

## Motivating Your Booth Staff

The increased cost of sales, the globalization of local economies and the quickening pace of change have increased the importance of every face-to-face interaction on the show floor. Over the past few years, most every industry has experienced dramatic change. Mergers and acquisitions, new technologies, products and services, shrinking development times, evolving marketplace needs and the Internet are among the many factors that have caused tremendous changes in our economy.

One thing that hasn't changed, though, is the fact that people buy from people. Shows, conventions, conferences and events bring together buyers with goals and needs and sellers with products, services and solutions. Each is trying to find and qualify the other and do so, in part, by spending a few minutes with each other in the seller's temporary place of business, the exhibit. After a three-, five- or maybe seven-minute conversation, the buyer leaves the booth with an impression of the seller that is either positive, negative or neutral. While a company's booth design, graphics, etc., play a role in helping a buyer form an impression, it is the interaction with the exhibit staff that has, by far, the most influence.

If the impression is positive, the buyer has identified one of the "short list" suppliers he/she wanted to find—one of two or three companies with whom a sales dialogue will continue after the event is over. If the impression is neutral, the seller might still be considered. If the impression is negative, however, the seller's company will most likely not even have a chance. The exhibit staff plays a tremendously important role in creating each attendee's impression of the seller's company and capabilities. In fact, at a busy show, the average staffer will influence more people's perceptions and buying behavior in a day than the average salesperson will in a month or two.

### **Expand the 'Comfort Zone'**

According to the Center for Exhibition Industry (CEIR) research, many attendees have found their interactions on the show floor to be less than satisfactory. CEIR research has found that 42% of attendees felt the booth worker didn't understand their needs because he/she didn't listen—not because the attendee didn't try to express them. Why is this? Why didn't the staffer listen and understand? The sad reality is, unfortunately, that most of your exhibit staff doesn't want to be at a show, and they convey that feeling to attendees through the information they provide (or don't provide) and the behavior they display.

## Motivating Your Booth Staff

You really can't blame the exhibit staff completely for not wanting to do booth duty. It's very different from what they typically do the other fifty weeks of the year. Back at their "normal" place of work, exhibit staff are in a professional "comfort zone." They have the knowledge and skills to perform their job. They generally like what they're doing and are good, if not very good, at whatever it is they do. Most importantly, they are doing what they were hired to do and what they are measured to do.

On the show floor they are about as far away from their professional "comfort zone" as they can be. They rarely have the necessary knowledge or the skills, and it's not what they perceive they were hired to do, nor what they are measured to do. Most exhibit staff doesn't receive enough of the right information to properly prepare for the show, and few receive training with regard to the uniqueness of the environment or the communication skills required to conduct a sales conversation that is mutually beneficial.

So the question becomes "How do we get our exhibit staff to recognize the importance of the role they play on the show floor? And how do we get them motivated to do the best they are capable of doing?" The answer varies. One (motivational) size does not fit all; one approach will not get everyone "fired up."

### Motivate with Knowledge

The first way to get people involved and motivated is to make sure they have the right knowledge and skills to be successful as they engage your company's customers and prospects. It's hard to be motivated if you feel like you don't know what you are doing. What does the staff need to know about your exhibit? Target audience? Goals and key messages? Pre- and at-show promotions? At-show activities? Announcements? Customer events? Competitive strengths and weaknesses?

Skill is another important area to make sure you address with your exhibit staff. What skills will be required to accomplish your goals? How should they engage and pre-qualify attendees? Deal with problem situations? Present information only after they understand the person's specific needs and degree of technical expertise? You can't assume they have this knowledge or these skills. Most of your exhibit staff doesn't have the opportunity to develop these skills in their day-to-day activities. Providing the appropriate training and coaching will help your staff be more comfortable, confident, focused and motivated on the show floor.

