

Steve Miller's Ramblings

(www.theadventure.com)

FOR SALE: ONE SLIGHTLY USED TRADE SHOW

Or 10 Lessons to Learn from the Decline of the Nation's #1 Show
(first published April, 1999)

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For Sale: one trade show.

Only 21 years old. Just a few cracks in the armor.

Getting out of the business and starting in a new field.

Statistics: 1.6 million nsf, 2400 exhibitors, 220,000 attendees
(depending on who you talk with).

Priced to sell! Call ZD.

Did anyone hear a loud, collective groan when Ziff-Davis announced they would be willing to sell Comdex because, as Tradeshow Week reported, "...The decision (to sell) comes as a result of the revised strategy of Ziff-Davis's majority holder Softbank Corp. to focus on companies that operate totally on the Internet platform."

Does this make you nervous? Does this make you want to run home and hug your teddy bear?

Maybe it should. Maybe not. After all, it was only a few short years ago that Softbank spent an unbelievable \$800 MILLION for Comdex. (Okay, technically they bought Interface and all the little Comdex's, but we all know they really only bought one big show.) And when they bought Comdex, do we really believe they only planned to hold it for less than five years? I don't think so.

The simple point is that Ziff-Davis believes there is a new future. And it's a future that doesn't include the brick-and-mortar world of expositions.

Are they right? Well, they think so. But let's look at some other possible reasons why ZD is willing to bail out:

- Comdex has proven it's not the invulnerable giant they promoted for years. Attendance has declined, major exhibitors have pulled out, and hotel rooms in Las Vegas can be found for under \$300. Has ZD decided they won't be able to rebound?

- Maybe ZD is now willing to admit, too, that Comdex isn't even a TRADE show. It's a consumer show. C'mon, we all know that anybody who owns a computer and can fog a mirror can get in. And exhibitors get tired of weeding out the true business buyers versus the lookie-loos.
- Comdex still carries the "arrogant" label slapped on it by Interface. \$49 a square foot? Give me (and all the exhibitors) a break.
- They think they can't be a really cool, high-flying dotcom if they have some old-fashioned brick-and-mortar expos attached.

But does this development sound the death knell for the exposition world?

The answer is a resounding NO. Expositions are alive and well. And they still have an important place in the future business world.

Did you think I was going to say otherwise? Heck, I live in this world, too.

But this is as close as I come to supporting the good-old-boys attitude that "trade shows have been around for years and they'll still be around in years to come."

In my last *Rambling*, I said that the Internet will kill the weak lambs. And it will. But there's no reason why any of you HAVE to be weak lambs, and there's no reason why any of you HAVE to give up (like ZD). But I believe there will be some fundamental changes required by every trade show, if you want to survive:

1. You cannot survive as a stand-alone event.

As I explained in my last *Rambling*, many of the reasons why trade shows came into being and grew are no longer valid reasons for existing. Attendees simply aren't going to wait a full year to see what's new. Exhibitors won't participate because they think they'll be exposed to thousands of new prospects. Both groups can accomplish those goals more efficiently and effectively via the internet. Telling people they have to attend because it's "the place to be," will carry less weight in the future.

2. You must evolve into a year-round communication tool.

Time is more valuable than money, so leaving the office for 2-3 days becomes a painful experience for exhibitors and attendees alike. By facilitating your marketplace's discussion on a year-round basis, you create higher value in the mind of both customer bases. And once you do that, attending the trade show for the face-to-face time becomes even more important.

3. You can't survive without partners.

Being the best trade show in your industry doesn't ensure future survival. If there are other companies providing valuable services (research, online education, Customer Relationship Management, international matchmaking, etc.), then you need to bring them in as full partners. By consolidating important and vital services, you bring a value to your industry that would be hard to replicate and displace.

*4. You must prove your value and worth through **Relevant Differentiation**.*

“Expose your products to over 25,000 attendees!” doesn’t measurably impact anybody’s bottom line, yet it’s a main tag line in most exhibitor prospectuses. Promising fuzzy results won’t cut it. You must show real, measurable proof to both exhibitors and attendees how they will get concrete results by participating. And it **MUST** be proof that is important to them, not you. In other words, Relevant Differentiation.

*5. You must understand you are in the **Customer Experience** business.*

Where’s the WOW? Do people leave your expo totally blown away by the experience, or do they feel bored by “just another trade show?” People are people, not robots and the experience of any event they attend is a major factor in whether they’ll come back or not. If I had a dollar for every time I’ve heard someone say “a trade show is a trade show is a trade show,” ...

*6. You must understand it’s all about **People**.*

In an era when change arrives without warning and threatens to eradicate the foundations of entire companies and industries, organizations can only survive by becoming more human. Each and every contact your customers have with someone who represents YOU (registration temps, union workers, service providers, bus drivers, etc.), either maintains, enhances, or diminishes their perception of YOU.

*7. You must practice **Healthy Paranoia**.*

No industry is immune from instant obsolescence. As my father found out in the 8-track industry, you can die a quick death if the market moves away from you. You must constantly be on the lookout for any possible Attacker, from any possible direction. And more often than not, the Attackers to be most worried about are not on your normal radar screen. There are a myriad of extinct products and industries that were wiped out by superior technology, not by the obvious competitor.

8. You must avoid being in the trade show business.

You are in the matchmaking business. It’s as simple as that. You help bring buyers and sellers together. If you fall into the trap of thinking you’re in the trade show business, you may be heading for a big fall. The last thing you want to be is very, very good at something nobody wants to pay for.

9. You must not rely on incremental improvements to add value.

Better signage? Newer carpets? More buses? *So what?* If you use conventional, obvious solutions available to everyone, you will get answers available to everyone. Refuse to seek conventional solutions and look for new ideas that will help you jump the curves. Stop looking at other trade shows for new ideas. Look outside the expo world for new ideas. Study Fedex, DisneyWorld, Harley-Davidson, Ritz-Carlton, Amazon.com, Virgin Atlantic, and other break-the-rules companies. Then figure out ways to combine their ideas into something totally new and unique to your world.

*10. You must become the **Club Everyone Wants to be a Member of**.*

How do you put all this together to provide a place where every member of your industry feels a compelling need to participate? How do you provide extreme high value and an experience that they would lose if they didn’t join the club? How do you create those golden handcuffs where people would feel left out and even left behind if they decided to

drop out? Once you've got that situation, it becomes increasingly difficult for any competitor to take your position in the industry away from you!

Comdex may have once been the big gun in the computer world, but I don't think it is anymore. I hear many more complaints from exhibitors and attendees than compliments. I even heard several jokes on ZDTV about Comdex, and they're owned by the same company!

These suggestions are tough to do, to be sure. Do you have a choice? Sure you do! But to choose NOT to do these things is, in my opinion, committing corporate suicide.

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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