

## **Performance-Based Staff Selection**

**Use a checklist format to rank the potential of your booth staffers and improve the productivity of your exhibit.**

The team that staffs your exhibit plays a significant role in your trade show success. Research verifies who most exhibitors instinctively know: The No. 1 factor in how a company's presence at a show is remembered is the impression made by its booth personnel. This only makes sense. Customers come to shows to see new ideas, test new products, talk business, discuss deals. All of that ultimately involves booth staffers.

Whether it's a technical expert, the VP of finance, sales manager, or your company president, booth personnel are the human connection. They are the difference between reading about your company in a brochure and talking to the people that make your company real. This is also why exhibit managers need to carefully consider the one aspect of their exhibits so often over-looked – staffing.

Unfortunately, most exhibit managers don't have the benefit of hand-selecting the people who will work the trade show circuit. Management simply tells them who will go. But, with a little extra effort and an impartial grading system exhibit managers can evaluate the staffers they do get and provide a rationale for the kind of staffers they actually need.

The trick is in the choosing. It's true that the most effective exhibitors use a variety of staffers with a variety of personalities and abilities. But how do you go about separating the wheat from the chaff? Is a great smile enough? Or mile-deep product knowledge? Or an executive title? To make life simple, we've compiled a list of criteria, along with a simple checklist, that will help you narrow your selection.

### **Who is your target audience?**

First, take a look at the needs and interest of your audience. Then find a group of staffers with the experience and ability to satisfy those needs.

If show statistics tell you that 75 percent of an event's registered attendees will come from highly technical positions, you can expect to hear a lot of highly technical questions. To keep your target audience happy, send a few extra staffers who can speak their language. The same holds true for shows with a high percentage of attendees in upper management. Who are these people going to want to talk to? Most likely their peers. So if you have the luxury, bring along a company executive or two. It's just the thing to prove to people that you are serious about meeting their needs.

### **What's your objective?**

Next, think about what you and your company want to accomplish at a particular show. Depending on your objectives, certain employees may better meet your staffing needs.

For example, a young company just entering the market may want to make as many new contacts at each show as possible. Staffers with an outgoing personality and a knack for conversation will probably best meet the demand. Or consider a company that plans to introduce a new and highly specialized piece of machinery at its next show. Who better to help staff the booth than the engineers that designed the product?

### **Character traits**

Although it may prove impossible to find the "perfect staffer," you can look for certain personality traits that will hint at the potential for greatness. The idea staffer will be:

- **Assertive:** The key here is balance. You can't survive on the show floor without being at least a little aggressive, but staffers who come on too strong often scare attendees away. Look for someone who is confident, not pushy.
- **Outgoing:** This is a no-brainer. When faced with meeting hundreds of new people in a few short hours, it helps to have a friendly and approachable personality.

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- Other-directed: Find staffers who can focus their attention on the task at hand. The person you want will spend most of their time talking with attendees - not their fellow staffers.
- Persistent: It takes two kinds of persistence to succeed as a booth staffer: physical and emotional. Trade shows are draining. So physically, you need people who have the ability to withstand the long hours and the droves of people. Emotionally, you need people who can withstand rejection. Attendees won't always give a positive response. Good staffers have to learn to forget minor setbacks and continue to work for the larger goal.
- Positive: This one goes without saying. Of course, if you've found someone who is assertive, outgoing, other-directed and persistent, then you've probably found someone who is positive, too.

### Basic skills test

To succeed in the booth, staffers need more than just a good smile and friendly disposition. They need a few skills, too. They need to be:

- Product knowledgeable: More and more people travel to trade shows to learn about the products they want to buy. Attendees crave information - and your success hinges on the ability to give it to them. With product knowledgeable staffers, you can rest easy. They have the ability to answer questions on the spot and quickly solve the problems attendees present them.
- Good learner's: Dynamic staffers will continually strive to learn new things. Look for people who reflect on their failures and their successes in order to find a better way to get the job done. Another tip: Try to find people who read the newspaper. Staffers who stay up-to-date on current events may be less opposed to picking up new trade show techniques.
- Team players: Trade shows are the ultimate team exercise. An outgoing greeter may hand a hot lead to a technician who can answer a few questions. And that technician may in turn hand the lead to someone in the management team. "Lone Wolf" staffers out to serve their own purposes have no place in the booth. If you're forced to bring one along, try to find something else to keep him busy.
- Truthful: Honesty isn't just the best policy, it's the only one - especially in the booth.
- Good listeners...and good note takers: When talking to hot prospects, just hearing about their situation won't suffice. Good staffers need to listen and take good notes about the discussions they have. Otherwise, once the show ends, all of the key information collected on the floor will stay there.
- Goal-oriented: People who can keep their eye on the greater goal will have an easier time staying focused on the task at hand.
- Pro-active: Pro-active staffers have the ability to approach every problem with the idea that they can fix it. Instead of reacting to circumstances and falling into the helpless role of the victim, they take control of the situation and work to make it better. Pro-active people look at the glass of water and are glad not because it is half full or half empty; they're happy simply because they have a glass with water in it. A staffer with this kind of attitude will succeed, no matter what happens.

