

Steve Miller's Ramblings

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Are Trade Shows TOO Complicated?

*"It's not necessary to change.
Survival is not mandatory."
Edwards Deming*

I think it's time we asked this question. I'm not trying to be cruel or anything, but I am plenty disturbed by some patterns that seem to be consistently raising their ugly heads regarding expositions, as compared to other marketing tools.

Last week I was working with a new client. Typically, the way we start consulting with a new association or show management company works out something like this: I come in to spend one day with the main players involved in running a show. Sometimes it's just the show staff. Sometimes it includes the Exhibitor Advisory Committee (or some similar group). Sometimes it includes the Board of Directors. The day is usually split into three parts. The first part is basically a seminar that offers a new perspective on trade show marketing that these people may or may not have ever considered. I take them for a walk in their customer's shoes — both exhibitors and attendees. After offering this little "whack on the side of the head," I then facilitate a S.W.O.T. analysis of the show (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats). This gives a good idea of areas we can concentrate on for enhancement and improvement. Finally, we get into a little brainstorming session. In this, we basically act as if the existing show didn't exist and invent a brand new show.

The purpose of the day is to open people's eyes to a new perspective about trade shows — why trade shows fail, why exhibitors succeed or fail, and how to create more VALUE for both the exhibitor/customer. It's usually a great exercise that most show management people have never been through.

Anyway, as I said, I was leading one of these types of days last week. In the group was a man who had been around the trade show industry for a long time. He wasn't about to buy into any of this "new" thinking. He was firmly planted in the attitude that "total attendance" was what determined the success of the show and he wasn't about to accept the idea of creating *VALUE* for exhibitors and attendees as a way of ensuring long-term success.

And this is the rub. Too often, in my experience, this attitude is the prevailing one. People think trade shows are simple. Bring in thousands of people and the exhibitors will be happy.

But I don't think it is that simple. In fact, I don't think it's simple at all. I believe trade shows are difficult, complicated marketing tools requiring a lot of time and energy on **EVERYBODY'S** part to make them work. I think any show that announces "we had 55,000 people at our show this year!" as the lead in a press release or promo piece is missing the point.

No, I think trade shows are complicated. My concern, however, is they are TOO complicated and possibly too bifurcated. There are many obstacles that every show must overcome, that every exhibitor must face, and every attendee must hurdle. Let's look at the exhibitor's hurdles first:

Exhibitor Hurdle #1 — Upper management doesn't know or doesn't care.

Historically, people have approached trade shows in the U.S. as necessary evils, an expensive habit. If we don't exhibit, our absence will speak louder than our presence is the battle cry of Corporate America. But this is really a head-in-the-sand attitude. The fact is, 85% of repeat attendees actually recommend purchases in their company, are the final decision-maker, or are a heavy influencer in selecting specific suppliers for their companies. These facts alone should open the eyes of any senior manager to opportunity.

Exhibitor Hurdle #2 — Exhibit staffers aren't educated on how to work a trade show.

It makes perfect and logical sense to look for qualified prospects. Unfortunately, most of us have grown up in the "traffic is king" mentality regarding trade show success. If they come into our booth and act interested, then they must be a prospect! By educating staffers on how to cull out those top quality leads, or at the very least, solid inquirers, exhibitors can really push their success level up.

Exhibitor Hurdle #3 — Lack of communication and coordination between all departments affected by trade shows.

No corporation is alike. Some put a salesperson in charge of trade shows. Some put a marketing person in charge. Others put somebody from the corporate communications department in charge. But then that department communicates with a one-way monologue, TELLING the other departments what to do and expect. A well-run exhibits department involves everybody in the planning and implementation process from the very beginning.

Exhibitor Hurdle #4 — Corporate management doesn't hold salespeople responsible for following up on leads.

Salespeople simply get away with poor follow-up because there aren't any consequences for failing to do so. Any good lead generation and tracking system sets up checks and balances for closing the loop later on.

Exhibitor Hurdle #5 — Corporations confuse busyness with effectiveness.

There are leads and there are leads. According to every study we've all read, we've got 86% of exhibitors looking to generate leads at a trade show. Yet the vast majority don't know *exactly* how many leads they're looking for! Instead, they design their booth and trade show strategy to attract anybody who can fog a mirror. (Hey, I gave away 5,000 fuzzy birds. It must have been a successful show!) Frustratingly, year after year, corporations continue to approach trade shows the same way.

Is it any wonder that the vast majority of corporations tend to look at trade shows as expensive exercises in futility?

Exhibitor Hurdle #6 — Trade shows aren't just a single marketing tool, they're a potential combination of **EVERY** marketing tool.

An exhibitor can use direct mail, telemarketing, trade ads, billboards, the World Wide Web, face-to-face, and every other marketing tool known to man to help promote their existence at your show. Yet, how many of your exhibitors understand this, let alone are capable of coordinating such an effort?

