



Trade Show Strategies

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Trade shows and vendor fairs are basically marketing vehicles for business development. One could, therefore, assume that the most effective trade show strategy is the one that will produce the most traffic and generate the most leads.

Vendor booths at regional convention centers are filled with outstretched arms and Cheshire cat smiles, as sellers repeatedly tell their corporate stories to cautious passers by. If this sounds familiar, I might recommend a few small adjustments in strategy that will significantly increase the return you can expect on these investments.

The selling activity that occurs within a vendor booth at a local or national trade show is a microcosm of the everyday strategic sales process. In a typical sale, sellers reach out to potential buyers hoping to create sparks of interest that will lead to the pursuit of mutually beneficial business relationships. From there, the salesperson must establish credibility, understand the customer's needs, convey the value of their solutions, and secure a commitment from prospects to move forward with an appropriate next step.

Vendor representatives in various trade show venues strive to perform all these functions, albeit you must execute within a much condensed window of opportunity and time. Sometimes these booths are manned (or women-ed) by experienced sales professionals who have a personal stake in generating lots of leads. Other times, there is an 'all hands on deck' mentality as companies staff their respective venues with people who would otherwise serve a customer service, marketing, or operations role, in addition to having repre-

sentation from management or the executive team.

Small organizations are often content to display their wares in an 8' x 10' booth with a single skirted table in front of a logo'ed backdrop complete with colorful signage. Meanwhile, large anchor corporations in the industry often go all-out to make a significant impact and create a 'best in show' atmosphere, hoping to provide a must-see destination for trade show participants. In either case, these booths are always well stocked with corporate brochures, buttons, bags, business cards, in addition to gadgets and gizmos that vendors freely give away to people who visit their booth.

After you finish reading *The Complete Guide to Selling Yourself*, I suspect that your perspective on selling has changed forever. This may pose an interesting challenge for the rest of the sales team at your next industry conference or trade show. My premise throughout the book is predicated on the belief that the person representing a product or service is just as important as the value proposition itself. In terms of your booth presence, this means that the perception people form about your company and value will be based on the impressions they form about whomever they happen to meet in those fleeting moments as they glide past your booth.

As you might guess, giving stuff away is not the point of a trade show. It has become customary to offer chotskis to passers by as a way to drive traffic into your booth, but just handing out trinkets doesn't necessarily produce quality leads. I understand that there some inherent marketing benefits like



name recognition and branding that come from just being there, but my preference as a salesperson would be to come away from these trade shows with a pipeline full of potential business opportunities. To accomplish this objective, some selling needs to occur in the booth.

Where you will face the biggest challenge in terms of making sure everyone is on the same page is in the positioning of your product or service. Most salespeople gravitate naturally to an

S-P-A style of selling, as we talked about in Chapter 3. If a prospective customer says, "I'd like to hear more about the new announcements," they are more than ready to jump into an elevator pitch describing all the features and benefits of their new products. The same tendency happens in almost every job interview, when the hiring manager says, "Tell me about yourself," and the candidate starts telling about themselves.

As a way to counteract this tendency, sales leaders often encourage booth workers to lots of ask questions, in order to try and qualify the prospect. This strategy may work great with a naturally chatty person who is ambling through the aisles looking for a friend. Key decision makers who attend these conferences and trade shows tend to be a much tougher lot, however, starting with the fact that decision makers are always easy to identify. In many cases, they look and act like regular people, and regular people are often reluctant to share with someone they don't yet know or trust. So, what do you suppose happens when a smiling vendor representative starts in asking a bunch of qualifying sales questions to a cautious person? You guessed it, they

clam up. After a bit of an awkward moment and a quick dump of product info, you stand with a colleague as the prospect quietly saunters on down the aisle and into the next booth.

It's no longer enough to instruct your booth team to ask lots of questions. While this approach might work with some fraction of trade show participants who are

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naturally open and receptive, it isn't necessarily the most productive strategy for engaging new prospects and qualifying potential leads. Instead, you can significantly improve your company's performance and return on investment by coaching the entire booth staff on a few key techniques from the methodology that are particularly valuable when implemented at tradeshow.

