

Steve Miller's Ramblings

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Change Your Exhibitors' Perceptions ... Or Else

When I wrote my first *Rambling*, I was attempting to send what I felt was a much-needed wake-up call to the trade show industry. “*Will your show be alive in seven years?*” was followed by “*Would you do business with you?*” Since those first went out, over one hundred shows have contacted our office looking for help with the most common response being, “This sounds exactly like us!”

Over one hundred responses! Sounds like a lot of people really want to make a difference for their Primary Customer (the exhibitor), doesn't it? Well, maybe not. I spoke with a lot of those people and I heard a lot of, “Gee, I wish our Executive Director would read this.”

In my first piece, I discussed how trade shows fit neatly into the standard business lifecycle mold: start-up, growth, maturity, decline. It's easy to see how many extinct shows fit that mold, and even more-so, how scary it is that many of our current shows fit. Where does YOUR show fit?

Let's talk a little about *Perception*, what it is and why I think it plays such an important role in the future of your show.

We all know that perception is reality, or at least that's what all the management gurus say. And the fact is ... it's true. Whatever you perceive to be reality is your reality, even if I think you're wrong.

Let's use a typical exhibitor, for example. Their perception is that trade shows are necessary evils, an exercise in unprofitable futility. Their reasons for exhibiting may include:

“... we've always exhibited in this show because if we didn't, our absence would speak louder than our presence.”

“... our competition is there.”

“... it's for image and PR.”

“... there are 10,000 people attending. We're bound to get business.”

Of course, if you ask your customers why they exhibit in your show, they'll also say something like, “... we go to find new prospects,” or “... we'll write orders.” But the fact is, that's baloney.

In twenty years, I've given over 1000 presentations to exhibitors and corporate executives. When I ask how many were looking for leads, over 90% raised their hands. Sounds good, right? Except, when I then ask how many had *clearly* defined the number of leads they expected to generate, less than 3% respond. Generating leads as an objective is nice, but without clearly defining that in specific numbers, it's a myth. If they can't measure it, they can't manage it.

For the average exhibitor, the trade show is a line-item in their budget ... an expense. As a result of that *Perception*, they develop their *Attitude* toward the trade show. From that *Attitude*, they develop their *Expectation* for the show. From that *Expectation* comes their *Approach*. And from that *Approach* comes their *Results*.

As long as their *Perception* is that trade shows are not viable sales and marketing tools, their *Results* will always bear them out. It then becomes a vicious circle. The *Results* support the original *Perception*, which reinforces their *Attitude*, and so on.

When an exhibitor says to me, "We can't get anything out of exhibiting at trade shows," my response is, "That's your *Perception*. Change your *Perception* and you'll change your *Results*." Why is it that some exhibitors come to a show expecting to get specific results, and they succeed? Why is it that a lot of shows aren't looked at as "order-writing shows," when there are thousands of buyers walking through? At a panel discussion I facilitated for the Food Marketing Institute last year, we asked eight major buyers if they would be able to write orders at the Supermarket Show. They all said yes, but usually nobody asks! As I said, *Perception is Reality*.

The bottom line is this: your exhibitors are probably trade show flops. Why do I make such a harsh statement? Besides what I've already said, consider this:

1. Most exhibit staffers don't know why they are there or what to do. It's common for exhibit staffers to receive little, if any, communication before a show. Too often it's limited to something like, "Here's your travel itinerary and booth schedule. See you there." Or, sometimes the company will have a pre-show meeting, but it's usually for new product introduction and education. The fact is there are vast differences between working in the field and working a trade show, but most staffers have never been trained on how to understand those differences and how to work a show. The exhibit staffer is the most important, yet most neglected, factor in achieving trade show success. And the reason why is #2:
2. Exhibitors spend most of their time and money on the wrong side of the equation. I look at the trade show equation as having two sides: hardware and software. Under the hardware column are such important factors as space rental, exhibit design and construction, shipping, drayage, I&D, show services, etc. Under the software column are such tools as direct mail, telemarketing, booth staffers, drawings, giveaways, post-show follow-up, etc. Which side will provide an exhibitor with the highest return on investment? The software side, of course. Yet, which side do they typically spend the vast majority of their time, energy and money on? The hardware side, without a doubt. What's wrong with this picture?
3. Nobody taught them. I offer a challenge to show managers. Ask any exhibitor to think back to their very first trade show and then ask a simple question: who taught them how

to work that show? The overwhelming answer is - no one. And considering the major differences between working in the field and working at a trade show, that's a problem. So how did they learn? Odds are they learned by watching and copying other exhibitors. As a result, the exhibitors in your show tend to look and act alike. Competition at trade shows doesn't breed creativity and innovation. It breeds **conformity**.

How many of your exhibitors truly understand all this? Heck, how many of your OWN staffers understand this?

