

Secrets To Successful Trade Show Marketing

Events and trade shows represent the channel sales and marketing people everywhere love to hate. High costs, LOTS of time (before and during the event), typically followed by less-than-exciting leads and few converted sales. But when executed well, events do have their place in delivering solid, profitable revenue. You just have to get a few things right.

In this report you'll learn specific best practices for increasing awareness, new leads and closed business from your next event—with proven ideas to put to work before, during and after the show. You will learn how to:

- Engage prospects and differentiate your business before you arrive
- Increase foot traffic and conversations at the booth without spending a dime
- Train all attending staff to maximize brand presence and lead capture
- Prepare for successful follow-up before the show begins
- Establish, track and report on the results and ROI of your event efforts

I hope these tips help you make better use of the time, resources and both hard and soft costs that go into making an event or trade show more profitable to your business. If you have any questions or want to talk more about how these tips apply specifically to your organization, please don't hesitate to reach out.

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How To Profitably Generate Leads and Sales From Trade Shows

Trade shows represent the marketing channel sales and marketing people everywhere love to hate. High costs, LOTS of time (before and during the event), typically followed by less-than-exciting leads and few converted sales.

But as much as I also typically shy away from trade shows as a front-line marketing channel for demand generation, they do have their place in delivering solid, profitable revenue. You just have to get a few things right. This list is by no means exhaustive, but it's a start in the right direction.

Pre-show expectations: First and foremost, make sure you understand what trade shows can do, and what they likely cannot do. Trade shows are busy, attendees are scattered and flustered on the show floor, so having a lot of high-quality conversations that lead to short-term revenue isn't likely the expectation you want to set. Fast deals are bluebirds, with the majority of attendees earlier in the buying cycle, which means a longer lead time to being ready for your sales pipeline. Most trade show revenue, therefore, will be long term. Go into the show with that mindset and you're already a step ahead.

Establish and estimate required ROI: Before going any further, do the napkin math to make sure your fully-burdened spend (including out-of-pocket budget, travel costs, as well as the opportunity cost of the team's time) is worth the expected sales. Know up front, before the show is green-lighted, whether it has a chance of being a profitable effort, ideally with an expectation of exactly how many sales need to come directly from attendees. More often than not, this ROI will either keep you from wasting further time on a show that's destined to be a failure, or at minimum will give you guidance on the investment and strategy required to make it a success.

Pre-show buzz and "appointments": Get a copy of the attendee list if possible, and give expected booth visitors—before they're inundated with messages at the show—a reason to stop by. This is where knowing your audience and their pain points can make it easy to map that knowledge to an offer or message that prioritizes a trip to your booth over others. If they plan for it, they're more likely to not only stop by, but invest a little more time in your presentation.

How you approach prospects: At the show itself, how do you engage traffic? How do you get browsers to break their gait, pause in front of your booth, and engage with your staff? What message or offer can your booth staff deliver in three seconds or less to a passing attendee that will get at least 50 percent of them to stop? It's likely something related to your value proposition—a sample, a no-risk trial, or even a challenge. These types of offers will likely generate the most visitors and better prospects.

After-show follow-up: Sadly, this step is ignored, forgotten or just plain dropped by many sales and marketing teams. But it's arguably the most important step of all. You've just invested a significant amount of time and money to capture sales leads early in their purchase cycle. At the show itself, they were overwhelmed with messages. And few of the other exhibitors will do anything coordinated to follow up. Think in advance, before you attend the show, what you want your follow-up to look like. Whether it's all from marketing, or combined with some sales team follow-up directly, plan for this in advance so your team can hit the ground running as soon as the show is over. Even if you decide to give attendees a day or two to get home first, having this done beforehand will ensure the plan is well executed and measured.

Nurture nurture nurture: Knowing these leads are early in their buying cycle, make sure they are added to your broader lead nurturing efforts. If you don't have one, come up with a plan that "touches" these leads on a regular basis with relevant information, messaging and offers to ensure you stay top of mind well after the show. If you made a good first impression at the booth, that's a great start. If you fail to follow up and build momentum on that early start after the show, your expected ROI will fall as well.

