

Shows Through the Eyes of a Professional Salesperson

Face-to-face contact is more important than ever in today's business ever changing business environment because, among other things:

- Most products, services and solutions are perceived as commodities.
- Mergers and acquisitions have prospects and customers *wondering* "Who am I doing business with anyway ..." and employees wondering if they have a job in six months, if so, and how to do it successfully.
- Most customers can't define their best suppliers' current capabilities.
- Most employees can't properly answer the question "Tell me a little bit about your company..."

When you combine these points (and the many others that can be made about our evolving global business environment), it's no wonder that salespeople are stereotyped as hating shows. The stereotype says that they don't want to be there; they don't want to invite their customers because the competition will be there; and they never get any good leads.

Like most stereotypes, this one isn't necessarily true. More and more, salespeople and sales managers are recognizing that shows and events are evolving from *marketing events* into *marketing and sales events* and are the one and only time many prospects and customers will ever have face-to-face contact with anyone from your company. Shows and events as sales activities are, more than ever, the most cost-effective and time-efficient way to:

- Create sales opportunities
- Differentiate a company, its people and its capabilities
- Accelerate the buying and selling process
- Ensure that prospects and customers have a perception of their company's solutions and capabilities that is updated and accurate
- Enhance existing relationships

Why else do salespeople stereotypically not want to be at a show? The answer might be opportunity costs – the cost of not booking the revenue that they are expected to book that week, that month, that quarter. Salespeople are measured by bookings, and only by bookings in most companies. If you look at the opportunity cost of their time, a salesperson with a \$1 million budget has an opportunity cost of \$500 an hour. A rep with a \$2 million budget means is expected to sell \$1000 an hour, fifty weeks a year, forty hours a week.

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Salespeople often look at a three-day show and think “Three days at the show, a day for travel and a day to get caught up – I have to give up five days to be there. At \$500 an hour, my opportunity cost is \$20,000.” The salesperson with the two million dollar budget has an opportunity cost of \$40,000 to support the same show. Looking at it from this perspective makes it easier to understand why so many salespeople are not too enthusiastic about working a show.

Many sales professionals have already learned that at a three day show they can often accomplish as much (if not more) than they can in a month or more in the field. They have “crunched the numbers” and realized that shows and events, when planned and worked properly will generate a greater return than the same time invested in the field. As more and more salespeople catch on to the fact that they can derive quantifiable value that is greater than their opportunity costs, they will have greater involvement in, and display more support for shows and events. Let’s explore what some professional salespeople are doing before, during and after a show to derive as much of its potential value as possible.

Goal: Generate qualified leads in the most time-efficient manner possible

Salespeople need to constantly identify new sales opportunities, either with existing customers or by developing new customers. On average, salespeople need to start the buying and selling process with ten or more sales opportunities to book one new order. Why? Out of ten opportunities, three or four will make decisions and buy from someone. The other six opportunities will evaporate – budget cuts, project cancellations, postponements, etc. The national closing average for business-to-business selling is just shy of 30% - the salesperson will average one sale for every four opportunities that buy from someone. Lead generation is an ongoing need for a professional salesperson.

At a well-attended show, the average booth worker will generate two to four good leads for each hour in the booth. If a show is open for three days, seven hours a day, the average booth worker will generate between 42 and 84 leads. To be conservative, let’s cut the number in half and say that at a three day show the average booth worker will generate twenty to forty leads (and ultimately make two to four sales with these leads). Ask a salesperson how many leads they would generate through canvassing, telemarketing, or any other marketing vehicle.

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To derive the value created by a show or event, a salesperson should be involved with sales and marketing activities before, during and after the show.

