

MARKETING

## Are you ready for your next trade show?

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*The race for leads. Image credit: ChiefOutsiders*

By [Per Ohstrom](#)

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A year after the pandemic really started to bite, we have all gotten used to Zoom meetings and conference calls.

In the past, many saw trade shows as a necessary evil. They were costly, took time away from projects and required both planning and follow-up.

What we have forgotten is that shows can be a cost-effective way of generating leads and flying our company colors. Plus, they help us keep a handle on the competition.

There is also something to be said about talking to people face-to-face. And maybe you will have a chance encounter that could not happen online.

Now with so many people vaccinated, trade shows are making a comeback. However, you must still pick the right show. And you must carefully plan how to participate to get the best bang for the buck.

Each industry typically has flagship trade shows, where the industry leaders exhibit and important customers visit. These run annually or every few years, and oftentimes have related events such as training or association meetings.

Smaller, targeted shows put on by associations or industry organizations remain narrower in scope, but highly focused. They can offer an opportunity to cost-effectively reach important target segments. I have had good experiences with specialized events such including the Concrete Decor Show but also mega-events such as the World of Concrete.

Let us take a look at planning, executing and following up on highly effective shows. And let us also explore what metrics to use for success.

### Planning for the show

A good trade show booth has a striking design, one that visitors can easily find on the floor.

After you secure a good booth location, you should set goals for show participation. These should at least include number of leads, number of booth visitors and sales directly related to a show.

Next, define a communication plan. Build a foundation starting with your existing mailing list. Then combine that

with targeted lists and advertising opportunities from the exhibit organizer.

The plan should include mailings inviting customers to visit, and advertising in trade publications or the show catalog. Also consider sponsoring breaks or meals or implementing other innovative ideas.

Sales reps need to personally invite their important customers and pre-schedule as many meetings as possible while at the event. Do not let your sales reps eat breakfast, lunch or dinner without a customer.

Schedule and train booth staff, and assign them specific duties.

For sales reps, this includes scheduling time to walk the floor. Afterwards, they should report back daily on activities and intel on assigned competitors.

Organizing a customer event with refreshments and access to management will draw an audience.

For longer-lasting reverberations in the online echo chamber, distribute press releases about new products or services.

Activities at the show

Once the show is underway, the primary goal is to collect leads.

Trained staff should talk to booth visitors, asking a few qualifying questions about employer, position and purchasing needs.

If deemed a prospective lead, staff should hand off the visitor to a sales rep for further probing and actions. If not, they should simply scan the badge and move on to the next visitor.

Instruct staff to scan each visitor's badge for the mailing list. In exchange, they can offer a small give-away.

To stay on track with goals, measure booth and aisle traffic several times daily. Count how many people walk past the booth for one minute and multiply by 60. Then count how many people are in the booth during one minute, and multiply by 60 for an hourly count.

You can calculate a hit rate measuring booth-design effectiveness by dividing booth visitors by booth passers-by.

Working a trade show booth consumes high energy, so schedule breaks for your staff. Staff should never sit on furniture, check email or eat while in the booth. It looks thoroughly unprofessional and is terrible branding.

Use morning and evening time for customer meetings over breakfast or dinner.

Sales reps should organize these meetings and include management and other staff as appropriate.

Use the slot after the show closes but before dinner for smaller customer events.

For example, you can host a happy hour in the booth or at a nearby location. Just keep in mind your competitors will also vie for customers' attention.

Follow-up after the show

The real selling work starts after the show wraps up. Never skimp on this.

Within a couple of days, send a follow-up email to all new contacts. Thank them for visiting the booth and extend to them any show specials or offers for a limited time.

Make sure to fulfill all requests for literature or sales calls.

High-value prospects should get a phone call or visit. Assign all leads to the respective sales rep or distributor for additional follow-up.

What gets measured gets done

You can measure the ROI for a show in several ways. Important metrics include:

- Total number of leads generated
- Cost/leads (total cost to participate/total leads generated)
- Sales conversion = total new sales/total costs

While memories are fresh, do a formal debrief with booth staff. Ask questions like: What worked well and what did not? What would you change for the next show?

These lessons learned will help improve the quality of your trade show participation.

Finally, make sure to document and share all observations about competitors and products. Subsequently, use this information for product development and market planning.



*Per Ohstrom*

*Per Ohstrom is Knoxville, TN-based chief marketing officer with **Chief Outsiders**, a leading fractional CMO firm focused on company growth. He works with manufacturing, rental, distribution and other B2B companies to find practical and differentiated solutions for growth. Reach him at [pohstrom@chiefoutsiders.com](mailto:pohstrom@chiefoutsiders.com).*

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