

Exhibiting at Conferences & Tradeshows

By Norman M. Goldfarb

Exhibiting at MAGI and other events provides the opportunity to interact with current and potential customers, suppliers, employees and competitors. There are lots of ways to maximize the effectiveness of your exhibit experience...and lots of ways to do the opposite.

Objectives

As with most things, it helps to know your objectives, and the more specific the better. Your objectives for exhibiting at an event might include the following:

- Find potential customers.
- Strengthen relationships with current customers.
- Find potential employees, suppliers, partners, key opinion leaders, etc.
- Collect names, e.g., as potential subscribers.
- Conduct market research, e.g., about what people think of your company, competitive intelligence, and key buying influences.
- Meet with people you already know.
- Hone your marketing message.
- Convey your company's culture and style.
- Show you are a presence in the industry.
- Express support for a group, typically the people attending.

It is easier to justify the time and cost of participating in an event if the results can be measured and directly related to value generation, which is usually calculated as return on investment (ROI). The first seven of these objectives can generate direct, measurable results against your objectives. Results from the last three objectives can be measured, at least in theory, with before-and-after surveys.

Tell the event organizer what you want to accomplish at the event so they can give you advice and, possibly, assistance.

Planning and Preparation

Know your goals and how you plan to achieve them. Pre-event planning and preparation are essential, especially because problems can be hard to fix if they occur during an event.

Invite current and potential customers to meet with you at the event. You might want to invite them to a meal or other gathering. Do your messaging early to influence their attendance decision. You can use social media to publicize your plans to exhibit at the event and, also, during the event. Find out if the event organizer has a special hashtag for the event; using it will score points with the organizer.

Use a checklist. Reread the event and venue contracts and order forms. Plan for surprises. Bring an emergency supply kit with office supplies, tools, maintenance items, and personal items (Appendix A). What will you do if your booth, marketing literature, or giveaways do not arrive on time? What will you do if Internet connectivity is inadequate for your online demo? Are your booth personnel all planning to travel on the same airplane?

Make sure booth personnel are trained and know when they need to be in the booth. Rehearse your story and answers to likely questions, e.g., “What’s new and exciting?” Bring a list of personnel with contact information, especially mobile phone numbers, as well as vendors for the booth, marketing literature, temporary staff, etc. Make sure everyone checks in on time.

Before you ship your booth, make sure all the pieces (and spare parts) are there, booth personnel can assemble it and repack it (if that’s their job), and the instructions are clear. Make sure the fixtures don’t block the graphics. Document the process with photos or videos. Bring return shipping labels with you.

Booth Objectives and Design

The job of marketing is to help the salesforce do its job, including providing the booth. It is very frustrating for salespeople to work in a booth that attendees ignore or that does not lay the groundwork for a productive conversation. Competent salespeople know how to sell, so help them do their job the best way they know how.

The event organizer can attract attendees to the exhibit hall but not necessarily to your booth. An effective booth will accomplish the following objectives:

- **Make a favorable impression.** A booth that is ugly, cluttered, boring, dirty, messy, cheap-looking or unprofessional sends a negative message and does not even give you a chance to make excuses. Update your booth from time to time to keep it fresh. A large booth communicates that your company is successful and that attendees will miss out if they don’t visit you. However, splurging on a large booth that attracts only a few visitors communicates the opposite. A small booth communicates that your company is not a major player, especially if the booth looks cheap or amateurish. As with many things, quality is more important than quantity.
- **Catch the interest of the people you want to talk to.** It is not your booth’s job to tell your story to attendees, just to catch their interest — booth personnel can take over from there. Since you have about five seconds to catch the attention of an attendee walking by, less is more. Distinctive, clear, concise, readable messages are essential. Attendees want to know the name of your company, what your product is, and why they want it. A clear message will also help keep the wrong people out of your booth. Bold, but not harsh, high-resolution images, colors and shapes will help catch their eye. Any faces should be smiling and engaging. Any text below shoulder level will probably not be visible and will make attendees feel awkward and exposed when they try to read it...so they won’t. Use lighting for emphasis.
- **Draw people in and encourage them to ask a question.** Do not use tables or fixtures to build yourself a fort. Make it easy for attendees to walk into the booth and right up to booth personnel for a personal greeting.
- **Provide a comfortable environment for discussion.** A padded floor to stand on and a high-boy table to lean on can be welcome for both booth personnel and visitors. Don’t over pack the booth with furniture and fixtures. If there is room, include some seating for discussions.

When designing your booth, also consider practical matters like storage space, durability, wire management, spare/replacement parts, set-up, dismantling and shipping. Protect your valuables, including giveaways and marketing literature — exhibit halls are not secure — the doors might lock but people have keys and, often, a back way in.

