

## STAFFING THE SMALL EXHIBIT

Limited space doesn't mean limited selling potential



When Jeanne Harwin heard that her company's 10-foot booth was overflowing with people, she was thrilled. She quickly headed over to the booth to see for herself. At first glance, she saw that it was, indeed packed. But a second look told her there was a problem: The crowd filling the space was all from her own company. And instead of engaging passer-by, they were talking to each other.

Today, Harwin and Sverdrup Civil, Inc. avoid a repeat of such a scenario with booth staff training prior to each and every show. It's just one way she ensures that her company's 10-foot space stacks up against the "big guys." She and her enlightened crew now realize this important trade show axiom: It's not how much space you have, it's what you do with it that counts. With that in mind, here are 11 ways to boost the staffing power of your small exhibit space.

1. Staff for the space. The rule of thumb is to staff the booth with one person for every 40 square feet of open exhibit space, according to Mim Goldberg, president of Marketech, a booth staff training consulting firm. A 10-by-10-foot booth will accommodate two people; a 10-by-20-foot booth, three people. If you have more staffers available, consider rotating them in and out of the booth instead of overcrowding your space. (Remember, you need room for the prospects.)

Of course, you can adjust those numbers according to your needs. Sverdrup's services as consulting engineers and constructors mean that staffers need additional time for consultative conversations. Consequently, the 10-foot booth is staffed a little more heavily by Harwin, Sverdrup's assistant director of business planning/marketing. During busy times, she uses three staffers; at all times, she schedules two staffers in the booth.

2. Prepare the plan. Whether there's one staffer or 100, planning is essential. The most important components: identifying your target audience and clarifying your key message/s. This information prepares your staff to quickly qualify prospects, then share key points with them. The crucial word here is quickly: "With the small exhibitor, it's critical for them to be aware that time is their competition," says Goldberg. "Their objective is to speak with as many people as possible."

With only a few staffers in the booth, everyone needs to pull their weight. Harwin makes sure that happens by educating her crew both prior to and at the show. Since Sverdrup's staff is scattered across the country, she uses pre-show memos to educate them on the booth theme, supporting direct mail, ads and staff attire. At-show training reinforces those points.

3. Team Sell. Yes, it's possible to use team-selling techniques with a staff of two. Here's how. One person acts as a greeter who engages and does minimum qualifying. The greeter passes qualified candidates to the second staffer for further discussion or politely releases unqualified candidates. This approach gives you the best shot at gathering quality leads.

4. Fight fatigue. It's inevitable: A small staff plus long show hours equals fatigue. To stay fresh, create a booth schedule, even if there are only two of you. Schedule both staffers during peak traffic times (such as breaks in the conference seminar schedule). Take breaks during low traffic times. Try to allow a 10-minute break for each person every hour, Goldberg suggests. The free staffer should use the time to energize with a brisk stroll around the show hall. (If you sit down, your energy drains.)

Follow these common-sense rules as well: Drink plenty of liquids (preferably nonalcoholic and caffeine-free), eat regular meals and get enough sleep. Remember, your prospects don't care how tired you are. "Whether you're the first attendee of the day or the last, you still expect the same quality of treatment and interest from that exhibitor," Goldberg points out.

Of course, fighting fatigue is much tougher for the lone booth staffer. If you work the booth alone, make friends with the exhibitors next to you and across from you. If you must leave the booth, ask your neighbors to cover for you if a prospect approaches your booth.

5. Plan for crowds. It's a mixed blessing: Your small space attracts a crowd, far too many prospects for two staffers to engage. Now what? Even if you're with a prospect, immediately acknowledge visitors who approach the booth by nodding your head or holding up your hand. "If they're interested and recognized, chances are they will hang around," Goldberg says. "If they're ignored, they'll leave within 30 seconds."

Other tips:

- Bring new visitors into the conversation. If you're demonstrating a product, you can invite other visitors to join the conversation. Take a few seconds to bring them up to speed - "I was just telling Mike about our XYZ product" -and then pick up where you left off.
- Limit conversations to three to five minutes.
- Keep the booth open to allow several people to step inside. Skip the chairs. Use small pedestals instead of tables to support product. Bring a minimal number of products. Use graphics, loose-leaf books or color swatches to show alternative product options.
- Use AV support. A three- to five-minute, closed-loop video will attract and educate visitors. When you're swamped, you can suggest visitors to view the video until you're available.

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6. Skip the conferences. The 10-foot space is no place for in-depth conferences or discussions. You have three options. If there is someone to watch the booth, you can take the serious prospect to the coffee shop for your conversation. Second, if you're the lone staffer or can't leave the booth, schedule the meeting outside of show hours. Third, if you don't plan to close the sale at the show, schedule the meeting for the week after the show, when you can give the prospect your full attention.

7. Collect those leads. Even if dollars are short, it's a good idea to invest in the show's lead collection device. If that's not an option, create your own lead forms. One possibility: Staple business cards to plain 3-by-5-inch index card and use the index cards for additional notes. No matter what your choice, be sure to record pertinent sales information. "What's important on those lead forms is to make sure that they become your bridge to accelerating your sale: after show, Goldberg advises.

For Sverdrup, Harwin supplements the show's offering with her own lead card. She creates the customized card in Wordperfect, then prints it out on card stock and cuts it apart. This provides a sturdy card for note-taking to attach to the flimsy imprinter card.

Another point for the small exhibitor: It's critical to remember that quality is more important than quantity. You may be tempted to grab as many business cards as possible. Don't. Focus on qualifying and finding your best prospects. Yes, you'll miss a few people by taking the time to qualify. But those you do capture will be worth the effort. Chances are you'll have limited staff to follow up on the leads back at the office – so give them only quality leads to pursue.

8. Do the demonstration. Small exhibitors often shy away from product demos, thinking they just don't have the space or time. That's a mistake. Done well, demonstrations allow the small staffer to talk to several people at the same time. Place the demonstration at the back of the booth. Use the greeter to qualify prospects, then send qualified prospects to the demonstrator, Goldberg suggests.

A closed-loop video is another good option. If it's designed to attract visitors, place it at the front of the booth and qualify those who stop to watch it. If it's educational, place it at the back.

9. Use caution with giveaways. There's one danger with giveaways in the small booth: If they overattract, you spend all your time handing them out instead of locating prospects. To avoid this, train staffers to get something of value before they hand over the premium. At Sverdrup, premiums are kept out of view. Staffers hand them out only after qualifying the prospect and completing the lead card.

That said, premiums can be designed to serve the small exhibitor's needs. Example: Staff training firm Marketech used its giveaway in conjunction with a pre-show fax. The fax invited people to come to the booth and say the words "staff prep" in exchange for a \$200 coupon for training.

10. Theme it. A well-conceived theme can separate the small exhibitor from the crowd. For example, Sverdrup recently used a "medical" theme for the American Water Works Association show. Exhibit signage offered to "diagnose" customers' problems, then "prescribe" the appropriate solution. Staffers wore white lab coats, which drew questions from passers-by, creating a chance for engagement. Giveaways were first-aid pouches with aspirin, band-aids and antacids. The theme helped Sverdrup succeed in spite of a small staff, small space and poor booth location.

11. Review the day. Yes, even if you're the lone staffer, it's important to review the day's successes and failures. That's the only way you can make improvements for the remainder of the show. "Just because day one had flaws doesn't mean you're doomed." Goldberg says. "Make changes to improve the situation."

- By Paula Marlow, executive editor.

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