

Exhibit yourself!

or

How to enjoy and get the most out of your Trade Show presence

by

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Most readers will be familiar with the business phenomenon called Trade Shows, Fairs or Exhibitions – present-day versions of traditional markets still found all over the world in villages, towns and cities... It's the old story of 'see and be seen', but with the concrete goal of promoting your products and services (if selling), and looking for opportunities (if buying). In some countries like the USA this village market has virtually disappeared, being replaced on the one hand by car boot sales and on the other hand by internet activities.

Common truths

Nevertheless it all comes down to some basic rules:

- who wants what from whom
- who needs what the most
- what is the buyer prepared to pay
- at what price is the seller willing to sell

And, to a greater or lesser degree:

- do the two parties trust each other sufficiently

Significant investment

Let's take the situation where you and your company participate in a Trade Show. It's a considerable investment in time, energy, money and manpower. We'll leave aside for the moment whether you buy or rent a stand, which country and culture it concerns, and hundreds of other variables. What remains fundamental is that it's your opportunity for you and your staff to meet prospective clients. It's also an important opportunity to invite existing clients to your stand.

Looking after people

It all boils down to 'people business'. Those you already do business with want to feel appreciated, so it's up to you to look after them in a suitable fashion. Besides, their enthusiastic presence at your stand will stimulate both your staff *and* attract other visitors, too.

Here are some insights and tips which either you'll may recognise (give yourself a pat on the shoulder!) or which will help you to make the most out of your stand presence:

- Differentiate the different type of visitor as soon as possible. There are, for example, those who:

- genuinely want to enrich themselves and find out how you and your company can solve their problems
- are just having a day out, and enjoy the bustle of the event (some of these may be pickpockets, too)
- are consciously looking for solutions to problems they're not even sure they have, but come to such events precisely in order to have their creativity stimulated
- are existing clients or business contacts who want to feel appreciated
- for whatever reason want to prove that *they* are already experts on the subject.

You'll understand that each category requires differing degrees of attention *and* firm treatment if you want to use your time efficiently and effectively.

Presenting the right image

Every aspect of your stand, including advertising, business cards, display materials, brochures... even the clothing worn by your personnel... *must* be consistent with and reflect your company's desired image. Take a moment to make a note for yourself of *seven* key descriptions of how you want yourself and your company to be seen.

Expect to use expressions such as: 'the best', high-tech, friendly, successful, innovative, efficient, professional, reliable... When you have your list, look at how you can express these points practically.

Examples:

→ friendly: make sure your stand personnel look and feel happy and comfortable and are willing to welcome visitors with a smile and a handshake, or whatever is appropriate in your culture; dare to give your name, and *use* the other's name in the conversation

→ professional: everything on the stand *must* work; if you're showing a video or presenting a slideshow, there is no excuse for defective equipment; there should be enough business cards (*tip*: have some specially printed for the event, with the name and date of the event added); the behaviour of your staff should give this impression, which means, for example, *no* slouching around with the arms folded, and *no* eating on the stand; and they must *show interest* in their guest by *asking questions*

Every aspect of your *desired image* can be used to check every aspect of your *stand presence*. Use it as a tool to your advantage.

The right questions

It seems so easy, and every salesperson has at some time been trained in how to ask questions. The problem is that not everyone who mans a stand *is* a properly trained salesperson!

For all practical purposes here we can distinguish these categories of question:

→ The closed question:

Is there any specific feature you're looking for within this range of products?

Do you have any colleagues who would be interested in this equipment?

The trick is to ask questions which are positive (that is, negative words such as 'not', 'never' are absent) and to which you can generally expect a positive ('yes') answer. Getting the visitor to say 'yes' is a great way of helping him to relax and feel comfortable with you!

→ The open question:

Which parameters do you consider essential for your quality control?

How large is your production facility?

These questions are designed to get the other talking freely and to elicit information. You can ruin the effect by interrupting and not listening attentively or by looking around (at whatever's happening on the stand) while he's talking. And you can score by maintaining eye contact (unless your culture proscribes this), smiling, nodding gently, saying "Yes...", "Aha..." and, when he pauses, by *waiting* and then stimulating him to continue by repeating one or two words from what he has just said *in a questioning tone*: "Expansion plans...?"

Tip: avoid 'why?' questions – there is a risk that the other could feel he has to explain himself or his actions in some way. Better is to rephrase, so that instead of: "Why are you using such-and-such machines?" you would ask: "Are there any special reasons for continuing to operate such-and-such machines?"

→ The rhetorical question:

And what makes this model so different from the previous versions? [slight pause] Well, as you can see here...

This question style attracts the other's attention but gives him no time to answer, yet gives you the perfect introduction for your following selling point. What's interesting is that here you *can* use the 'why?' question, because *you* give the answer!

Tip: when using the rhetorical question it is better at that moment to avoid direct eye contact so as to discourage the other's answer!

Different strokes for different folks

There are many so-called *typologies*, which help you to assess very quickly what type of person you're dealing with and what his needs are. NLP, Myers-Briggs, Enneagram, Psychographics, Six Coloured Hats... the list is extensive and training bureaus thrive on promoting *their* version. Experienced salespeople tend to develop a sixth sense that enables them to tune in immediately to the signals in language and non-verbal signals they receive, and to respond in kind. That is, they are flexible and work instinctively towards the essential click of a successful business relationship.

Here are two clear tips for less experienced professionals:

→ A visitor asks directly in a clear voice: "Tell me precisely what makes your equipment so good." You see: it's not even a *question*, but a command! You'd better be equally clear, direct and to-the-point in your answer – after he's satisfied that's when you take the opportunity of asking him about the relevance of this information to him and his work. With this person you should stand face-to-face and not too close.

→ The visitor is quiet and hesitant, even seeming rather shy. This is an invitation to approach him gently, standing a little aside, avoiding eye contact at first, and greeting him softly. Take your time, give this person plenty of space as you need to encourage his interest and make him feel comfortable (safe) with you.

These two extremes are just an indication of the potential complexity of stand behaviour at Trade Shows. Remember that although training may be an expense, *not* training could well prove *more* expensive!

Some last thoughts

→ Visitors come to Trade Shows for themselves, not for you.

→ Everyone wants to be validated as a human being, and everyone is looking for a solution to his problem – these two essentials govern *all* human interactions.

→ Everyone is looking for ways to get better, richer, become more successful, healthier...

→ As Robert Louis Stevenson, author of *Treasure Island*, wrote: "Everyone is *always* selling *something*."

→ Trade Shows are there to see and be seen, and it's up to you to make the most of every contact you make. Learn from the sad statistic that fewer than 50% of all contacts made at Trade Shows are ever followed up on!

Have fun!