



Exhibitions and Events

Making an exhibition of yourself at Hearth and Homes

With the exception of direct sales I don't know of any form of marketing that is – or should be - more effective and efficient than trade exhibitions. Advertising, PR, direct mail and websites all have their place in the marketing communications mix but they all lack a fundamental ingredient almost unique to exhibitions – the human dimension: Face-to-face contact with existing clients, potential clients, suppliers and journalists.

So why are some companies so sceptical about the merits of exhibitions whilst others seem to thrive in the hothouse environment of a busy trade show?

I've been involved in organising and managing exhibition stands for many years with budgets ranging from a few hundred to over fifty thousand pounds. Whilst the layout of a stand is undeniably an important aspect of planning an exhibition there is a danger of it becoming all-consuming with little or no time spent on the myriad of other factors that contribute to a successful show.

Ironically, much of what contributes to a successful show is down to what happens before and after the event.

The first step in your exhibition strategy for the Hearth and Homes Show should be the definition of clearly defined objectives. In addition to generating sales orders, exhibitions are ideal for identifying future sales prospects, launching new products, educating customers, and generating media coverage. If there are no clear objectives, how can you measure whether the exhibition was a success or not?

The organisers of the Hearth and Home Show have an extensive promotional campaign in place to attract visitors to the event. However, I like to leave as little to chance as possible and would certainly be contacting my key clients and target clients to ensure they receive a personal invitation. Why not arrange a specific meeting time on your stand? If it's a long way to travel, why not suggest that the local sales manager gives them a lift to the event? Making people aware of your presence at the show need not be an expensive process. For example, you could add a simple message to your email signature, ensure that it is mentioned on your website's home page, overprint a comment at the bottom of invoices, add the details to your franking machine's slogan – to name just a few ideas.

In my experience exhibitions provide a focal point for completing all those product literature ideas that have been on the 'to do' list for months, for setting a target date for that new product to be developed, and for focussing the minds of sales and customer service teams.

Larger organisations are likely to have a team of people manning their stand. Nothing detracts more from a company's image than ill-informed, poorly trained and badly presented stand teams. Stand personnel should be 'on-message', able to extol and demonstrate the key benefits of every product on display, and fully aware of the importance and procedures for clearly recording the salient details of each conversation with a visitor. This process can be facilitated by renting the barcode scanners shown in

the Hearth and Homes exhibitor's manual which can be downloaded from the website www.hearthandhome.co.uk. The Association of Exhibition Organisers* (AEO) uses the acronym 'PEOPLE' to identify the principle skills needed to be an effective stand team member. PEOPLE stands for people-oriented, enthusiastic, observant, product knowledgeable, listening, and empathetic.

Exhibitions are cost-effective – but they are not 'cheap'. Totalling up all the costs incurred for the space, stand design and construction, accommodation, and expenses and then dividing by the number of customer-facing minutes available during the show will generate a figure to focus the mind of even the most 'battle-weary' salesman. Visitors to trade shows have already committed time and money to the event, simply by attending they have pre-qualified themselves as serious prospects. They deserve to be treated to your company at its best. In my opinion stand members should avoid alcohol, smoking, coffee and strong smelling foods the night before; on the stand don't sit down, read, smoke, eat or drink; don't chat to colleagues and ignore customers; don't stand with your back to the aisles; most importantly, smile and be friendly: Customers want to feel as though the stand is a neutral and unthreatening environment.

How many times have you been to an exhibition and returned with bags full of product brochures – only for them to stay there for weeks or months as you become distracted by the demands of day-to-day business activities? I know I have. Far better, I believe, to offer to post the literature to the visitor. Firstly they'll be grateful to you for not having to carry it around the halls for several hours, and secondly it provides an opportunity to refine the messages you provide in the light of the conversation you've had with them on your stand.

Busy trade shows are interesting, exciting, productive.....and extremely tiring! Too often the collective sigh of relief that everything has gone as planned overshadows the fact that the sales leads generated at the show represent the exhibitor's 'return on investment'. Preparing 'fulfilment' processes before the show should help avoid this pitfall. At the end of each day the stand team should have a debrief whilst conversations are still fresh in the mind: What worked well? What questions were difficult to answer? Are there immediate actions required of the sales force? In the age of the internet there is no reason why sales leads cannot be sent back to the office at the end of the day to be actioned the next. How impressed would a client be to find your brochure and personalised letter on his desk on the morning he returns to work after visiting the show?!

I always try to 'sweat' exhibition assets – otherwise they sit in boxes gathering dust and, more often than not, are out-of-date by the time the next opportunity comes around. Why not design your stand in such a way that part or all of it can be used in the company's reception area, product showroom, or loaned out to distributors?

Finally, the golden rule of exhibiting at major trade shows such as Hearth and Homes is that you can never have enough self-adhesive Velcro!

* The AEO provides free guides to stand design and management which can be down-loaded in PDF format from its website: www.exhibitionswork.co.uk