Booth Messaging

Instead of broad, puffy, clichéd, abstract claims, use specific, objective, coherent messaging that explains what your product does and why attendees should want it. Instead of saying “Best CRO in Europe,” perhaps say, “Experienced staff in 14 European countries waiting to serve you.” Plan to fine tune your booth messaging from event to event for different audiences and as your message evolves. You might even be able to experiment with booth messaging during an event.

There are probably lots of reasons (features and benefits) why attendees should want your product, but focus on the one message that *speaks to your customer’s soul*. If necessary, support it with one or two secondary reasons. However, in some cases, it is possible to weave multiple reasons into one simple message. For example, the CRO message above communicates three synergistic messages: that you have experienced staff, that they are on the ground in Europe, and that they will deliver excellent customer service.

If your company offers multiple products, it will be a challenge for your booth to communicate a focused message unless all the products fit neatly within a combined message that still packs a punch. You will have a similar challenge if you are targeting multiple market segments. If at all possible, focus your booth messaging on your most important product for your most important market segment. Then screen attendees and tailor your conversation and collaterals accordingly.

Attendees want solutions to *their* problems and want to know that *you* are focused on *their* problems. If your booth communicates that you have three products and an attendee wants only one of them, the attendee will feel like he or she has to share your love. If you have to offer three products, try to create three sub-booths, which requires some size and creativity. If you are a large company with lots of products, your central message might have to be rather general, but the messaging for each product or product family should tie into the central theme.

Avoid messaging clutter at all costs. Lots of text might be informative but nobody will digest it. It will just distract. The first step in a selling process (and maybe the whole process) is an emotional appeal. Lots of text in a booth not only diverts attendees from the visitor’s emotional mode to their intellectual mode, but it also does a poor job of communicating to the intellect at all.

Honing your marketing message is one of the most important but least appreciated objectives of exhibiting at an event or tradeshow, since they can give you the opportunity to try out variations in your message on dozens or even hundreds of people and observe their reactions.

Depending on your business and the event, many, if not all, of the people who visit your booth will not be decision-makers, just people who know them. In such cases, your objective is to train and motivate the attendee to *convey your message* to the decision maker. That means you need to communicate a clear and simple marketing message, provide a single piece of marketing material that communicates the same message, and give the attendee a reason to carry the message for you.

Booth Location

A prominent location communicates that your company is important, even to attendees who do not visit your booth. You want a booth location where there is substantial foot traffic but not, necessarily, on the busiest aisle. Most people, when entering an exhibit hall, go straight ahead or unconsciously turn to their right, so that side will probably have more traffic. Booth locations visible from the entrance are best. The front of an exhibit hall is better than

the back, but traffic flow might carry attendees right past a booth at the entrance, especially if the booth does not feel like it is “in” the exhibit hall.

The layout of the aisles is very important. Attendees who want to be thorough will tend to walk up and down the major aisles. If an aisle is interrupted by a sitting area or a large booth, they might not bother crossing it or going around it to get to the booths behind. Some exhibit halls have multiple entrances, some have posts or other obstacles, and there might be other features, such as service entrances, that can disrupt traffic flow. A partial aisle all the way on one side, especially if it looks like a low-rent ghetto, will get less traffic. A small booth can benefit from traffic from a nearby large and busy booth in the same business, but the small exhibitor might suffer by comparison.

You probably do not want your booth to be located right next to a competitor, but it might be advantageous to be in their neighborhood. Booths that feature games, entertainers, lectures, or novelty foods might benefit nearby booths or, conversely, block access and disrupt conversation. Food service during a break will attract attendees to the area of nearby booths, but not necessarily to the booths themselves. In a word, booth location is complicated.

Marketing Literature

The best strategy is to bring only one or, perhaps, a few impressive marketing pieces. Amateurish materials communicate amateurism. You can probably assume that most attendees, if they read your marketing materials at all, will not read them until they get back to their office, and that’s when you want them to read them — when they are able to use them. Your marketing materials, or their content, is probably already on your website (or should be), so it is better to point to supporting material in a follow-up email with a call to action.

A large number of marketing pieces can confuse or even intimidate attendees. Just displaying them creates clutter and might even create a wall between you and the attendees. If you need a large selection, keep them hidden and then bring out the right one when needed.

Traffic Generation

There are a variety of ways to attract people to your booth, including the following:

- Pre-show emails, post cards and letters
- Promotional items (AKA giveaways, incentives, swag, freebies, tradeshow trinkets)
- Food
- Performers
- Treasure hunts
- Drawings
- Contests
- Games

The problem with these methods is that, if they work at all, they attract people who want the thing offered but not necessarily your product. If your primary objective is to generate visibility, or you are a publisher or staffing firm, collecting a lot of business cards might be your primary objective, but attracting a crowd of random attendees is not only costly but *counterproductive* because that crowd can get in the way of the small number of attendees you actually want to talk to.

