



A Trade Show Bureau Publication

TRADE SHOW Work: The Mean Business

Does Your Staff Practice Boothpersonship?

By Bob Dallmeyer

In his article on boothpersonship, Bob Dallmeyer describes the basic techniques for achieving outstanding trade show selling results. The most critical of these involves selecting, training, and managing an effective booth sales team.

True or false:

- Snow skiing and water skiing are practically the same.
- Trade show selling and direct selling are practically the same.

If you answered “false” to both questions, you win. And that places you in the minority of American marketing executives, which is great for your business acumen. But that fact is not so great for the trade show industry.

Historically, trade shows always have been significant: Nero bought his fiddle at one and Hannibal traded up horses for elephants at another. But modern-day corporations have been too slow to recognize trade shows as the prime marketing vehicle that they truly are. And most companies don't know how to demonstrate or sell their wares properly in the trade show environment.

However, companies that understand these basic techniques can achieve record-breaking sales and an out-standing return on investment.

In more sexist times, the process of trade show selling was dubbed “boothmanship” but now perhaps “boothpersonship” is in order. Call it what you like, just be aware that trade show selling is unique.

Why? First and foremost, the potential customer comes to you: No appointments are made; no casual chatter occurs in an office over coffee. When the prospect strolls into your exhibit area, everything you know about your company and its products, selling, smiling, eye contact and body language, becomes critical to your success.

First Impressions Count

The first impression- the initial 30 seconds—make the sale. But it also makes many accomplished salespeople break into a sweat because they don't know how to handle it. Training your exhibit staff properly will develop confidence, professionalism and good old team spirit.

Start by assembling the right team for the show. In general, you need two people on duty for each 100 square feet of exhibit area. Product demonstrators and technical experts may be used as backup.

Schedule your staff for no more than four hours of continuous booth duty each day. Longer periods cause fatigue, strain and poor performance in generating sales or leads, which wipes out any economies gained by fewer people working longer hours.

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This does not apply, however, to demonstrators and other temporary show professionals hired to assist your staff. They expect to work the entire day with reasonable breaks for lunch, etc. Moreover, don't use the trade show as a reward for employees who probably should not be there; you'll be dollars ahead if you send them on a paid vacation rather than have them be non-productive at the show.

In selecting the right marketing team, a cast of gorgeous women and men may do wonders for you ego, but what good are they if they can't sell? Your staff should have proven people-to-people skills plus good product and company knowledge. Don't worry about physical appearances: An engaging smile can compensate for a bald head in two seconds. However, cleanliness is next to godliness.

Next, define why your company is participating in the trade show. While it's obvious that you want to sell your wares, have you pinpointed the target audience for those wares? Are you performing market research on a ware? Are you introducing a great new ware, or have you a new slant to an old ware? How about a little press coverage for that ware? Are you trying to contact a few key persons to show them your ware? Are you hiring a hotshot salesperson? (A trade show is one of the best places to recruit this side of a college placement office.) Are you scouting the competition's new line of wares?

The list of reasons to participate in exhibitions is not endless, but it may be longer than you think. Your exhibit team should understand each and every objective so that it has a clear focus on the show and its individual role in achieving each objective. Imagine how you would feel if one of your key clients entered the exhibit and an uninformed salesperson told her to come back later because you were on a break.

An incident like that should motivate you to share as much advancement information as possible.

Understanding the reason behind your participation is just the beginning. Company objectives then must be translated into individual goals for the show. This means defining daily and/or hourly performance standards for each person: leads generated or prospects qualified, literature requests handled or sales made. You can assign these goals, or the staff can set them. Either way, record them so that proper actions can be taken when they are surpassed or missed. While you're at it, this is the time to start building team spirit. Every company has its share of sales stars, but individual efforts must be combined to utilize each staff member's talents and abilities.

If you treat every meeting prior to the show as a mini pep, rally, you'll have the proper perspective on building team spirit. Talk about company loyalty, growth and achievements. Engender pride in the organization and lots of enthusiasm. You also can split the sales force into groups and have them compete against each other, rewarding the winners. It's great for performance and it makes everyone try harder.

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Memorable Exhibits

People love “hands-on” demonstrations, so, if possible, include one in the booth. Studies consistently show that, next to the effectiveness of booth personnel, an exhibit is remembered for its demonstrations.

Review each demonstration, as well as each product; you’ll be surprised at some of the muddled sales pitches you’ll hear. Have the group rehearse precise, concise statements that sum up each product’s advantages and features. This enhances your sales team’s ability to communicate clearly and quickly. Remember, these folks will make more presentations in one hour at the show than in two days in the field.

Booth presentations also need to be rehearsed. You cannot have a department store mentality in the exhibit: Asking “May I help you?” is poison. Instruct your sales force to open conversations with questions that require a response other than a “yes” or “no”.

“Who, what, when, why, where or how” questions usually get the conversation moving in the proper direction. “You look like a decision maker” surely will get a response.

Next, steer the conversation without being pushy, to learn:

- if the prospect is interested in your wares,
- is planning to buy and
- when the prospect will buy.

These questions qualify the prospect. If all systems are go, sell the product. Make a personal demonstration in the exhibit or get a company expert to assist. Be sure to get the prospect’s telephone number and address, the best time to contact the prospect if the sale cannot be consummated at the show any other pertinent information necessary to complete the sale. If you properly qualify your prospects, you most likely will close about 54% of the sales with only one follow-up phone call, studies show.

Body Talk

As you’re flying to the next trade show, read a book on body language. Pay close attention to the section on good eye contact, nervous pacing or gestures and the concept of territory. Share the information with our staff so it is aware of its non-verbal communication in the booth.

This also covers their dress and deportment. The policy of “when in doubt, be conservative” has saved many red faces at trade shows. Be prepared to send someone back to the hotel to change clothing if you feel he or she has dressed inappropriately. The list of other exhibit “no-no’s” includes cigarettes, gum, food, drink and anything else that might bother prospects.



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Sitting down on the job is definitely no no—as they say in Britain. Train your staff members to move to the perimeter of the exhibit whenever they are free, make eye contact with people passing by, start a conversation with a likely prospect, smile a lot and swoop as in “swooping to conquer.”

There is a time-wasting visitor at every show who just won't go away. It is important that your team employ a signal alerting others to come to the rescue when this happens. For example, if a troll won't leave your side, make eye contact with someone on your staff, tug at your ear a la Carol Burnett's weekly sign off. That signal tells your teammate to call you away for a meeting, phone call or whatever little white lie works best.

Drum up enthusiasm every morning prior to the show by scheduling a team meeting. Review yesterday's successes. Praise the high achievers. Do some warm up exercises to mix the adrenaline with the caffeine. Review the key contacts for the day. Reiterate policies about breaks, phone etiquette, visiting with friends in the booth, etc.

The team meetings should be the only company gatherings that take place in the exhibit; meetings during the show scare off prospects. Team meetings excite salespeople and prepare them for the day's work. And an eager sales force will channel its enthusiasm back to you in the form of sales.

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