### What types of people make good staffers?

Do salespeople generally make better staffers than technical people? Does management tend to do a better job in the booth than employees from customer service? The answer is sometimes yes, and sometimes no. Job titles do not reveal

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enough about a person for you to accurately judge their true abilities. However, certain stereotypes can help to get the selection ball rolling.

Salespeople generally offer certain disadvantages. It's the same way for technical staffers and everyone else. All come with a list of stereotypes that can make them sometimes beneficial and sometimes detrimental to the tradeshow environment.

Just remember that stereotypes have limitations. Although they often contain a kernel of truth, that may be all they contain. Are all salespeople outgoing? Do all technicians work well in a team? Certainly not. But if you're looking to make 500 new contacts at our next show, you will need outgoing people who can move a conversation along efficiently. Where should you start looking for staffers? Common sense dictates that you start in the sales department, since most salespeople have an easy time talking to people they don't know. After all, their job depends on it.

To make stereotypes work to your advantage, consider the following list of typical pros and cons about salespeople, technicians, managers and customer service reps:

- Salespeople: If you're going to a trade show you're probably hoping to make a few sales – so who better to take along than your sales department? They have experience in qualifying potential customers, they can talk to just about anybody about anything, and (if you're from a well-established company) they probably know some of your customers and potential attendees.

Unfortunately, some of these characteristics can also work against you. When you want to concentrate on meeting new prospects, salespeople may still spend more time talking to current customers. It's a natural tendency. People find it easier to talk to those they already know, avoiding those they don't. Plus, sales reps have an obvious reason to talk to their clients: They want to keep them happy. You can't fault them for this but it can be a problem in the booth.

- Technical Support: Because technical support people do not regularly work in sales situations, they often require extra training in conversation, presentation and listening skills. In spite of this, technical employees often turn into the best staffers because they have detailed product knowledge. They know how products have developed over time and can answer even the most difficult attendee question.

Plus, technical staffers bring one aspect to the job that no other employee can: pride of workmanship. Because they helped to develop a product from start to finish, technicians often view their creations in the same way a father views his newborn child. It's a feeling that can't be faked – and one that attendees respond to immediately.

- Management: if you have a manager who is willing to put in time at the booth, take advantage of it. They provide instant credibility to your program and can give you added clout with show press.

On the down side, managers often have scheduling conflicts and will attempt to do too much once they hit the show floor. If your company vice president decides to make a few phone calls from the booth, for example, he's no longer an asset, he's an obstacle. Make sure they understand their role and purpose in the booth; otherwise you may be in for trouble.

- Customer Service/Administrative Support: The one downside to choosing staffers from this field is they have no trade show experience. That's also one of the good things about them. Because they don't often get the chance to attend trade shows, most customer service reps and administrative support people will do whatever it takes to play a part. Their eagerness to succeed makes them invaluable in the booth.

Plus, these employees often have a lot of experience in dealing with customers, listening to people and solving problems. If you expect to see a lot of clients at a particular show, think about the benefits of having a bank of customer

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service reps on hand to solve your customers' problems on the spot.

### **How do I find the best staffers?**

Now that you know what to look for in the ideal staffer, you need to know how to find them. A checklist format works well. Rank the potential of your staffers using the criteria discussed about.

Do they have the necessary product knowledge? Are they comfortable talking to strangers? Can they manage their time well? Mark down "5" for the top performers and "1" for people you should leave at home. Using this system has two benefits: One, you gain a clear understanding of each employee's strengths and weaknesses; two, you do this in a way that is fair and impartial. You won't fall into the trap of not using people just because you don't like them or think their tie looks funny.

Where and when should you collect this information? In a perfect world, all trade show managers would have the time to personally interview each of their staffers before they stepped foot in the booth. And if you have the time to do this, great. Take advantage of it. Otherwise, talk to other managers and supervisors about the personalities and skills of potential staffers.

Then do some observing of your own. Take time to watch people in action. No better way exists to rank a person's abilities in the booth.

Granted, you have a busy enough schedule as it is and probably think you don't have time for all this. But consider the alternatives. You either accept your fate and deal with the staffers (good and bad) that management hands you, or you slowly work to weed out the people you don't want and gather those that you do. And you do it in a checklist format that ensures that each person is being ranked consistently and fairly.

In the end, you'll have no trouble meeting the needs of attendees. You'll have a qualified team of staffers ready and waiting to do the job. ◇

*- By Douglas MacLean, a contributing writer.*

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