Trade Show Strategy #1: Bond with people on (P)

The first step to filling the booth with potential customers is to leverage curiosity to pique the prospect's interest. Just like in a regular sales call, if someone is not the least bit curious about who you are or what you can do for them, they won't want to spend any time with you. Fortunately, as they become more curious, you get more mindshare with potential buyers. But, if I were to make a global observation, I would say that the typical vendor representative does more to satisfy a prospect's curiosity than create it. Perhaps this shouldn't be a surprise since other than Question Based Selling, no one really talks about the importance of curiosity in the strategic sales process.

For example, if your role at the trade show is to invite people (or, should I say drag them) into your company's booth, then here is an opening line that works really well at a trade show.

Vendor: “Are you familiar with (company or product)?”

If you represent a smaller or lesser known company, you put a pleasant expression on your face and ask passers by, “Are you familiar with XYZ Company?” Nine times out of ten, this question stops people in their tracks. Unless they are preoccupied or hurrying off to another engagement, they will pause and answer the question you just posed. Do people like it when you show interest in them? The answer is, yes-absolutely.

After posing the question, if the prospect is indeed familiar with your company, in addition to responding in the affirmative, they will likely rattle off a few factoids to demonstrate their insight. Do people like to be seen as knowledgeable? The answer is, yes-again. This is good news because you can glean a great deal about the customer's current perceptions by the type of information they share.

If the prospect does not happen to be familiar with your company, the cool part about this opening salvo is that it would be very rare for someone attending a trade show to just say, “No,” and then walk away. Instead, a predictable pause that follows their response, which gives you a wonderful opportunity for you to advance to question #2 of this initial exchange.

Note that if you work for an industry leading internationally known company like Microsoft, US Steel, Coca-Cola, American Airlines, Hewlett-Packard, Cisco, or IBM, it wouldn't sound right to ask passers by if they have heard of your company. Instead of asking if they are familiar with the company, you can apply the same strategy by asking, “Are you familiar with our new _____

product?” The answer at that point will either be, “Yes, I am (blah, blah, blah),” or, “No, I’m not (pause).” Either way you end up in the same place, perfectly poised to move onto question #2.

The next thing out of my mouth would be a problem solving statement followed by a question inviting a more in depth conversation. The exchange might sound like this:

Vendor: “Are you familiar with Stephenson windows?”

Prospect: “I’ve heard about your products a little bit.”

Vendor: “Well, our new line of products basically solves the problems that traditional window manufacturers have created over the last twenty years. Would you like to know how we do it?”

It will forever be the case that you bond with people on their problems, not your solutions. You solve the problems traditional window manufacturers have created for the last twenty years? Homeowners attending a home improvements show, for example, would absolutely want to know, “What problems do you mean, and how do you solve them?” Bingo!

With this approach, I’m not asking people to commit hours of time. I’m merely planting the seed that we have a competitive advantage, and then I essentially offer to pull back the curtains and show the customer how we do it.

Without hurrying, you can easily deliver these two questions in ten seconds or less. Speed is not the goal. But, since cautious customers are usually stingy with their time, you better do something to pique their curiosity early in the conversation or they’ll be gone.

Trade Show Strategy #2: Manufacturing Mini-invitations

The days of shoving products and services down customer’s throats are definitely over. People do like to make buying decisions, but most customers don’t like to be “sold.” Most decision makers do not wish to be told, pushed, probed, prodded, or persuaded either. At this point in our cultural existence, the typical prospect’s natural defense mechanisms are already set on full alert toward vendors they don’t yet know or trust. Knowing this, you better do something, again within a short time window, to knock down these walls if you want an audience that will be receptive to your message, or you want them to share information about their needs. As a red carpet into needs development, you simply ask,

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Prospect: “I’ve heard about your products a little bit.”

Vendor: “Well, our new line of products basically solves the problems that traditional window manufacturers have created over the last twenty years. Would you like to know how we do it?”

Prospect: “Sure.”

Vendor: “Can I ask you a couple specifics about _____?”

Prospect: “Go right ahead.”

Before you start spewing features and benefits, it’s always appropriate to ask relevant questions about the status of the customer’s current situation in order to give them more valuable information. We talked about this in Chapter 4 when I introduced the whole concept of Conversational Dynamics. Be careful, however, to stress the need for precision when asking this question, especially to someone who is not

familiar with the methodology. For example, I don't say, "I'd like to ask you a couple specifics about _____."

