

# BIIA

## Business Information Industry Association

### How to Triple the Effectiveness of Your Trade Show Marketing Program

By Ruth P. Stevens

Are you exhibiting at trade shows as part of your B-to-B marketing strategy? You're in good company. About 18% to 25% of the typical B-to-B marketing budget goes to trade shows.

Direct marketing can play an important part in your success in trade show marketing. Using direct marketing to promote your attendance at the show in advance can double, triple, even quadruple the results of your overall trade show investment.

#### The rationale for pre-show promotions

Trade show marketers often get so preoccupied with designing and building their booths, they can forget to concentrate on driving qualified traffic. There are a number of important reasons why an investment in promotion is critical:

- You cannot expect show management to do all your recruiting for you. Show management's real job is to get plenty of attendees to the event itself. It is still your job is to get the *best* prospects to visit *your* booth. If you just wait for them to walk by randomly, you'll miss major business opportunity.
- Business buyers generally plan their trade show time in advance. The Center for Exhibition Industry Research (CEIR) found that 76% of attendees use pre-show information for this purpose. You are competing with conference sessions, and with other exhibitors, and with outside attractions, so you must get on your prospects' calendars early.
- CEIR commissioned a study by Deloitte & Touche that proves my case. Those exhibitors who conducted a pre-show campaign raised by 46% their "attraction efficiency," meaning the quality of the audience they were able to attract to their booths. Similarly, the conversion of booth visitors to qualified leads rose 50% when a pre-show promotion was used.

#### Two approaches to pre-show strategy

The most-cited goal of a pre-show promotion is to drive traffic to your booth. But not just any traffic. You want qualified prospects only. In effect, you are front-loading the sales qualification process.

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An effective pre-show strategy employs two prongs:

1. Targeted communications to registered attendees. Extract high-potential visitors from among the trade show attendee population and encourage them to visit your booth or set up an appointment. The secret here is qualification. Not everyone at the trade show is worth your attention—with the exception of highly targeted, niche trade show where nearly all attendees are likely prospects. So, a blanket mailing inviting all attendees to stop by usually contains a lot of waste. The first step: cull the pre-registration list you receive from the show organizer to eliminate non-prospects and competitors.
2. Communications to your house file. Invite your own customers, inquirers, and prospects to the show. These people are already interested in doing business with you. If they are not planning to attend the trade show, your invitation might encourage them to change their minds. At the very least, it will remind them you are exhibiting, and serve as a useful part of an ongoing relationship-building communications stream.

### **Multi-Touch Promotions**

Ideal pre-show promotions use a series of contacts, leveraging multiple media channels. While it's impossible to make recommendations for every possible scenario, here are common pre-show multi-touch contact strategies that have been proven to work.

To drive qualified traffic to the booth, using the trade show attendee list:

1. Outbound postcard to the registered attendee list. Show organizers typically do not offer detailed selections based on such qualifying criteria as job title, industry, or company size. When you cannot target the list as narrowly as you'd like, the best solution is to craft your direct mail copy to attract the qualified and repel the unqualified. An example of such a headline might be: "Attention, purchasing managers! Come find out how you can save time and money in your search for the best widgets." The creative thrust of the message should be around *why* the prospect would benefit from a visit to the booth. The postcard should go via first-class mail, and be scheduled to arrive a week to 10 days before the trade show. Note: Plan ahead. There is nothing more wasteful than a pre-show mailing that arrives after the prospect has left town for the event.
2. Follow-up email reminder to the same list. The email should be equally targeted in its message, and include links to a landing page from your company website. The landing page should describe in detail your plans for the event, such as the new products you plan to introduce at the trade show, any parties you will host, and sessions where your executives will be speaking.

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To set up appointments with past inquirers:

1. An outbound postcard announcing that your company will be at the trade show, and explaining why this is important to the prospect. Is a useful new product being introduced? Is this a chance to meet with the product designer? You must give some reason why the prospect will benefit from the fact that you are exhibiting.
2. A follow-up phone call seeking to set up an appointment to meet a sales rep at the booth at a specified time. You might include mention of other attractions, like an executive panel session or a party you are hosting. The point is to gain an appointment so that prior inquirers can have a face-to-face meeting and, one hopes, move them further down the buying cycle.
3. A confirming letter or email, or both in succession, to remind the prospect about the appointment, and resell the prospect on the reasons why it is going to be worthwhile. You might include a pass to the show floor, with the sales rep's business card attached.