And how many of you are saying, "hey, we offered an exhibitor training program once, but nobody came, so we didn't do it again." How do you respond to a potential new exhibitor who says, "We'll give your show ONE chance. If it doesn't work, we're never coming back?" Upper management in associations, who are very budget-driven, tend to have a short-sighted view here.

Why is this *Perception* thing important to you? **Because the future of your show may depend on it.** Have you ever heard an exhibitor say, "we can't justify our trade show expense to upper management?" That's their perception, albeit misdirected. And when times get tough, and as budgets get cut (as they eventually ALWAYS do), how do trade shows fare under the knife? Usually they're the FIRST thing cut. If your show is to be alive and thriving in the next century, you've GOT to manage your exhibitors' *Perception* of your show.

And that calls for a major shift in how you do business with your Primary Customer - your exhibitors. Whether you like it or not, it's up to you to help them understand the true value of your show and how it fits into their overall corporate marketing strategy. It's up to you to make a long-term commitment to developing a true partnership with your exhibitors. If over 50% of your association's annual revenues come from your exhibitors, then they are your Primary Customers. The attendees are the Secondary Customer. Exhibitors can help your show succeed and grow, because they ARE the show.

Here are six steps you must take to ensure your show's future success:

1. Make the commitment to develop a permanent, on-going education program that goes beyond periodic mailings or exhibitor manuals. (Hey, they don't read that stuff anyway!) Include in your permanent program seminars, audios, videos, on-line services, fax-on-demand, CD-ROM, webinars, whatever it takes to provide the information your exhibitors need to succeed. Recognize it takes time to re-educate your exhibitors and change their *Perception* about your show.
2. Invest in your newest exhibitors. This is where your biggest annual turnover comes from and yet, this is also where your future big guns will come from. We all know that once an exhibitor comes back, odds are they'll be back for many years. Make sure their first year is successful. (Odds are your biggest exhibitors have grown as big as they're going to get, so your future growth is in the newest companies.)
3. Personally visit the Top 20% of your exhibitor base. These usually represent 80% of your total exhibit space (with the possible exception of some state shows). As I stated above, they probably won't grow, but they can kill you if they drop out or cut back

severely. It's critical you keep a face-to-face relationship with your biggest customers to maintain open communication and enhance long term relationships.

4. Re-educate your own Exhibit Department. I guarantee that to your exhibitors, they represent **real estate salespeople**, not trade show consultants (see #6). Yet, consultants are exactly what they need to be. Can your staff talk with an exhibitor from a strictly marketing perspective and help them create an individualized, customized plan of attack for your show, based on their overall marketing strategy? Remember, your contact at the exhibiting company is typically not a marketing person. They have a lot of responsibility and almost no authority. By re-educating your own staffers to help guide your customers to maximum success, you're helping to ensure the future of your show.
5. Move your relationship higher. Your current contact is probably an exhibit manager who has a lot of responsibility and no authority. This person rarely has much say about exhibiting, other than implementation. You need to have a close relationship with those people making the sales and marketing decisions. **THEY** are your lifeblood. Hint: these people not only don't read the manual, they have no desire to.
6. Tell the truth. Whoa, touchy subject here ... but vital. Attendance figures have been inflated for years. **AND EXHIBITORS KNOW IT.** They know shows deliberately mislead them. Why on earth would an exhibitor want to know an attendance figure that includes other exhibitors, models, actors, guests, media, school kids, bus drivers, union workers, and friends of convention center employees? Well, the answer is ... **THEY DON'T.** They only want to know how many people are walking in who can positively affect their business. In other words, buyers. Let's stop kidding ourselves about the 200,000 people who **used to** attend Comdex. Ask any exhibitor and they'll tell you they know those weren't all buyers.

I don't think it's any mystery why shows have such a hard time developing strong partnerships with exhibitors. Exhibitors reason that if the show can't tell the truth on something as obvious as attendance, then what else could they be deceived on? Getting a call from a show representative who says, "We want to help you be more successful by borrowing your customer list," is akin to hearing, "I'm with the government and I'm here to help."

These steps may sound radical, expensive, and painful, to be sure. But if your show is past the Growth Stage (as eventually they all are), then you must recognize the old days of taking orders and selling real estate are soon over. To survive and thrive, you must manage the Perception of your exhibitors, your attendees, your staffs, and yourselves. Wake up Executive Directors. (The bottleneck is always at the top of the bottle.) If your exhibitors go away, your show goes away. When your show goes away, I absolutely guarantee you that your attendees/members will find another way to get together. But, if your show goes away, so do you.

The future presents both great opportunities and great challenges for the trade show industry. New shows will be born, grow and die. To reach the Growth Stage and look beyond requires the ability to view change as a continuous and important part. New rules require new tools and we, at The Adventure LLC, are positioned to help manage that journey.

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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