Track results regularly and long-term: If you know going in that collected leads will likely take longer to close, you're less likely to deem the event a failure after just 30 days of follow-up. But no matter how long your sales cycle, measuring conversion and close results from collected leads is critical. If you're a Salesforce.com user, putting all collected leads into a unique Campaign is your best choice. But no matter what you use, have the patience and discipline to watch conversion over time.

29 Tips For Making the Most Of Your Next Trade Show

These ideas are tactical, and don't equally apply to everyone, but something here should spark or accelerate awareness, interest, demand and sales from your next event or trade show.

Before the Show

Objective: Get people to the booth. Create awareness and recognition so that people recognize your company on the showroom floor and stop at your booth as they walk the exhibit hall. Here are some suggestions for how to strategically do this:

- Get a list of expected attendees.
- Target customers you'd like to work with or learn more about, send them an invitation to visit you at the show. Include your booth number.
- Do a pre-show email and/or offer to expected attendees.
- Let people know your Twitter handle, and that you will be tweeting during the show.
- Get on the pre-show promotions list on the Web site.
- Consider joint offers with other exhibitors—are there a couple of complimentary exhibitors you could partner with in advance to drive traffic to your site?
- Know what exhibitors are around your booth. Does it make sense to contact them and collaborate on a way to get people to both booths?
- Let your website visitors know that you will be at the show.
- Come up with creative ideas to get visitors to prioritize your booth. Maybe offer to validate their parking?
- Compile examples and stories of other customers making good \$\$ using your product in their space (online or offline).
- This could be the most important piece of all this; demonstrating directly to prospective buyers that this works in retail, that it's profitable, and that it's a safe bet to try it in their space.

At the Show

Objective: Make as many contacts as possible, collect as many emails as possible.

- Offer a show discount. XX percent off if customers place their order at the show.
- Drop business cards in a fishbowl for a prize.
- Offer free samples to all registered buyers.
- Have contact or order forms available for when you have more in depth conversations.
- Run a game to get people to stop at the booth.

- Build a quick-and-easy-to-read one-sheet to educate show goers on the ease and profitability of using your product. This should be the type of document that stops people in their tracks. They immediately see the value of using the product and want to talk with you to order.
- In the collateral, offer usage scenarios.
- Have a current customer join you at the booth and be a live testimonial. Alternatively, write up a one-sheet with customer testimonials or case studies of successful retailers who use the product.
- Get social media ID from all attendees (twitter handle, Facebook, etc.).
- Hire a college kid to hand something out at the door or near the registration table to draw attendees to your booth.
- Tweet during the show and invite followers to come by your booth.
- If sales are slow, send out an offer via Twitter, "the next five people to show up at the booth get XXX in addition to the show discount."

After the Show

Objective: Create long-term, lasting relationships with prospects that showed interest; build/expand the sales pipeline.

- Thank you to those who purchased at the show.
- For those that did not order at the show, categorize and prioritize leads.
- Follow-up immediately with personal emails and/or calls to "hottest" buyers.
- For other leads, it may make sense to prep something in advance in order to send a message out as soon as possible after the show. Speed is very important. Buyers have met a lot of people at the show, and you want them to remember you.
- Review your pre-show targeted list of attendees. Were there people that you did not get to meet, or collect contact information from? Consider a separate "Sorry we missed you" message with an offer to get a demo or presentation at their convenience.
- Gather their social media presence (Twitter, blog feeds, etc.) and follow, retweet and respond to them moving forward.
- Keep all contact information in your CRM and use for future e-newsletters, email drip campaigns, etc. Be sure to collect and maintain their permission to be emailed.

Trade Show Booth Best Practices: Observations From Dreamforce

I'm among more than 30,000 people that attended the 2010 Dreamforce conference, and it's as nuts as you would imagine. I had some time to check out many of the vendors, new technology and emerging SaaS businesses on the trade show floor.

I learned a lot, both based on what they're doing as well as how they handled prospective customers walking by. A booth space at Dreamforce costs a LOT of money, so I was interested in seeing how some companies capitalized on the opportunity, and how others let subtle things impact their ability to capture and engage prospects.

Here are some of my observations—good and bad alike.