If possible, send personalized invitations to your “high-value targets.” To this end, MAGI’s online networking module can help you identify and contact these people. The personalized MAGI treasure hunt helps attract attendees to your booth who are likely to be good prospects.

If you want to offer promotional items, find something your audience wants. Unfortunately, hot, new items quickly become old and passé. You can offer expensive promotional items in personalized invitations to important prospects or as unexpected thank-you gifts to provide a delightful surprise, but don’t put them out front where passersby can easily grab one or three. Try to find items that reinforce your message. For example, if you are promoting your presence in Europe, offer key chains from different European countries. You will want to brand your giveaways, but not everyone wants to be your walking billboard. Try using a message that makes them feel good about themselves, with your logo in a smaller size.

Working the Booth

Booth personnel must be knowledgeable about and believe in your products. They should be outgoing, energetic, good at verbal communications, curious and familiar with your customers’ world. Attendees love meeting (personable) senior executives.

Booth personnel should work as a team. If you have three booth personnel and the attendee/lead funnel is the right shape, each of them can play a different role:

- Rick, *the gaffer*, identifies a promising attendee and asks a qualifying question, e.g., “Are you involved in quality management?” (If possible, catch the person’s name, e.g., “Sally,” from her name tag.) If Sally says “no,” then Rick says something like, “Have a great conference, Sally!” and starts looking for the next promising attendee. If the Sally says “yes,” Rick introduces Sally to the catcher (“Bill”) and says something like, “Bill, Sally is involved in quality management. Can you talk to her?” The gaffer/attendee interaction should take under a minute, just long enough to establish a personal connection and determine whether a longer interaction is justified. If the event allows, Rick should stand in the aisle in front of the booth.
- Bill, *the catcher*, says something like, “Sally, so nice to meet you. You’re involved in quality management?” If Sally answers, “yes,” Bill asks her a few more qualifying questions. If the answers are encouraging, Bill introduces Sally to Grace, the closer, saying something like, “Grace, it sounds like Sally plays a key role in quality metrics at Acme Company. Sally, would it be okay if Grace learns more about your needs and how we might be able to help?” The catcher/attendee interaction should take no more than two or three minutes, just long enough to determine whether a longer interaction is justified. Try to avoid pitching your wares to anyone, especially competitors, without asking a few questions first.
- Grace, *the closer*, says something to engage Sally in a longer conversation, and then continues the conversation just long enough to get to a natural stopping point like an agreement to follow up after the event.

Genuine enthusiasm helps the process along, but everything should be low-pressure, consultative and sensitive to Sally’s time and interest. She should feel that, at any point, she can politely excuse herself and go spend her time elsewhere.

Depending on their skills and attendee flow, booth personnel can play multiple roles. Of course, if there are not at least three booth personnel, one or two people will have to play all three roles, but the process should still go through the same three steps. Depending on the product, other people might direct traffic, collect contact information, demonstrate the product, or perform other roles.

Booth personnel should not try to force feed visitors with a product pitch, a list of features and benefits, or a product demonstration. Instead, they should be gracious hosts who engage visitors in conversation, ask lots of open-ended questions, listen attentively, and find ways to help. They might refer the visitor to someone who has relevant expertise.

Determine in advance what information you need from visitors for proper follow up. The best time to collect information is during or immediately after your interaction, even if it delays your next interaction by a minute or two. Technology for collecting an attendee's name and contact information is evolving, so ask the event organizer which method(s) will be available. Keep in mind that you will need information to classify and follow up on leads. Don't trust your memory. Try dictating to your mobile phone.

From the time the exhibit hall opens until the time it closes, at least one person should staff the booth. Booth personnel should spread out in the booth to maximize availability and not congregate in packs that make visitors feel like they are interrupting your club.

While you should never leave your booth unattended, sitting there alone sends the wrong message, so stand in front and greet everyone who walks by or even looks your way.

Traffic Management

Some attendees will want to visit your booth for a quiet conversation and others will be attracted by a crowd, but the majority will want to visit when your booth is active, but not too crowded, and someone is available to talk to them. Since you can't count on a steady, consistent flow of visitors, adjust your approach accordingly.

When your booth is busy, the challenge is to be attentive to the best prospects, not neglect current customers, and capture contact and qualifying information from the rest. Acknowledge new arrivals with a smile or a "be there in a minute." When you are talking to an attendee, give that person your full attention. If you don't have the time just then, try to schedule a meeting for a quieter time. Company personnel who are not dedicated to the booth and current customers in attendance can help handle heavy traffic without much training. In a small exhibit hall, any attendee who really wants to talk to you will find a time.

