

How to Grow Your Business as a Trade Show Attendee

**Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Networking
and Couldn't Find Anyone to Ask**

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Why Attend a Trade Show?

There are seven basic reasons to attend a trade show. These are:

1. Find solutions to known problems.
2. Get ideas and identify opportunities.
3. Promote your business.
4. Help other people promote their businesses.
5. Have fun.
6. Make friends.
7. Cart home a huge collection of promotional items.

In this report, I'm going to focus on #1-4. In my experience, #5 and #6 happen naturally as a result of doing #1-4 well, and #7 happens naturally no matter what you do.

Goal 1: Find Solutions to Known Problems

If we weren't a savvy business crowd, we could call our attendance at a trade show "going shopping." Hey, look at all these exhibitors! Most of them have products and services geared to businesspeople. You know how to shop.

You ask questions. You kick the tires. You see how well they listen, how clearly they "get" your situation, how much relevant experience they bring to the table.

How to Prepare for Maximum Benefit

One thing to remember is, the exhibitors are probably pretty busy and they're moving pretty quickly. That doesn't mean they're going to blow you off. They know the first impression has to be good for you to do business with them later. What it does mean is, the more prepared you are, the more value you can get out of a short conversation on the show floor.

Here's quick and dirty 4-step prep process to help you get the most out of this part of the trade show. It's also a great exercise to boost your business any time at all. I know you figured this report was just going to be a quick read, with no work involved, so you probably don't have time for the four steps this instant.

(Do yourself a favor: take some time before or after work one day this week, or an hour over the weekend, and go through the process in a serious way. Just the act of stepping back from your business and looking at the big picture will put you light years ahead of most other businesspeople. Remember, to achieve leverage, you need distance from the thing you're trying to move.)

Step 1: Set Goals

A few days before the trade show, take 20 minutes and write down your business goals for the coming year. What revenue figures are you aiming for? Number of new clients? New offices? Adding more staff? Profit margins? And everything you can think of. Paint a picture of total success twelve months from today.

To get ideas, look at people and businesses you admire or even envy. Look at what your competitors are doing right. Look at what successful businesses in other industries are doing that you might want to plagiarize, er, emulate.

How to Write Out Your Goals

Once you've chosen some motivating goals, write them out as if you have accomplished them at a specified future date. For example, "By September 18, 2003, I have created an online presence for my business that consistently brings in at least \$5000 a month in new business."

You can go a step further and depict your attainment of the goal in a multi-sensory way: "I can see the web site and the order forms that flood my inbox. I can feel the deep satisfaction and relaxation that will come from a source of nearly passive income. I can hear the conversations I am having with the customers who have found me on the web."

The more real you make it, as if you've already achieved the goal, the more motivating it will be, and the more clearly will be the path to its achievement.

It's like driving home from work. You probably do it on autopilot a lot of the time while you're thinking about something else. But when you're going to a new, unfamiliar location, just getting there can become a struggle. One detour and you're lost.

Though this exercise, you can make your unattained goals as real as the road home.

Of course, you can't stop there. Goal setting without reality checking is the kind of positive thinking that gives positive thinking a bad name. It's like repeating, "I'm rich, I'm rich, I'm rich" while you're sleeping in the back seat of your car.

Not very convincing, not very useful. So that brings us to...

Step 2: Identify Obstacles to Achieving Your Goals

What are some current realities that, unaddressed, will keep you from reaching your goals? Do you need the help of someone with a certain type of expertise? Do you need an office building? A secure computer network? An effective marketing campaign to parents of triplets? Lower employee turnover?

Brainstorm Obstacles

Make a list of all the things you can think of that could conceivably get in the way of your goals. Spend some time doing this. It may seem depressing, and some may accuse you of being pessimistic, but in fact the opposite is true.

Optimists are confident that they are prepared to face all obstacles and still succeed.

Pessimists refuse to consider those contingencies, because they are too overwhelming to think about.

