

Trade Shows Deliver New Customer Relationships to High-Tech Distributors

By Winn Hardin

At one of the earliest trade shows on record, Thomas Edison showcased 25 phonographs in a 7,226-square-foot interactive booth. Attendees used proto-earbuds to listen to music and voices speaking in 50 different languages.

The modern approach to trade shows isn't all that different from Edison's innovative display at the 1889 Exposition Universelle in Paris. These days, vendor booths creatively demonstrate high-tech products, offer sessions that delve deep into technology, and promote contests and other interactive activities to keep attendees engaged.

But for all the flash that a modern trade show brings, there's only one metric that matters: lead generation. AHTD members share their best practices for capturing leads at trade shows and converting them into sales—and, ultimately, long-term customers.

Taking the Long View

Measuring the success of a trade show often requires high-tech distributors to take the long view. For example, Gibson Engineering Co., Inc. (Norwood, Massachusetts), exhibited at EASTEC, the Northeast's largest manufacturing trade show, but didn't see an immediate return on investment, despite a remarkable display of ingenuity from the company's sales engineers.

"Our engineers built some cool demos, such as servo-driven whack-a-mole games, motion control systems that play tic-tac-toe, and a robot that shoots craps," says Dan O'Brien, president of Gibson Engineering. "Nobody will use these types of applications, but by watching them move, they can imagine how to apply the technology in their own industry."

While the engineers caught the attention of attendees, that interest only garnered a few follow-up meetings and an occasional order in the first year or two of exhibiting at the show. "From a business standpoint, we questioned whether it made sense to exhibit," O'Brien says.

But longer-term data suggested otherwise. "After we had been doing EASTEC for five years, I realized that three of our ten biggest customers were ones we met there," O'Brien adds. By expanding their view past the short-term, Gibson Engineering realized the trade-show venue formed the genesis of relationships that generated big business for the company.

A Targeted Approach

Instead of attending trade shows, some companies bring the trade shows to them. This allows high-tech distributors to better align exhibiting companies with potential customers. Standard Electric Supply Co. (Milwaukee, Wisconsin) quickly discovered this advantage when hosting its Automation Express tradeshow every other year. In May 2019, the event will feature some 400 customers visiting about 60 supplier booths and attending a variety of technical sessions and classes.

The company sees several benefits to hosting its own tradeshow. “When you look at a large tradeshow like PACK EXPO, for example, it doesn’t always attract the variety of customers that we serve,” says Joanne Moss, Director of Marketing for Standard Electric Supply Co. “If we just had a 10 x 10 booth and a couple of banners, it would be difficult to show how we partner strategically with our customers and suppliers. But when someone walks through our tradeshow floor at Automation Express and sees 50 or 60 suppliers, it has a much greater impact.”

Additionally, Standard Electric provides marketing support and lead generation for the event. “Lead capture is always difficult, so we have an app to make it easier,” Moss says. “We code all of our nametags, and when scanning the badge, the supplier qualifies the lead. They assign a dollar volume on the lead and estimate how quickly we can close the business.”

The company also invites suppliers to meet with customers at mini trade shows it hosts at customer sites. Between these and the larger Automation Express show, “we strengthen our connection with our suppliers because we give them the opportunity to showcase their products, answer technical questions, and make connections directly with our customers,” Moss says. “The conversations we have at the shows will eventually result in sales for the supplier.”

Be Our Guest

Companies that host their own trade shows also find advantages by bringing together the regional players in the automation market under one roof, as Industrial Control (Zeeland, Michigan) experienced when it started the Advanced Manufacturing Expo four years ago.

“We bring in universities and state programs that offer funds for employee training, and then we bring in global automation manufacturers, machine builders, and integrators,” says Mark Ermatinger, CEO of Industrial Control and AHTD membership chair. “You can look at your automation and training needs, or even find a vendor to install a new air compressor or help you with energy conservation, all in one place.”

The event, which attracts about 220 exhibitors, takes place in Grand Rapids and Detroit. In addition to the main hall, the Advanced Manufacturing Expo features two other halls focused on metalworking and mechanical. Industrial Control is considering opening another hall in 2019 that focuses on process and instrumentation.

Since the Industrial Control launched the expo in 2014, the company has tripled the number of exhibitors and more than doubled its business. Some 1,200 customers walked the show floor in Grand Rapids, while 453 people attended the Detroit location.

The diverse products on display represent an important advantage for Industrial Control. The company scopes out large trade shows for the latest in technology, recently adding four collaborative robots to its lineup.

“A lot of distributors aren’t attending trade shows to look for new products and are basically selling the same things they did last year,” Ermatinger says. “And we are outpacing them, because our customers want to work with us on the high-tech products and standard products alike.”

Ermatinger cites a number of advantages to hosting a trade show, including improving existing supplier relationships while attracting new suppliers to exhibit at the show, as well as boosting employee morale. “Machine builders that exhibit at Advanced Manufacturing Expo work closer with us,” adds Ermatinger. “Customers also think we are bigger than we are because of the show.”

Beyond Borders

While the United States and Canada remain an important trade-show market for high-tech distributors and manufacturers, TR Electronic (Troy, Michigan) has turned its attention to Europe. “The unfortunate reality is that the European trade shows are looking for the next technologies, but in North America, they are not,” says Stephen Watson, Sales and Distribution Manager for TR Electronic. “We get a lot of leads over there because the people who attend those shows tend to be the people who drive innovation.”

When the company does attend shows in North America, they are small and industry specific. “Anytime somebody makes a point to come to a show, especially a smaller one, then you know there’s some interest from them,” Watson says. “But when shows are much larger, you hardly get any interaction time with customers, and the cost of doing them is astronomical.”

Although TR Electronic is an exhibitor, it will occasionally walk a tradeshow floor. “We do it to determine if we want to attend that event the following year,” Watson says. “It also allows us to see what our competitors are doing and to make sure we’re not missing something in the market.”

Don’t Forget the Press

Although lead generation remains the top priority at trade shows and exhibitions, many high-tech distributors attending or hosting these events underutilize or altogether overlook one critical element: the press.

Automation industry magazines and websites often send editors to trade shows to look for story ideas and to showcase the newest products. Trade-show exhibitors can take advantage of this opportunity with a proactive approach. That means asking the event organizer for registered media and reviewing their editorial calendars for places your content would fit. At the show, schedule meetings with the editors to amplify your reach — and have plenty of content ready in the form of new product press releases, case studies, and recent blogs.

Whether they are exhibiting at a trade show or hosting their own, high-tech distributors and manufacturers find many advantages at these events, including networking, establishing relationships, and generating leads. Considering that automation trade shows are a multimillion-dollar industry, finding new customers is worth the price of admission.