Exhibitor Hurdle #7 — Exhibitor managers are forced to learn on their own.

I've spoken before almost 60,000 exhibitors and over 80% of them said that nobody taught them how to prepare for and work a trade show when they first started. They all learned by watching the other exhibitors. This develops an “expertise” that is based on conformity.

Additional Hurdles happen on the show management side:

Show Management Hurdle #1 — Who taught **YOU**?

Do you really know how to help individual exhibitors create a marketing strategy that will help them use your show to its maximum potential? If you are trapped in the “traffic is king” mode, then you are handcuffed to the ups and downs of your industry. Unfortunately, right now, most industries are going through massive revolution. Entire industries are downsizing.

Corporations are merging, acquiring, and laying people off. The buyer population is shrinking and it'll be some time before we start to see any significant recovery, if ever. Oh sure, the buying power is still there. It's just in fewer people's hands.

As I always say: if you live by attendance, you'll die by attendance.

Show Management Hurdle #2 — Shows tend to try to satisfy exhibitors based on unimportant criteria.

After a show is over, how do you measure exhibitor satisfaction? The typical show sends out questionnaires (sometimes with next year's renewal form - now there's a hoot), and asks such mundane questions as:

1. Please rate the General Contractor (scale 1-5)
2. Please rate the move-in, move-out (scale 1-5)
3. Please rate the bus transportation (scale 1-5)
4. Please rate the foodservice (scale 1-5)
5. How was our communication before the show? (scale 1-5)

Okay, now, let's take #4 as an example. The ratings come back. They're great. The average exhibitor rates food service at 4.3. Yippee, they're satisfied!

But these ratings are based on EXPECTATIONS, not importance. If we were to ask the exhibitors to base their rating of foodservice (scale 1-5) on *how important it was to the success of their show*, what would they say? I think we know the answer.

You see, the problem is that satisfied customers leave all the time. Remember snail mail? UPS? Fedex? Fax? Email? We were satisfied with each of these before the next came along.

The point is — trade shows can't survive in the long term with merely “satisfied” customers. You must literally develop evangelical exhibitors, who can clearly and measurably point to your show as helping them be more successful. And it's not enough to compare your show to other shows available to them. You must compare it to every other marketing tool out there. Let's say an exhibitor cuts his/her annual exhibiting schedule down from six shows a year to just one — yours. If another marketing tool comes along (better database marketing, cable TV, specialty trade magazine, the World Wide Web, etc.) and they decide to cut out trade shows ... well, it doesn't matter that you're the best. You're still out. You must make darn sure that your trade show is the best marketing tool overall.

And a big part of this is to manage your exhibitors' expectations. You need to work with them, almost individually, on a constant and continual basis. You need to educate and communicate with them a new definition of success — one that is based on **value**, not attendance.

Show Management Hurdle #3 — Communication with exhibitors and attendees is a oneway monologue.

I often ask exhibitors in my seminars to describe show management. Inevitably, one of the responses I get is — “real estate salespeople.” Their perception is that every communication

from you ASKS for something. Send in your application. Send in your check. Send in your forms for services (and don't forget the check). Send in your balance.

For the most part, the communications is more a monologue than a dialogue. Show managers need to do a better job of getting one-on-one with their exhibitor/customer. You need to learn what problems these people are facing. What their marketing strategy is for the next year or two. What new opportunities or challenges are these people facing in their daily battle to survive and thrive? How does your trade show help them to succeed?

Show Management Hurdle #4 — The “We gave a seminar once and nobody came, so we can't help them” attitude.

We leased a new copier this year for our office. After delivering and installing it, the salesperson took Teri and Kay through the ins and outs and how-tos of efficient operation. They learned about collating, duplexing, working with odd sizes, copying from a book, how to take care of jams, and who knows what else. The purpose was to make sure we were maximizing our investment and effectiveness with the copier. And after a week or two, he called to make sure we were totally satisfied and did we have any questions? He took the responsibility for our success with his product.

Why aren't *we* doing the same thing with our exhibitors? I'm not talking about the lipservice of sending out some copies of how-to-do-it articles or putting on a once-a-year seminar. I'm talking about a full-blown, year after year, permanent, one-on-one, handholding, take-responsibility-for-their-success attitude and implementation!! Your exhibitors are most likely the life blood of your organization. They very well may represent a disproportionate share of your organization's annual revenues and an even higher share of your annual profits. Because of this, it behooves show management to accept a large role in helping your exhibitors succeed. I'm amazed that exhibitors haven't demanded this type of customer service. How many associations and show management companies have multiple salespeople responsible for selling space, but then don't have anybody responsible for helping exhibitors succeed? Does something not seem right here?

With today's proliferation of extraordinary new techniques for helping corporations generate new customers ... with the pressing need for faster and more personalized communication ... with the advent of giant, new technological advances creating sophisticated marketing systems ... it requires a revolution of the way show managers relate to their exhibitors and attendees.

Are trade shows *too* complicated?

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