The Good

Making eye contact and saying hello. The best booth staffers were engaged, scanning the crowd, and being proactive at making direct eye contact and greeting visitors. This was a great way to get myself and others to break their stride, pause for a moment, return the salutation, and start to engage on what they do. Many booths failed to do this. Eyes down and watching your Blackberry is not a good way to get prospects.

Script the first five seconds. It was very clear which booths had thought beforehand about their value proposition, and what specific handful of words would get the most visitors to say “wow, tell me more.” Your first few words, those first five seconds of your introduction, will help me decide if I'm going to learn more or move on.

State your benefits in bold letters. If I'm walking by, deciding which booth to visit, I need a reason to stop. If I'm scanning the booth, I want to see words that imply what I'll achieve by working with you. I don't want you to tell me you're a cloud-based application. I don't need a list of features. What will it do for me? Why should I take the time to learn more? It's part of the hook, part of getting prospects to stop and engage.

Move longer conversations out of traffic flow. Especially in a crowded exhibit hall, once you've identified someone who wants to learn more or see a demo, get them out of the aisle and into your booth. Move there somewhere you can have a more direct, less-distracted conversation. This will add more value to that deeper conversation, plus allow more prospects in the flow of traffic to walk by and engage with others working your booth.

Value-added takeaways. The best booths at Dreamforce offered a book, a how-to guide, a sales automation or nurture marketing cheat-sheet, something of independent but related value that will make me smarter. I don't want to take home a bunch of brochures, that's what Web sites are for when I'm back at the office. Give me something I want to read on the plane home, something that will teach me and demonstrate how much more you can teach me if we keep working together.

The Bad

Scanning badges without context. Unfortunately, “can I scan your badge?” isn't a good example of the scripted five seconds referenced above. Offer me some value in exchange for the scan. Even if it's just to enter a drawing for an iPad, at least I understand the value being exchanged. If you want to add me to your mailing list, promise me something valuable in return. Email tips on sales automation, for example.

Failing to qualify. If you don't know who I am, what I do, what I need, how do you know it's worth giving me a five minute deep-dive on your product? Not every booth visitor is a good lead, not every booth visitor should be pitched the same way. Know my role and my objective first.

Scanning for someone better. If I'm talking to you, at least pretend that you're interested in our conversation. It's obvious when you're scanning to see if someone better walks by.

Ignoring loiterers. If I pause on my own, stop and stare at your booth on my own, I'm interested. I don't understand why I'm not immediately engaged with a handshake and welcome, especially when booth staffers are looking at and around me anyway. If you're already busy giving a demo to someone else, take a quick moment to welcome me into the conversation. Make me feel welcome, otherwise I'm likely to move on.

Check your email. We've all done this at trade show booths. It's bad. If you really must check your email, make sure your booth is staffed by someone else and walk a few feet away to do your business.

Brag about your hangover. It's not a badge of honor. Yes, we may all have had too much fun last night. But you're here this morning to work.

The Most Important Part Of Event Marketing

Two months after the Dreamforce show, the full messenger bag I brought back still sat untouched in my office. Unopened. Forgotten. Full of collateral, sales sheets, white papers, who knows what else.

The conference itself was fantastic. Great speakers, great networking, many interesting exhibitors. I followed up with a few I had particular interest in, but quickly forgot about the rest as I settled back into my regular routine.

Any of us who attend trade shows or events develop temporary Attention Deficit Disorder. It's impossible to avoid. Hundreds of booths vying for your attention, in between meeting after meeting. Then you hit the party circuit, get a couple hours of sleep, and do it again.

There's no way you can remember everybody, everything. All that money spent by sponsors and exhibitors to get your attention. And it worked. At least it worked at the time.

I had a bag full of collateral from I don't know how many vendors. A stack of business cards from vendors who told me they'd follow up.

All that time, energy and money to engage me at the show. And how many followed up? Not many. Not enough.

The most important part of event marketing happens after the event. You've made your impression. Now, after the dust has settled, make sure you capitalize and convert.

How to Manage and Measure ROI From Events and Tradeshows

Marketers today measure everything. We want to know, in real-time, how well something's doing, who responded, how much money we made.