My goal when using this technique is to manufacture a mini-invitation. Once someone invites you to ask them questions, when you do, you will get more information in more depth, and the information they share also tends to be more accurate. Basically, because of your words, the customer is now saying, "Could you please

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ask me a series of relevant questions so you can put your solutions in a context that will be more relevant and valuable?" Once you have the customer's permission to ask questions, you will have all kinds of opportunities to identify potential needs and qualify the opportunity-starting with a series of Diagnostic Questions.

What questions should you then ask? One of the homework assignments in the book was to build a repository of possible business issues and implications that might be important to a customer. This will help with needs development. Another homework assignment was to create a list of possible diagnostic questions that you could ask to kick-off the discovery conversation and establish your own credibility. Part of being committed to your craft includes making this information top-of-mind so you can facilitate more in-depth conversations without sounding like every other salesperson on the floor of the trade show.

If there are people working in the booth who are not in sales and would not have committed this information to memory, you would be smart to have a pre-show strategy session to explain the logic behind these

strategies, as opposed to just giving them a handful of one-liners to use when talking with prospects who visit your booth.

Trade Show Strategy #3: Securing Commitments

You might close some business during a trade show, but in most cases, it's all about getting quality leads. Do you know what I hated when I was in sales? I despised having to call a fishbowl full of names as a follow up activity after a trade show. Talk about cold calls. Me and hundreds of other vendors would pound the phones the week or two after the event, and frankly, most prospect didn't even remember visiting our particular booth. Guess what I despise even more-being on the receiving end of these same calls from vendors now that I attend some of these events.

If you pique the prospect's interest by the taking about the problems you solve, and you earn the right to get into a discussion about their environment and needs, I would strongly recommend that you should try and close on a commitment right then and there. I'm not suggesting that you ask for their first-born son. I just want to make sure I establish a reason to follow up with them in order to avoid having to start back at square one by lobbing a cold call into their account following the show.

The justification for a follow up call or meeting is actually pretty straight forward-to put together a specific proposal, or get back to them to have a more in-depth conversation about how your prospect or service could address their needs. Using the same phraseology we talked about in Chapter 10 with regard to Wrapping up the Sale, you simply say:

Seller: "Mr. Prospect, if you are interested in ____, ____, and ____, and those are some of the exact problems that we address, would it make sense for us to schedule a time

where we could get the appropriate people to sit down in front of a whiteboard, or on a conference call, roll up our sleeves, and show you in detail how this idea would impact your business?”

If they have their calendar handy, it's possible that you can schedule a time on the spot. Scheduling a specific time for a follow up meeting is a bonus. My main purpose at this point in the dialogue is to justify a subsequent event after the trade show and secure an invitation from the prospect that makes it easy to re-engage.

Pulling it all Together

Whew! There's a lot to think about to effectively differentiate yourself at a trade show, especially for an inexperienced salesperson or the long-timer whose habits are deeply engrained. Not really, though. If I strip away all the supporting logic, our strategy basically boils down to four simple questions:

- A.)** “Are you familiar with (company or product)?”
- B.)** “Well, our new line of products basically solves the problems that traditional _____ have created over the last twenty years. Would you like to know how we do it?”
- C.)** “Can I ask you a couple specifics about _____?”
- D.)** “Mr. Prospect, if you are interested in ____, ____, and ____, and those are some of the exact problems that we address, would it make sense for us to schedule a time where we could get the appropriate people to sit down in front of a whiteboard, or on a conference call, roll up our sleeves, and show you in detail how this idea would impact your business?”

When I deliver a QBS training programs to a “live” audience, I always recommend that students should let logic be their guide. It's a mistake to keep doing the same thing time after time just because it may be familiar to you. A similar mistake would be to avoid a logical progression like the one above just because it's not yet engrained.

You may have to pay attention the first time you implement something from this book. That's okay; Tiger Woods always hits a bucket full of practice balls before heading to the first tee. If it works according to plan, it should be exponentially easier to execute the same strategy next time. The third time is the charm, however, because that's when a successful technique starts to become a habit.

Good luck and good selling. I will look forward to seeing you ‘in action’ next time I pass by your booth.

Excerpt from Tom Freese's new book, The Complete Guide to Selling yourself, to be released Spring '09.

