

SELLING

OUTSIDE THE STAND

Getting the best out of your sales team means thinking hard about the value of trade shows and exhibitions and how to get genuine leads. **Report: Grant Hyman**

● Tyre-kickers are a salesperson's worst nightmare on a trade-show stand. They monopolise the salesperson's time while genuine prospects wander past. It's up to the salesperson to quickly assess anyone who visits a stand and if they are not a buyer, firmly and politely direct them to a brochure or a product manager.

Marketing managers will be horrified about treating "potential customers" in this way. However, expecting a salesperson to take on the role of "educator" or, worse, running a pit stop for ambling trade show visitors, is not making the best use of an exhibition stand and the people staffing it.

Exhibition stands should always include a marketing person to deal with non-buyers, leaving salespeople to work on potential sales – which should be the purpose of the exercise.

Unfortunately, marketing people tend to visit stands only briefly, making unhelpful comments about the salesperson's good fortune in being able to pick up a few easy sales thanks to marketing's hard work in organising the stand.

Often, these marketing people are accompanied by a senior manager or two who have come to see the stand at work. Then they all go off to lunch, leaving the salespeople to nurse their sore feet.

No wonder many experienced salespeople have an intense dislike of exhibitions and trade shows.

The challenge of exhibitions and trade shows is to convert the expense of money and time into a return that makes the whole exercise worthwhile.

Ideally, "worthwhile" means making sales directly from the stand, which is almost impossible. If that level of "worthwhile" cannot be achieved, then a salesperson needs to at least get some high-quality prospects.

Companies that insist on participating in exhibitions and trade shows should

Stand and deliver: Trade exhibitions work when the marketing team supports the salespeople

consider alternatives – for example, holding events at their own premises. This way, those attending cannot walk a few steps to the opposition.

If a company's products have enough appeal and invitations are focused on qualified people, they will come along.

Another alternative is to run mini-exhibitions in geographically convenient areas. Places such as business clubs, sports clubs and social clubs are usually happy to host events at reasonable rates, and many sporting venues are also happy to provide suitable rooms and catering.

If a company insists on joining in with everyone else at industry events and exhibitions, it is important to create a feedback facility that is more sophisticated than simply asking people to throw their cards into a bowl for the chance of winning a prize.

When people go to an exhibition, they tend to be in an upbeat mood and are often enthusiastic at every stand they visit. However, 24 hours after having all but committed to buy, they may not even remember visiting the stand.

What is needed is a simple qualifying tool, such as an easy-to-fill-in form that is not so detailed that people cannot be bothered, but is detailed enough to give salespeople an idea of what interested them during their visit. If a visitor's relevant interests have been recorded, follow-up sales calls will have a much greater chance of success.

Being on a stand can be frustrating, but if a salesperson has no choice but to attend, it is important to do the job professionally.

When a prospect visits a stand, get their details quickly. From the salesperson's perspective, the aim of an exhibition stand is to get as many qualified names as possible.

If a company is truly sales-focused, the only people attending an exhibition or trade-show stand should be the top-performing salespeople. They will want to be there if they know the event is likely to deliver genuine leads.

Some marketing managers will insist it is vital that their company has a stand at a certain exhibition because its brand needs the profile and presence. Salespeople who understand their customers and their marketplace usually know best. If a company's salespeople are reluctant to attend shows, their reluctance is probably a valid warning sign.

If they are not interested in attending – because they do not expect to get genuine sales leads – but a company feels that it is important to be seen, then perhaps the marketing people should look after the stand. What better way for them to get undiluted, real-time market feedback? **BRW.**

Grant Hyman is the author of A Practical Guide to Selling (Sales Central, 2007).



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