Pre-show activities:

- Working with marketing to develop a lead form captures qualifying information from a salesperson's perspective (size of the opportunity, timing of the decision, budget, the person's role in the decision process, competition, etc.
- Providing marketing with lists for pre-show promotions to increase the number of qualified leads obtained. Lists should include:
 - existing customers
 - former customers
 - prospects from other divisions or departments of existing customers
 - pre-qualified prospects from personal sales data base
 - hard to reach decision makers
 - geographically dispersed prospects
- Making follow up phone calls
- Pre-arranging appointments with priority names from pre-show promotion

At-show activities:

- Providing trade show manager with a list of pre-arranged meetings
- Conducting meetings they arranged before the show
- Supporting their associates and not just focusing on own accounts or territory

Post-show activities:

- Following up as quickly as possible to meet or exceed customer expectations
- Tracking activity as requested by marketing and sales management
- Reporting revenue to marketing and sales management

Goal: Enhance competitive posture and relationships

In order to enhance their competitive posture and relationship with the existing customers, active sales opportunities and other pre-qualified prospects, many sales people are pre-arranging meetings which will occur at the event including:

- Tours of the exhibit to ensure that prospects and customers have a perception of their company's capabilities that is updated and accurate
- Executive-to-executive meetings to build or enhance relationships at the decision making level of the customer organization

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- Demonstrations of products or equipment that would otherwise be difficult to display
- Personnel the customer would generally not have access to including technical people, research and development staff, senior managers, PR and others

To derive this value, a salesperson should be involved with the same pre-, at- and post-show activities listed for generating qualified leads, as well as the following:

Pre-show activities:

- Scheduling and coordinating the appropriate people for the at-show meetings
- Establishing goals and objectives each meeting
- Providing background information to all involved to help them prepare for, and be productive at, the meeting
- Defining and help secure whatever resources will be required to accomplish each meeting's goals and objectives.
- Working with the trade show manager to help coordinate the venue where the meeting will occur (other than in the booth),

At-show activities including:

- Checking the venue, its set-up, audio visual, food etc.
- Conducting the meeting
- Debriefing with associates after the meeting

Post-show activities including:

- Following up to honor commitments made at meeting
- Tracking activity as requested by marketing and sales management
- Reporting revenue to marketing and sales management

Salespeople should be as involved as is required prior to, at and after the show or event to make each customer meeting as mutually beneficial as possible.

Goal: Accelerate the decision process

According to research conducted by the Center for Exhibition Industry Research (CEIR.org), shows and events reduce the number of sales calls required to close business. From a trade show manager's perspective, this is a quantifiable value (savings on sales calls) that should be factored into any ROI calculations being done. From a salesperson's perspective, there is additional quantifiable value.

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First of all, shows can reduce (or completely eliminate) the number of competitive options being considered by a prospect or customer. Secondly, the salesperson is not investing the time that would have been required to move the buyer through the same steps of the buying process as was accomplished at a show. They can use the time they have saved by leveraging the show to create or pursue other sales opportunities.

To derive this value, a salesperson should be involved with:

Pre-show activities including:

- Schedule as many appointments as possible with existing prospects and customers who are actively involved in making a purchase decision
- Arrange the appropriate resources and personnel required to move they buyer or buying team through as many steps in the buying process as possible

At-show activities including:

- Confirming that everything that can be done before the meeting has been done properly
- Conducting the meeting
- Debriefing with associates after the meeting

Post-show including:

- Following up to honor commitments made at meeting
- Tracking activity as requested by marketing and sales management
- Reporting revenue to marketing and sales management

Goal: Develop competitive insight

On the one hand, a show provides prospects and customers with the ability to do some “one-stop-shopping” and identify new products, services and suppliers. On the other hand, a show enables salespeople to develop a better understanding of their competitors’ strengths and weaknesses. Although it’s rare that they will get information about specific products and services that they don’t already have or could get off the internet, they will still be able to gather additional insight into their competitors strategies, approaches, key messages etc. This insight, although not quantifiable, has tremendous value to a sales professional. To derive this value, a salesperson should be involved with the following activities before, during and after the show:

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Pre-show activities including:

- Developing goals, strategies and plans that relate to developing insight to coordinate these activities at a show
- developing a list of competitors
- assigning specific competitors to specific people at the show
- developing a list of questions to ask or information to gather

At-show activities including:

- Executing the strategy and plan

Post-show activities including:

- Collecting, assembling and then redistributing all of the competitive information captured at the show
- Developing strategies and plans relating to how to use the information gathered

Shows and events offer tremendous opportunities and quantifiable return to professional salespeople. Those who dread shows will continue to do so until they understand how much value can be derived if they are willing to put in the time and effort required before, during and after a show to derive its full (sales) value.