The Importance-Ease Matrix

Now take a blank piece of paper and draw a big version of the 2 x 2 matrix shown below, **leaving out the numbers.**

	Hard	Easy
Important	1	2
Not Important	3	4

Using 1- or 2-word phrases, place each of the obstacles somewhere in this matrix. For example, “new photocopier” might go in Quadrant 4 if your existing machine is a little old, but serviceable and you use it almost solely for copying checks.

If, however, you have a print shop and you need a new-fangled hi-speed 3-D color-matching Whizbanger that de-staples and re-staples so you can attain your goal of being the print shop of choice for the Ewing/Hamilton fashion industry, you probably would put it in Quadrant 1.

Be brutally honest here. This is no place to kid yourself that finding a rainmaking business developer who knows your industry inside out will be easy, or that buying neon index cards instead of the regular assorted colors is important.

Your job is to identify the one to three items that go in Quadrants 1 and 2.

Realistically, more than three won't get done, and will just frustrate and demotivate you. Handle the first batch of obstacles, then move on.

Go for a Quadrant 2 solution first. Getting in the habit of "quick wins" will keep you moving, and build your action-taking and problem solving muscles for bigger and harder challenges ahead.

Also, Quadrant 2 represents your highest ROI solution: the biggest return (most important) for the least investment (easiest).

Step 3: Brainstorm Options to Eliminating Those Obstacles

Now you're ready for the trade show. You've identified what you want (and by default, what you don't want) and what could keep you from getting it. You've prioritized your needs. Now you talk to experts who can help you figure out what you really need.

The Solution May Not Be What You Think

Most of us in business are consultants of one kind or another, even if we sell a pretty ordinary product or service. We tend to become experts in our industry, and often can help a client or customer who thinks they want Y to understand that they really need Z.

That's the kind of value-added guidance you're looking for in your own vendors and solutions partners (a buzz phrase for "vendor" that typically means you're going to pay more).

I'm not talking about an upsell, like when you go to the stationery store for paper clips and come out with a \$75,000 bindery machine because you got in the path of Commission-Crazy Carla. I mean when you identify a problem and then, because of limited experience, immediately gravitate toward the most obvious solution.

The Need Behind Your Need

A desirable vendor will ask you questions, find out the "need behind the need," and often recommend a much more elegant, cost-effective, long-term, more appropriate solution than the one you thought of.

I'll give you an example from my own field, marketing. Often I talk with prospects who are frustrated that they are not attracting enough clients, and immediately think of advertising as the first and only thing to do about it.

Rather than simply sell them copywriting and find a designer and a place to run the ad, I probe for underlying reasons for the lack of clients. Could they be selling a product that nobody wants or needs? Offering a service that is too expensive for the market? Unable to define their market or their promise? Sounding too much like entrenched competition? Does their office or store smell bad? Are their employees representing the business accurately? And so on.

Until some other things are dealt with, advertising isn't going to solve the problem. It will just be an expensive shot in the dark. It may even help a bad company go out of business faster.

Before jumping into my client's solution, I help them rethink the problem. And often, at that point, the answer becomes obvious to both of us.

Before I go on, is anyone in the market for a slightly used \$75,000 bindery machine?

Step 4: Keep an Open Mind and Visit Some Booths Randomly

There's a saying that if your only tool is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail. The great thing about a trade show is that you've got business experts with dozens, if not hundreds of tools among them.

What to me looks like a marketing problem may look to a coach like a leadership issue may look to an IT consultant as a communications infrastructure flaw may look to an electrician as inadequate refrigeration for the mayonnaise in the cafeteria.

We all see things from our own perspectives, based on our experiences. Remember the story of the blind men and the elephant?

Take Advantage of the "Cafeteria" of Solutions

I don't mean to imply that we're not geniuses, we potential vendors – I mean solutions partners – of yours. Of course we are. I am saying that a trade show is a great opportunity to hear from a bunch of us, to view your situation, your goals, your obstacles and challenges, from many different points of view.

At the very least, you'll be better equipped to deal with future needs that you can't anticipate now.