Outside the Booth

For a variety of reasons, some good prospects will not visit your booth or you will be busy when they do visit, so you will have to go find them. The best places to find them are near other booths they are likely to visit and in educational sessions they are likely to attend.

Another good reason to get out of your booth is to learn things. It is a lot easier to engage with a prospective customer if you can talk their talk.

"Walk the floor." Talk to other exhibitors, including competitors, ask questions, and observe. Which booths are busy (or not)? What do they look like? How do they operate? How are they different than your booth?

Attend the social events and talk to people there. Do not assume that you are just there to relax, and remember you'll still need to show up in the morning at the top of your game, so don't overdo it and do get some sleep.

If allowed, attend educational sessions. They might seem boring or confusing to you but they are, presumably, interesting to potential customers.

If your budget allows, sponsor an event, the tote bags, or something else to increase your visibility and promote your image as an industry leader. When you put your name in front of

people, especially with a generous message, they unconsciously feel a bit like you care about them.

There are two things you should not do:

- Do not get salesy outside the exhibit hall.
- Do not host events that compete with the organizer's events without the organizer's permission. Event organizers call this and related activities "outboarding," and they do not like it.

If you see someone outboarding or running a mini-booth on a table in the exhibit hall or elsewhere ("suitcasing"), inform the organizer.

Etiquette

The normal rules of business etiquette apply: Act professionally and like you want to be there; dress appropriately with unwrinkled clothing and polished (comfortable) shoes; give people your undivided attention (don't check your mobile phone); be discrete in conversations; do not bad-mouth the competition; stand when talking to people who are standing; and do not eat in your booth when the exhibit hall is open.

Venues

Every event venue is different and rarely will you experience perfection, and probably not at an affordable price. You can blame the event organizer but keep in mind that, as conferences get larger, they have fewer and fewer venue choices and they have to compete for those venues with conference organizers in other industries that might have deeper pockets.

Hotels, convention centers, and other event venues are businesses. Like any business, they have both financial and customer satisfaction objectives. As an exhibitor, you are more likely to notice the implications of the financial objectives — the rules and price lists might seem outrageous until conference life wears you down. To rub salt in the wound, you might not be that impressed with their customer service, especially if the venue has to deal with unions, which can limit the venue's flexibility. If you have a problem, ask the event organizer for assistance — they will have more pull than you do with the venue. Other than that, follow the rules, pay the prices, tell them what you want, ask lots of questions, get creative, and take deep, slow breaths.

Post-Event Follow-Up

The best time for the initial follow up with contacts is during quiet times at the event. The attendees will be impressed, and you'll have some breathing space when you get back to the office.

The classic mistake is to invest so much time preparing for and exhibiting at an event that you do not have time afterwards to follow up properly on the leads you have collected. As a result, your leads might never hear from you or they will get a generic follow up communication that conveys only that you are bad at following up and do not respect them.

Your follow-up communication should focus on what you plan to do and what you are asking the attendee to do. If you send emails, remind the attendees what message you want them to convey to the decision makers and include the appropriate marketing piece. If you make a commitment to send them something, call them with some information, or add them to a mailing list, honor your commitment.

At the end of the event or immediately thereafter, debrief everyone and figure out how to get better results from the next event. Pass information and give feedback to colleagues who did not have the good fortune to attend the event. Also give constructive feedback to the event organizer so they can improve your next experience with them.

And, finally, reward your staff for their hard work with a lunch or some other get-together.

Where to Get Help

Many companies hire or contract with meeting planners to manage their event experiences. Exhibit marketing consultants can help. Event organizers can also help you navigate the process.

Author

Norman M. Goldfarb. MAGI Chairman, enjoys the art of crafting effective marketing messages and booth designs so much that he offers his assistance as a free service to MAGI exhibitors. Contact him at 1.650.465.0119 or ngoldfarb@magiworld.org.

Appendix A. Back-Up Supplies & Emergency Items

Promotional Items

- Giveaways
- Marketing literature
- Business cards

Office Items

- Pens, markers and highlighters
- Stapler and staples
- Paper clips
- Notepads
- Post-It notes
- Calculators
- Extra batteries

Personal Items

- Throat lozenges
- Breath mints
- Tissues
- Hand sanitizer
- First-aid kit

Tools and Maintenance Items

- Duct tape
- Packaging tape
- Velcro
- Light bulbs
- Glass cleaner with cloths or paper towels
- Clorox wipes
- Utility knife
- Tape measure
- Hammer
- Pliers, small and large
- Screwdrivers (Phillips head and regular), small and large