, make sure you do if you say you will) as well as pointing to your web site and most importantly providing a contact name should they require any immediate information.

Once you have done this then prioritise your personal contact plan to ensure the correct representative contacts the prospect as soon as possible, as hopefully they will be expecting your call and you can then move onto your standard selling process.

Conclusion

If you follow these simple and common sense guidelines you will look like a professional organisation and your tradeshow will be a lot less stressful and far more successful.

For more information on sales training, sales effectiveness techniques, partner qualification, channel best practice at trade shows or this article please contact us at info@channeldynamics.com.au