Etiquette Tips When Visiting Tables

1. Don't monopolize the time of an exhibitor

They will probably be very polite, and won't yawn in your face or push you into a jar of Hershey's miniatures to get to another prospect, but they do want to meet a variety of people. Unless you've set up an appointment, be mindful of taking more than a couple of minutes of an exhibitor's time.

Think of the trade show as "Cliff Notes" time. Don't learn everything about their business. Learn enough to decide if you want to follow up, and then either set an appointment then and there or exchange business cards and commit and adhere to a follow-up plan.

2. Don't try to sell to the exhibitors at the Trade Show

They've paid for their table. At their table, it's their show. Their goal is to show off their own helpfulness and expertise. You've got to respect that goal.

That said, there are likely to be some exhibitors that you look at and start drooling. Maybe the key contact at a prospect you've never been able to get to before is standing there not 35 feet away. I'm not suggesting that you do nothing about it because they bought a table and you didn't.

Rather, use intelligence and etiquette to begin a conversation that you can continue elsewhere, later. Remember that face to face consultative selling always begins with asking.

Whether as a prospect or a vendor, you want to know about their business. What are they working on? What have been their biggest successes? All this information is crucial to you if you want to sell to them later.

Buy First, Sell Later

You'll have a much better chance of getting their business if you first give them some of your own. Do they have a product or service you could use? If not, can you recommend them to others? Ivan Meisner, founder of Business Network International, summed up his entire business philosophy in two words: "Givers Gain."

If you want to get something from someone, give them something first.

Don't pretend to be a prospect just to make friends. The Talmudic term for "window shopping" literally translates to "stealing the brain" of the person you're feigning interest in.

How to Follow Up

If you honestly can't use their stuff, you can still provide value that will gain you friends and influence. Offer to send them an article or magazine or book or report that pertains

to their situation. Ask them who their ideal customer is, so you can give referrals to them. Add value and you'll always be an invited guest.

And if you honestly want to sell something to an exhibitor, be brief and direct about it. Give them your business card, ask for theirs, and ask permission to contact them in a week or so. Say thanks and move on.

Goal 2: Get Ideas and Identify Opportunities

A trade show is a great place to absorb a particular business scene, either by location or by industry. If your business success depends on understanding these business trends, you owe it to yourself to look around and brainstorm some ideas for innovations in your own business that can serve. Being “in the loop” about trends that others don’t see increases your value as an advisor to your own customers.

You also have the opportunity to think about joint ventures, co-marketing, alliances, and various other forms of cooperation that can make you and your partners more attractive and valuable to clients and customers.

Trend Spotting

You discover trends by gathering and processing enough data to separate trend from fluke. In your own business, you’ve noticed trends. Maybe customers are spending less on X, more on Y. Maybe they’re complaining about things that used to be fine. Maybe you’re experiencing more charge-backs; maybe customer loyalty is increasing.

There are larger trends in the local business community that you can discover only by talking with lots of people. The Trade show, which will put lots of people in one place at one time with business on their minds, is an ideal place for this.

How to Research Trends

How do you research trends? You can start with some hunches, and test them: “Do you find that it’s harder to get loans for heavy equipment these days?”

You can simply gather data without having a hypothesis to test: “What’s your biggest challenge this year?” “What keeps you up at night?” “What’s the biggest change you expect in your industry over the next three years?”

Examples of Possible Trends You Might Discover

- People are spending money on things that will give them _____, rather than _____.

- Many businesses are looking for new solutions to _____; the old ways are increasingly perceived as ineffective.
- The number one worry on most people's minds this year is _____.

How might those completed fill-in-the-blank statements affect your own business? What are some ways you can capitalize on trends among your customer base and competitors? What new products, services, offers, sales messages and the like can you create to stay in touch with your market?

Joint Ventures

By joint ventures, I mean cooperating in some way with another business to your mutual benefit. The deals can be formally or loosely structured. They can involve strict accountability, as in a percentage of gross as a finder's or marketing fee, or can be constructed entirely as good faith quid pro quo.