## Motivating Your Booth Staff

### Motivate with Incentives

Many companies use contests to motivate their staff. Typically, the contest rewards one or two people for generating the most leads. Contests like these rarely accomplish what they are trying to because most people working the show know that they have no chance of winning. Rather than get excited, they often think to themselves, “Why bother—I’ll never win?” Contests can be effective however, when everyone knows they have a chance of winning, and the reward is worth the effort.

If you are going to use an incentive such as a contest, we suggest that you link it to your specific goals for the show and create levels of awards. Contests work best when people are competing against a standard, not against each other. For example, let’s say your goal for a show or convention is to generate 200 qualified leads. Create a contest for lead generation, but don’t reward only the top one or two people. Instead, set up two or three different levels of reward defined by the number of qualified leads generated. Set the first level at a number attainable by everyone in the booth so that everyone knows that they have a chance of winning.

For example, your first level of reward may be set at 10 leads: anyone who generates 10 qualified leads or more will have a letter sent to their manager (with a copy to HR or the appropriate VP) complimenting their accomplishments. Have a second reward level for people who generate 20 qualified leads or more. The reward at this level should include the letter to the manager as well as something else your staff will perceive to be of value. If you have 20 or more booth workers, we suggest a third level of incentive and reward. Creating this level will often motivate top performance without generating competition among members of your staff. Often people who meet or exceed their own personal goal will help their peers succeed as well.

All three levels of reward should start with the letter to their manager because it can mean two things to the exhibit staff. First, it means they have the opportunity to be recognized for their contribution to the company’s success while they were away from their day-to-day activities and responsibilities; second, it can reduce or eliminate problems with managers who are not supportive of shows and who reluctantly let their people attend, making it tough on the staff when they return from the event. They might be teased about being “on vacation” or given a hard time about work not done. A letter in the employee’s file means that the manager has to recognize the time the person served their company by doing booth duty and take that into account at their next performance appraisal and salary review.

## Motivating Your Booth Staff

### Motivate with Recognition

While contests can be effective, there are other ways to motivate your booth workers. Recognition can be a good motivator.

At the end of each day conduct a short (no more than 15-minute) debriefing meeting to discuss what worked, what didn't work and what might be changed the next day. Then recognize people who worked hard and did well that day. One way is to ask everyone with "x" leads for the day to stand and have everyone give them a round of applause. Then have the people with "x plus one lead" keep standing and give them another round of applause. Keep doing this until three or four people are left and recognize them all together.

Another way to provide recognition is to tell everyone before the show starts that they will have the opportunity at each afternoon's debriefing meeting to recognize their peers for something particularly well done. If necessary, get things started by recognizing a few people yourself. Ask a manager who spent time in the booth to recognize someone they feel did a particularly good job. Once you get people started they usually get good at recognizing their associates.

### Motivate with Personal Gain

Salespeople can sometimes be the toughest booth workers to get focused—let alone motivated. They often don't perceive they should be there, and many have not "connected the dots" as to the opportunity a show presents. According to CEIR:

- 90% of business show attendees have not been called upon (face-to-face) by any company exhibiting at the show in the twelve months prior to the event;
- 46% of executive decision makers made purchase decisions while attending a show; and
- 77% of executive decision makers found at least one new supplier at the last show they attended.

Get your salespeople's buy-in and support by helping them understand how they can use a show from a selling perspective to:

- Generate qualified leads in the most time-efficient manner possible;
- Prearrange customer tours of the exhibit which can enhance their competitive posture and relationship with the customer;
- Accelerate the buying process and get a decision sooner;
- Gain access to high-level decision makers in the customer organization;

## Motivating Your Booth Staff

- Meet geographically dispersed prospects and customers in a very time efficient manner;
- Leverage booth resources, such as company managers, technical experts or hard-to-demonstrate equipment or other products the customer is considering; and
- Develop competitive insight they could not develop anywhere else.

On the show floor, your exhibit staff is your most important asset. In the eyes of the customer, they are your company. Make sure they have the right knowledge and skills. Motivate them with an incentive, recognition or by helping them understand the value of the event and the importance of the role they play.