### **Pre-Show Promotional Tactic Checklist**

Business marketers have used all kinds of tactics in pre-show marketing communications. You can use this checklist as a jumping off point.

Also keep in mind that you only want qualified visitors to come to your booth. An aggressive offer should only go to very targeted audiences. With lists that are less qualified, use a message and offer designed simultaneously to attract the wheat and to repel the chaff.

- ❑ Print up stickers with your booth number and the name, date, and city of the trade show. In the months before the event, affix the stickers to all kinds of communications—invoices, letters, packages, whatever you can think of. Provide each sales person with a batch of stickers, too.
- ❑ Create an electronic ad or tagline that can be dropped into your regular electronic communications (your website, e-newsletters, solo email, social media).
- ❑ Add a starburst, similar to the sticker, to trade advertising programs.
- ❑ Create a mini-site off of your company website that describes your activities at the upcoming trade show. Populate it with your press releases, product announcements, exhibit hall hours, contact information for staff working the show, speaking engagement schedule—whatever will inform or excite your customers and prospects. Mention the URL in all your correspondence before the show.

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- ❑ Send out free passes to the exhibit hall, or discount registration offers to the trade show. This tactic requires cooperation of show management. But since it is in the interest of both parties, arrangements can usually be made.
- ❑ Send part of a two-part item, inviting recipients to pick up the other part at the booth. Try walky-talkies, athletic socks and work gloves—whatever comes in pairs.
- ❑ Send a letter plus a map of the exhibit hall, with your booth location highlighted.
- ❑ Advertise in pre-show issues of your industry trade publications.
- ❑ Produce a show appointment book. Set up appointments with your key customers. Send each one as your confirmation the book with that appointment hand-written inside.
- ❑ Do what everyone else does: send a coupon, puzzle piece, or key that can be redeemed for a gift at the booth. But also do what only a few do: narrow your target for this promotion to attendees who are likely to convert to qualified leads—and not every name on the list.
- ❑ Offer a time-limited incentive, to create a sense of urgency. “The first 30 people to visit our booth will get a special prize!”
- ❑ Use testimonials from last year’s attendees.
- ❑ Never use less than first-class mail. Don’t be among the pre-show mail pieces that attendees will inevitably find in their in-boxes on returning from a trade show.
- ❑ Personalize your communications. Trade shows are a highly personal medium. Get the relationship off to the right start with a letter or phone call that acknowledges the name of the recipient and explains the particular benefits to that person of visiting your booth.
- ❑ Try these attention-getting formats:
  - An invitation card instead of a letter.
  - An urgent-looking outer envelope from an overnight carrier.
  - Dimensional mail, like a box or a cylinder.
  - A telegram.
- ❑ Develop a series of contacts using all the media options available to you: letter, fax, postcard, telephone, email, personal visit from a sales rep.

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- ❑ For a stronger impact than the mail: have your sales people drop off invitations to customers and prospects by hand.
  - ❑ Stress the benefit. Don't say "Visit us at booth number x." Say *why*. Why should recipients take the time to visit you? Are you offering a show special? Launching a new product? What's in it for them? Give them a good reason to take the action.
  - ❑ Promote your trade show special offer.
  - ❑ Send a personal letter from a senior executive at your firm. Include the dates and locations of your trade show activities, and explain why they should come. Use the executive's personal letterhead stationery, and mail it first-class.
  - ❑ About 5 weeks in advance, have your sales people call their clients to set up appointments at the trade show. Try to make the meetings coincide with the least-trafficked time periods on the trade show floor. Create a master schedule of expected visitors, and make sure you don't overbook in relation to the booth space and demo stations available. If prospects are unwilling to commit to a specific time, ask them to name an afternoon or a morning period when they'll come by. Follow up appointment-setting calls with a confirmation letter, and then an email reminder a few days before the trade show.
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