Non-competing companies who share a common market can endorse each other, or offer reduced rates to each other's customers.

Even competitors can work together: for how that can work, check out a fantastic marketing book: [Getting Everything You Can Out of All You've Got](#), by Jay Abraham. His chapter, "With a Little Help from My Friends," will be worth thousands of dollars, minimum, to just about any businessperson with initiative. You can find a review on my web site, www.howieconnect.com/books.htm.

Examples of Joint Ventures

- A chiropractor, a massage therapist, and a nutritionist can get together and endorse each others' services in mailings to their own client base.
- A realtor can put together a book of valuable coupons from local restaurants, dry cleaners, pharmacies, landscapers, contractors, carpet cleaners, and maid services for home buyers new to the area.
- An accountant farms client work out to a bookkeeper, who recommends the accountant to his or her clients.

Note that you can look for joint venture opportunities with exhibitors as well as other attendees. I recommend brainstorming inside your own head first, before getting all excited and sharing an opportunity that requires someone else's buy-in.

How to Follow Up

If you're chatting with someone and they strike you as honest, reliable, forward-thinking, and focused, exchange contact information and say that you would like to buy them coffee next week and talk about some ways in which you might help each other. When you meet, lay out the idea and focus on how it benefits them.

A word of caution: Don't spend even five minutes trying to convince someone who doesn't get it. If they don't want to pursue the opportunity or the relationship, find someone else who does. The possibilities are truly infinite.

Goal 3: Promote Your Business, & Goal 4: Help Others Promote Their Businesses

I've combined goals 3 and 4 because they go hand in hand. The people who do the best in business are those who help other people succeed. Also, you need to go through the same steps to achieve both goals.

Promoting Your Business to Exhibitors

For promoting your business to exhibitors, see Etiquette Tip #2 above. Remember that they paid for the spotlight, and are unlikely to take kindly to your grabbing it from them. Be brief, add value, make an appointment for next week or next month. And move on.

Promoting Your Business to Other Attendees and Helping Them Promote Theirs

There are probably dozens, if not hundreds of attendees who are prospective customers for your product or service. As well as thinking of the trade show as a mall, where you're just a shopper, you can also see it as a singles bar (or art museum), where the patrons are all looking to meet that special someone.

Even if you are not in the market for what a fellow attendee is selling, you probably know others who are. Or who sell to the same market. Or who share common interests. Or common problems.

Peer to Peer Networking (people, not computers)

Attendee networking is the single biggest missed opportunity for trade show attendees. Remember, the other attendees also represent potential clients and referral sources for you. The main thing to remember is, YOU ARE NOT THERE TO SELL. That's what the exhibitors are there for. It's expected of them. You are there to network; to demonstrate your worth by providing something of value to the people you meet.

Let me repeat this definition of networking: to demonstrate your worth by providing something of value to the people you meet.

What Networking is Not

- Distractedly peering around the room while you're talking to someone
- Pressing your business card into the hands of everyone within 20 feet of you
- Forcing people to listen to a long description of your business
- Standing around and eating
- Having conversation that never lead to how you can help each other
- Large groups of people standing around chatting
- And a bunch of other things you probably can think of

Ask, Don't Tell

The major mistake that people make while networking is talking too much. Strangers don't care about you. They care about themselves. So don't talk about your business. Ask them about theirs and how you can help them.

Some Effective Networking Questions

- What do you do?
- How do you do that?
- How are you different from your competitors?
- What do you think will be the most important change in your industry over the next few years?
- What's your most exciting goal for the next year?
- Who would be a good referral for you?
- What should I listen for in conversation that will give me a hint that you could help them?
- What questions should I ask to prequalify your prospects?
- Should I have them call you?

By finding out about them, you're actually doing two things at once. You're demonstrating that you're in this to help them, and not just yourself. And you're also doing a great job of consultative selling. How can you sell them something until you understand what they need?

