

Trade show clichés that really miss the point

Over the years I have visited, exhibited at and been involved in international trade shows many times. This experience not only gave me a good idea on the do's and don'ts when exhibiting at trade shows but I also started noticing something interesting. Whenever asked about their success at the trade show many, if not most, exhibitors replied in very similar ways. One can think that if everybody is saying it, it probably must be true...but is it really? Although I must admit that I myself sometimes used one or two of these clichés I have reached the conclusion that when it comes to trade shows many exhibitors are in the state of mind that can be described as "don't think, participate". Herewith are the most heard clichés that actually demonstrate a lack of understanding on how to make the best use of a trade show.

"We do not know whether or not the show was successful until months after the show"

This is one of the most common clichés regretfully spoken by many executives who are paid to actually know better. If the right objectives have been properly defined in measurable terms it is possible to determine how successful a show was at the very moment the final whistle blows. The problem quite often is setting the right objectives. Objectives such as: we aim to increase sales or we wish to launch our new product successfully are quite often mentioned. To make a tradeshow responsible for the overall objective of increasing sales or having a successful product launch is poor management since it overlooks the other parameters. Like all marketing activities a trade show contributes to reaching a certain objective. The objectives for the trade show should therefore be focused on what is required from a trade show to support an overall objective in the best way possible. Better KPI's are number of press presentations, number of introduction packages sold, number of existing distributors who have been invited that visited the show, number of contracts signed or number of new qualified leads for the company.

"We only need one good deal to make the show worthwhile"

In other words we only need to be lucky once...when someone is saying this their colleagues immediately need to shout out loud: "WAKE-UP... IT IS NOT A LOTTERY"! This cliché clearly indicates a fatalistic view to marketing & sales activities in combination with a complete lack of formulating objectives and the ability to achieve them. Of course it is nice if the trade show helps to secure one or more great deals but also here the rule applies that the trade show should not be made solely responsible for securing this great deal, other factors play a role as well. However, the proper plan with well-defined objectives will increase the chance of securing any deal during or after the show but only as a contributing factor.

"We are here to feel the temperature of the water"

In other words: "We are not ready to be here yet". So... why be there? When interested in conquering new markets the research and preparation process ends with exhibiting at a trade show and does not start with it. When a company is exhibiting "to feel the temperature of the water" the usual effect is that they end up with leads that can't be followed-up effectively, agents or distributors of which the majority are not suitable, potentially good customers losing interest in the product and sometimes even the company. With respect to getting the temperature of the water it usually leaves the company almost as ignorant as they were before the trade show. Because they were exhibiting, there hardly has been the time to study the show and see what really is happening in their market of interest. When interested in feeling the temperature of the water time and money is much better spent by conducting market research and developing a penetration strategy aimed at the new market(s). During this process attending trade shows not exhibiting is essential. After the market research is done and a much better understanding of the market and what is required has helped to develop a plan an excellent way to start the market penetration process is with a trade show.

“There are not many visitors but the quality is high”

Usually spoken by someone who is utterly disappointed in the show they are exhibiting on but still in public denial. Also here the cliché reflects poor preparation because the number of visitors at the show is not relevant but the number of right visitors to your exhibition is important. As a matter of logic the right visitor must be high quality. The fact that there have been a couple or perhaps even more people who appeared very interested and indicated they might buy something does not automatically mean that an objective has been met. Again set the right objectives in advance and measure the real success of the show with these in mind and yes it is most likely that when there have not been many visitors it was a disappointing show.

“We need to generate as many leads as we can”

Bouncing balls, balloons, raffles, candy, showgirls, singing shoe-shiners, foot massages and many more activities certainly contribute to the overall fun atmosphere at trade shows, however, does this “fish-bowl marketing” boost your sales as well? To be quite honest if your objective is to generate quality leads that can be converted into sales all of these efforts are usually counterproductive. Most leads acquired in such a way only make the follow-up process more tedious and ineffective.

In order to do generate quality leads it is better to spend the money on pre-marketing & sales activities like personal invitations, promotion activities by sales staff or campaigns together with distributors and dealers, and aimed towards the target groups you wish to have visit your exhibition.

“We hope this show will help us to find some good distributors”

It is always funny to see those booths with a paper sign on top “Distributors wanted”. Yes of course sometimes one might get lucky and actually find a quality distributor this way. Actually there are also several people who did win in Las Vegas. Still it would not be sound business advice to suggest to take US\$ 50,000.= of company money and put it all on black at the roulette table. Why spend the same amount of money on a trade show without making sure you achieve your objective? The only way to make sure that quality distributors will be visiting is doing the homework before the show and investigate the markets of interest to find out who the main distribution players are. Once this homework is done it is possible to entice the best distributor(s) to visit the exhibition for a meeting. In other words trade shows are not the ideal method to find quality distribution partners but a great opportunity to take a relationship with a distribution partner further.

The way many companies approach trade shows is more like entering a lottery than taking control of their own destiny. Taking control of this destiny all has to do with preparation. The preparation of most companies quite often is solely aimed at the aesthetics of the display and the hotel accommodation. Proper business planning that includes realistic objectives for the activities during the trade show is usually lacking. This is a shame because this component is actually essential in making sure that a trade show delivers the return on the money invested in the event.

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