SHOULD YOU EXHIBIT AT TRADE SHOWS AND EXPOS?

by Bob Salvas

Like most marketing expenses, exhibiting at a trade show or expo can either be a terrific investment or a colossal waste.

The advantages? Having a booth at a show gives you the opportunity to display your visual brand imagery (signage, etc.); it gives you the ability to sell products to attendees or give samples or (if you sell a service) to set appointments; and of course, it gives you the chance to get face-to-face with potential and existing customers.

The disadvantages? The main downside is usually cost. It's not just the cost of the space but the cost of materials (like backdrop and handouts); the cost of travel (if the show is out of town); and the cost of staffing the booth (as well as the opportunity cost if it leaves your office short-staffed).

When all is said and done, do the advantages outweigh the expense? As you might expect, the answer is: it depends.

The decision to exhibit or not should come down to answering 3 basic questions:

1. Is this specific show right for you? This is primarily about who the attendees are. If the attendees are representative of *your* target market, then it is at least a show to consider exhibiting at.
2. Do you have the resources? Unlike most marketing investments, this one will *cost* you more than money as you must commit both money and the time to manage the event.
3. Are you *really* committed to follow-up? It is not just the time commitment of the show itself but what you do AFTER the show that can make the difference between profit and loss on this endeavor. This is where most businesses fail. The fortune really is in the follow-up.

If your answer is YES to these questions, then you really SHOULD exhibit at the show. The exposure you get to your target market (assuming it is a well-attended show) is well worth the investment to grow your business.

If you have not done a show before, there are a few things of importance to take note of. If you are at a big show, you will want to attract people to your booth so good signage is important. Make sure the important information on the signage is above head level so people can see it. Crowds tend to block out signage that is too low. You can have freebies and gifts at your booth, but it is always better to give a nice gift AFTER a meaningful conversation with a prospect or client (and make sure to capture their contact information!). And while some people like to do contests (business cards in a fishbowl stuff), remember that the prize is what attracts the people to enter the contest. They are probably not going to be good prospects for you if they enter a contest with a prize that is dinner for two. Their interest was not necessarily in your product/service but more so in winning a nice meal! (Of course, if your business IS that restaurant, then this is a great idea!).

By far, the most important thing is for the people at your booth to be friendly and enthusiastic. Attendees will make decisions to engage with you based on your disposition. If you are sitting down or on your phone or looking like you 'can't be bothered', then they will not 'bother' you! It is often a long day at one of these shows so having more than one person to share the load of manning the booth is always a good strategy. If possible, push your table back and get in front of it. You want to be approachable, and a table can be a barrier to engagement. Stand in front of the table, smile, and say hello to people who pass by.

And of course**, follow-up** with all your leads and prospects as soon as possible after the show.

"Diligent follow-up and follow-through will set you apart from the crowd and communicate excellence."

-John C. Maxwell