Your Tag Line

At some point, if they're smart, your networking partner is going to ask you about yourself. That's when you deliver your 10 second tag line. Don't make it cute, memorable, corny, hokey, obscene, or hilarious. Don't say the name of your profession, as in, "I'm a financial planner."

Instead, focus it on the most important benefit you provide and how you do it uniquely. Dan Kennedy, the renowned marketing expert, refers to this as "the promise only you can make."

For example, a financial planner I know says, "I help parents of children with Downs Syndrome provide for their own and their children's long-term needs."

I say, "I help businesses end cold prospecting by teaching them how to attract more customers with less expense and effort than they ever thought possible."

And I modify it, depending on whom I'm talking to. If they never cold prospect, I leave that part out. If they're with a startup, I might add something about "getting customers to buy from Day One." To the extent I can, I want to describe the benefit in terms that mean something to the person I'm talking with.

If I can, I get specific: "I use techniques that have helped businesses increase the response to their Yellow Pages ads by an average of 400%."

Two Warnings About Your Claims

First, don't try to be all things to all people. If I'm talking to someone that I know I can't help, I don't contort myself and my message to interest or impress them.

Second, never ever make a specific statement that you can't prove. I don't care what your other assets are, lose credibility and you lose everything.

Talking About Your Business

Even if you could, you wouldn't want to tell everything about your business unprompted. The best response you can get to your tag line is, "How in the world do you do that?"

To answer that question, you have two choices. If you think they are a prospect, you offer to give them an example from their own business by asking questions. If they aren't, you can tell a short, compelling success story to illustrate your value and how you are different from your competitors.

Commitments

The whole conversation should take no more than 7 minutes. When it ends, you either make a commitment or you don't. Examples of commitments:

- schedule a meeting
- send literature
- send an email with a link to a relevant web site
- send an article, book, tape, or report of value
- contact someone else on their behalf and follow up

Follow Up

Then, take their business card and note on the back everything that you're sure you're going to remember tomorrow. Or jot down their name on a pad and write it down. Or get one of those micro or digital voice recorders and make a note to yourself.

Because you're wrong. You're going to leave the Trade show and forget everything. And even if you forget to do just *one tiny thing* that you promised, you lose.

So don't wait – as soon as you finish a conversation, store the relevant facts and action items in a place you will remember to look later.

Because you are going to go back to your office and do everything you said you were going to do before you said you were going to do it. You are going to **underpromise** and **overdeliver**. That's the quickest way to build credibility, and demonstrate what it's like to do business with you.

What to Bring to a Trade Show

You also need to bring your calendar with you. Whether paper-based or electronic, you want to be able to schedule something on the spot.

Obviously, you want to bring a bunch of your business cards (in good condition, I don't have to tell you), but you don't care if you give them out. Your goal is not to distribute your business cards. If you wanted to do that, you could just throw them up in the air and watch them flutter to the floor. You'll end up with the same result if you press them upon people who don't really want them.

Your goal is to collect business cards from people you want to contact later.

One pointer that you might consider to obvious to mention, but I've made this mistake so I'll pass it along anyway: put the business cards you collect in a totally different place from your own stack of cards.

I once put other people's cards in the same shirt pocket as my cards, and discovered to my horror that I had given away almost all of the cards I had collected.

I couldn't follow up with anyone, and no one could follow up with me. Staying home that day would have been infinitely smarter.

Bring a working pen that won't leak and embarrass you. Often, people who feel comfortable with you will give you more information than appears on their cards: email addresses, cell phone numbers, pagers, private lines or extensions. You want to be prepared.

Networking Simplified

If all this seems very complicated, you can boil it down to one strategy: "Ask people questions." If you're naturally shy, it may be hard to be really open and engaging, but remember that most attendees are there because they're interested in what other people are doing, and are there to learn. And of course, exhibitors love answering your questions.

A Final Thought

Now that you're an expert in goals 1-4, don't neglect 5 and 6: Have fun, and make friends! (Probably the best business strategy of all.)

Peace, and thanks for reading.