

Steve Miller's Ramblings

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ARE YOU “PAIN” TO YOUR EXHIBITORS?

I'm not asking if you're “a pain” to your exhibitors. I'm asking if you *represent* pain to them.

Let's look at your relationship with your Primary Customer (PC) as represented by a scale. On one side of the scale is “Give,” on the other side, “Take.” Every single time you have contact with them, no matter what the form or who's doing the contacting, you are adding to one side or the other. Your PC either feels you are trying to “give” something to them or “take” something from them. As you contact them more and more, one side starts to get heavy and tip.

Which way is your scale tipping? Do you think it's tipping on the “Give” side? If it's tipping on the “Give” side, then you're in good shape. You've got a great relationship with your exhibitors. They take your phone calls, return your messages promptly, read everything you send, respond to deadlines, and send checks when asked.

But if your scale is tipping on the “Take” side, then you've got a relationship problem. Do you only call your exhibitors to see if they're going to sign up for space in next year's show? Is every piece of mail that lands on their desk a solicitation piece for the show? Do you send newsletters that are thinly disguised sales pieces? When they're setting up for the show, do they only meet someone from your staff when they're in violation of some old regulation?

If your scale is tipping on the “Take” side, then you represent pain. That's right, pain. Do all phone calls, all letters, all mailings ASK for an order? If so, your exhibitors see every contact with you as being a painful experience. And who wants to be in pain?

When you add this to other misperceptions: e.g., trade shows are only a necessary evil, trade shows don't generate real business, trade shows are a waste of time, trade shows are an expense versus an investment, etcetera, etcetera ... well, it's no wonder that trade shows are the first to go when budgets are cut.

In the over 200 responses to my previous Ramblings, many of you keep asking how you can find new exhibitors to grow your show. Finding new exhibitors is important. However, I think your

first priority is to keep your current customers coming back. Cut your turnover rate and solidify your customer base. THEN you can look at expanding.

Our own surveys have shown that the average trade show has an exhibitor turnover rate of about 30% each year. For a show with 400 exhibitors, that's 120 exhibits you've got to RESELL before you can even begin to think about expansion. If you cut turnover down to 20%, you only need to resell 80 spaces. If we're talking about keeping 40 10x10's, that's 4000 net square feet! Not an insignificant number.

What am I driving at? In many cases, the relationship you have with your exhibitors will be a major motivating factor in their decision to re-sign for next year. The more "logical" evidence you can provide them that reinforces that "emotional" relationship, the easier that decision will be. And I believe a big part of your relationship can be seen in the "Give" and "Take" scale. Let's look at ways you can tip the scale to the "Give" side.

- How often do you communicate with your PC? Do they only hear from you six months before the show when it's time to sign up again? If you're not in contact with them in a regular, year-round basis, you may run into out-of-sight-out-of-mind. Your exhibitors need to hear from you at the very least every other month in order to maintain "top of mind" presence.

- Maintain a ratio of at least 2:1 "give" versus "take." What are your customers biggest problems year-round? I can assure you it has very little to do with your trade show. They're concerned with things like increasing the effectiveness of their field salespeople, lowering costs of sales and marketing, new sales and marketing techniques, new technologies, and many other non-trade show related priorities. Can you imagine their surprise (and delight) if you started sending information that helped them be more successful *on a year-round basis*? What would their perception be of your organization? They might start to believe you actually *care* for them and their problems! And, of course, you do.

- When you do talk about exhibiting, start to re-educate them on the true value of trade shows. Re-educate them on how to justify their not-insignificant investment in your show. Re-educate them to stop believing in old trade show myths (such as the value of total attendance). Re-educate them on the value and importance of pre-show promotion. Re-educate them on the critical importance of selecting and training the right staffers. Re-educate them on the final step of closing the loop after the show — the one step, more than any other, that determines whether they return next year or not. Don't just focus on hardware stuff — exhibit design (highly expensive and overrated), shipping, I&D, and other non-marketing stuff.

- Mix up your communications. Don't just rely on newsletters. Start to use Broadcast Fax, Fax-On-Demand, seminars, email, the World Wide Web, audio tapes, article reprints, CD-ROM, video, and whatever else comes down the pipeline. The magic of information retention is in the mix and you're more likely to keep their attention by sending different media.

- Use outside sources. And I mean **outside** sources. You've heard the saying, "It's tough to be a prophet in your hometown." And unfortunately, it's true. Over 90% of my consulting and training work is out of the Seattle area. And I still don't listen to my dad. You've got the same situation with your exhibitors. You're part of the family. And whether or not you make sense, they still discount anything you say. Communicate with them through outside voices.

I'm not just talking about me or Allen Konopacki or some other trade show specialist as an outside source, too. Go outside the trade show industry. If you're talking about direct mail, contact somebody through the Direct Marketing Association. For traffic flow, look to the supermarket industry (or a source from Disneyland) for information. Really get outside.

- Add upper management to your communication list. If your corporate contact is below this level then you have a two-fold problem. If you have no relationship with the President or VP of Sales and Marketing, then you are a hostage to their whims, moodswings, and annual budget decisions. If they decide to cut back or cut out your show, they merely send the edict down to the messenger, who relays it to you. That puts you in a bad position. The second problem is turnover among exhibit managers. There are probably 10-20% new exhibit managers in your show each year. Heck, that's almost like having that many new exhibitors. You're starting the relationship all over again and you have to teach them all about the show. By moving your communication process higher up the ladder, you're at least maintaining some level of consistency in the relationship.

Do you represent pain to your Primary Customers? If so, then your relationship may not be stable enough to ensure a long-term commitment to your show. And some of these suggestions may represent painful change to you and your staff. But which pain is greater: the pain of changing your communication strategies or the pain of annually replacing exhibitors who drop out of your show?

Steve Miller, Kelly's Dad and a strategic director, works with both show management and corporations worldwide, advising them on competitive advantage and innovation. He also speaks to business groups around the world on corporate strategy. His website is www.theadventure.com.

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