Promotional Activity

Trade Shows Reimagined

Six Tips for a Successful Trade Show Journey

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More than just a destination, successful trade show management is all about the trip.

Imagine you’re preparing for your dream vacation. Before setting your Out of Office message in your email, you thought ahead. You researched and planned. Maybe you developed a detailed itinerary, coordinated with travel companions, or lined up a pet sitter.

Apply this same scenario to your trade show planning. Each show is a journey, from preshow marketing to postshow evaluations. Planning, organizing, and follow-up are vital to maximizing your investment as costs for registrations, travel, displays, giveaways, and more add up quickly.

In a November 2018 survey of SMPS members, we asked A/E/C marketers about their trade show experiences. By applying modern trade show practices and tools identified through our survey, marketers can transform their conference processes, achieve business goals, and make a lasting impact on their firms. We hope you’ll use these results to transform your own journey.

We Are Different and Alike

Roles and participation in a trade show can vary, and our survey reflected the many hats we wear. We received 157 responses, and of them, 132 identified as exhibitors and 119 as attendees—signifying that our roles change from show to show.

Survey participants came from large and small firms, and their trade show budgets ranged from the thousands into the millions. Despite these differences, participants are driven by an overarching...
What is the size of your firm?

- Did not identify: 40%
- Small firms (less than 100 full-time employees): 65%
- Medium/large firms (more than 100 full-time employees): 52%

What is your trade show marketing budget?

Responding firms spent an average of $50,000 on trade show marketing per year.

% of marketing budget spent on trade shows

- 0% to 19%: 77%
- 20% to 39%: 11%
- 40% to 59%: 11%
- 60% to 79%: 9%
- 80% to 99%: 5%
- 100%: 6%
- Did not identify: 8%

ABOUT THE SURVEY RESPONDENTS

As a relationship-based industry, keeping our sales staff and experts visible is critical," reported Alyssa Scheuneman, marketing manager with MSA Professional Services, Inc., in Champaign, IL.

The Big Miss

Passing out business cards and amassing a database of juicy leads isn’t the end of the story. How we plan, operate at the show, measure results, and follow up can make or break the investment. Research shows that we have plenty of room for improvement in these areas.

At the preshow stage, we found that marketers often prioritize activities that are not as important to attendees. For instance, marketers tend to place more emphasis on self-promotion—social media buzz, advertising, and selecting promotional items—and less focus on what drives attendees—personal outreach and prescheduled meetings. Knowing this, exhibitors have an opportunity to equally invest in scheduling meetings with clients and contacts, extending personal invitations to visit their exhibit booths.

Deciding what shows to attend in the first place offers another area of improvement. Results showed that 72% of survey participants do not have a go/no-go process for this. Is your company attending legacy trade shows because they’ve been on the list for decades?

Driving Success

Fast forward to the end of the show. Following up with leads tops the list for exhibitors and attendees alike. The trouble is, we aren’t necessarily following up.

Two-thirds of respondents do not conduct a post-conference debrief. If we aren’t evaluating outcomes, how do we know what we did well, where to improve, and who is accountable for action items? To that end, a mere 11% of respondents use a quantitative measurement to assess trade show ROI. While such metrics are a challenge, that doesn’t mean we should give up. Developing a system to capture hard data is not only achievable but also essential.

“It is also important to have more discussions on whether the conferences we attend are valuable, so we have more of a business case for which to attend;” said Kara Chiccarelli, CPSM, northeast regional marketing and proposal manager with Skanska USA Civil in Waltham, MA.

Delivering Value

A good trade show experience can bring value to your firm, connect you with decision-makers, provide opportunities to gain competitive intelligence, introduce your firm to new potential clients, and propel your brand forward.

Our research points to six key implementation areas to make the most of your firm’s investments. Just like your vacation planning, doing it right can reap big rewards.
1. Implement a go/no-go process. As marketing leaders, we must be judicious with investments of both time and money. With 72% of survey respondents noting a lack of an official framework for making decisions, this is a big opportunity to inject strategy into your trade show program.

2. Define marketing objectives. A full 42% of respondents cited a lack of focus and goals as a trade show challenge. Identify why you’re going, what the firm wants to get out of it, and tie all activities back to those goals.

3. Establish business development objectives. When it comes to priorities, exhibitors and attendees are out of alignment. Research shows attendees care most about personal invitations to visit a booth, prescheduling meetings, and networking. A strong business development plan specific to the event bridges that gap.

4. Hold a post-event debrief and define action items. Marketers indicate that follow-up is important, but only 26% of survey respondents are conducting holistic debriefs. Use this debrief time to examine and discuss how trade show happenings aligned with strategic goals for the event. Document next steps with leads, assign responsibilities, and establish deadlines.

5. Develop processes to measure trade show performance. A hefty 89% of respondents have no quantitative measures in place to evaluate trade shows. While it may seem tricky to track and measure trade show success, think about all the costs that you can capture to track the total investment—lost billable hours, shipping charges, even lattes for booth staff.

6. Create a meaningful experience. More than half of attendees—53%—come to trade shows to learn, but exhibitors put emphasis on self-promotion. Infuse creativity into the planning process to develop product demonstrations, engaging video case studies, and interactive quizzes and gamification activities to involve booth visitors and provide learning opportunities.

It’s time to dream big and plan accordingly when it comes to trade show marketing. ■

For more in-depth content, access the recorded SMPS November 2019 webinar, “Reinvent Your Trade Show Journey” at onlinelearning.smps.org. Check out additional resources at gannettfleming.com/events/tradeshowjourney and mysmps.org.