The instant-gratification channels we increasingly use at the core of our marketing mix lend themselves to this. We have more tools to manage and measure our marketing than ever before.

And then there are trade shows.

Trade shows and events in general are among the most expensive and least monetized marketing channels we have. It's not just the cost of the booth. It's the soft cost of all the time marketing spends getting ready for and executing the show. All the time your salespeople are away from the phones and shuffling their feet in the booth.

Few organizations count up the total cost of shows, and even if they did, most couldn't tell you if they made their money back, let alone made the event profitable.

Too often, ROI on an event comes up after the fact. When all is said and done, someone asks if it was worth it.

Well, was it? And by who's definition? Would you do it again? Should you do 10 more of them?

Managing and measuring ROI on your next event starts well before you get there. Here are a few tips to do it right the next time.

Define clearly what success looks like first. There should be a sales or marketing objective independent of the event that is different than your pre-show expectations. The event, after all, is just a channel. So, why are you doing it in the first place? Is it about sales? Awareness? Satisfying a partner relationship? Know the objective up front, and then decide what specifically success looks like.

Don't do it alone. Get the event's key stakeholders on board with that definition—before you plan, before you commit. If there's disagreement early about the objectives, it's good you got that out early vs. hearing about it the day you get back.

Triage the slippery slope of ideas based on your goals. Events and trade shows have a way of getting out of control quickly. The sales team wants tickets to the customer-only exclusive event. Then they want to sponsor it. Meanwhile, a partner wants you to go in on an awards

reception sponsorship and your biz dev guy says it's critical to a pending deal.

These things may be true, but are they priorities? Are they core to the reason you're going, and the means by which you'll measure success? These aren't easy conversations to have, but if your plan is rooted in a universally-understood set of objectives, it gets a lot easier to say no to the peripheral tactics that will only take your focus away from the more important work.

Establish immediate and longer-term measures of success. Someone's going to want to know if the show was successful the day you get back. Depending on your objectives or what you're selling, that may not be entirely possible.

If the show was about making a partner happy, you can usually do that temperature check right away. If you're selling impulse-buy products on-location, same thing. But if you're working long sales cycles, the show may be more about making good impressions and capturing leads.

And that's OK as an immediate measure of success. Just make sure there are farther-out measures you're managing as well. Leads should turn into opportunities, which should eventually turn into closed deals. How many opportunities and closed sales do you need from the show after XX weeks or months?

Knowing that number, and setting the expectation that you'll measure it not the next day but in due time, helps set expectations and establish post-show milestones for evaluating effectiveness.

Plan your post-show activities before you leave. It's highly likely that your show or event ROI is contingent on significant post-show activity. Lead follow-up, the sales team following through on commitments they made to prospects at the booth, etc.

Most organizations don't think much about these activities until they're back—when they're tired, less focused, and likely starting to think about the next thing on their plate. If you not only plan for but prepare post-show activities as part of your pre-show work (literally build it into your project plan), it's far more likely to happen—quickly and completely. No matter how you're measuring ROI from a show, this is critical.

Templatize a post-event ROI report. Do this before you leave as well. It can be a simple one-page Word doc or short PowerPoint presentation. If you've established success criteria up front, circle back and at the right intervals (within a day or two, at the time you will measure pipeline contribution, etc.) with a quantifiable report and update.

Your executives will appreciate the follow-up, will appreciate how quantifiable you've made the event evaluation, and will be far more likely to approve event expenditures in the future if they have the confidence that 1) it will be profitable, and 2) you're responsible enough to know whether it is or not.



More Information About Us

About Matt Heinz

Matt Heinz is the Founder and President of Heinz Marketing Inc. Matt brings more than 12 years of marketing, business development and sales experience from a variety of organizations, vertical industries and company sizes. His career has focused on delivering measurable results for his employers and clients in the way of greater sales, revenue growth, product success and customer loyalty.

About Heinz Marketing

Heinz Marketing is a Seattle marketing agency focused on sales acceleration. Heinz Marketing helps clients achieve sustained sales success by growing revenue from existing customers and cost effectively identifying and winning new customers.

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