

Have No Fear: Put Trade Shows to Work for You!

— Steve Portrude, President, Harwill Express Press

Trade shows are really like non-threatening sales meetings.

Have you ever sat through a sales meeting waiting for the salesperson to make his close (the push)? We all hate that part; it makes us want to pick up our marbles and run. Trade shows are

Top of Mind (TOM) opportunities to present your case without the sales pitch—and that can put your prospects in a much better frame of mind.

Although sales can be made at a trade show, it is more often a place where both exhibitor and attendee can ask and answer questions, gather information, and exchange ideas and information. It is a way to help your TOP OF MIND (TOM) marketing and create a reputation for expertise in an industry with your clients, prospects, future employees, trade partners, and the press.

But before you decide to be in a trade show, first look at “G and the 5 Ws”: Goals, Who, What, Where, When, and Why, and make sure each is tied back to your business and marketing plan. You will be spending money—not just hard dollars, but soft dollars as well (labor, marketing material, booth design, travel, your time), and all of this needs to be accounted for in your goal.

If all are aligned with your business plan, the next step is to be sure your participation fits within your marketing and sales goals and then develop a simple, measurable target you can use to manage your show activities and track your success.

Qualified Prospects

Our company’s goal for one show, for example, was to find four-to-six qualified prospects that would do somewhere between \$2,500 and \$10,000 a year in our type of work, and to close two of them within six months of the show. We have gotten one or two clients at trade shows every year for the past 15 years and have grown some—and lost some—over time.

We have also set a goal of getting mentioned in the press and using that coverage as part of our marketing plan for the year. One year, for example, we created a theme for our booth—“Relax and we will make your problems go away”—and it featured beach chairs and umbrellas, with our staff dressed in Hawaiian shirts.

“G and the 5 Ws”:
Goals, Who, What,
Where, When & Why

TO BEGIN, LOOK AT YOUR GOAL FROM FOUR PERSPECTIVES:

- **The organizers’ view:** Why are they putting this show on? This will help you decide if the event is the right show for you to have a booth.
- **The attendees’ view:** Why are they going to the show? This will help you decide if the event will provide the best audience for your booth.
- **The exhibitors’ view:** Why are they at the show? This will give you an idea of the environment in which your booth will be placed and the audience it will be attracting.
- **Your company’s view:** Why are you there? This will help you define your aims and targeted results for the show.



To attract attention, we turned the back of a pickup truck into a mini volleyball court where our mascots were playing a game. Then we parked it in the first spot going into the hotel where the show was held so it could be seen by everyone going in and out. The result: Not only was it covered in the business section of the local paper, but it was picked up on Philadelphia TV where we got 30 seconds of prime time in the business news segment.

Another goal we have had was to attract to our company salespeople who might be looking for their next challenge. We weren't going to put up a big sign saying, "WE ARE LOOKING TO HIRE A SALESPERSON," but by staffing a professional booth with the owner or sales manager, we increased our chance of finding someone with the skills and personality to sell printing.

Warm and Inviting

Once your goals have been defined and the Why, Where, When, and Who questions have been answered, it's time to work on the What—what your trade show booth will look like. That's probably the part everyone wants to start on first, but it really needs to be determined only after goals have been set.

The type of show you are going to be in will dictate the booth you need. You can be creative and build your own or you can reach out to a sign shop and partner with them. They might have a pop up or retractable stand you can rent and this will create a great looking background for your logo and a theme that will draw people to you.

The layout and flow of the booth is important. It should be open, warm, and inviting. The aim is to get the passerby to see the booth's theme and keep the company top of mind. You want them to stop in and ask questions, hopefully driven by preshow marketing that has invited them to the booth.

And, yes, you should invite people to your booth ahead of time to schedule appointments with your salespeople for a non-sales conversation in a relaxed setting. Bring some of your staff or hire a few people to handle the booth traffic and identify the people entering your booth so your salespeople are only spending time with visitors you want to talk to.

You will encounter people who will try to sell you their services, and that is OK, but always ask them if they would mind answering a few questions about their business. By listening to answers from a salesperson, business owner, or someone who is ready to show you their products, you might get a ton of information that will help you figure out if their company might be a good prospect for your services. And you might also make a connection with someone who can help you set a meeting up with a buyer in their company.

Other things you can do during the show can be as important as the show itself. If you are trying to create TOM and position yourself and/or your firm as an expert in your field, volunteer to be a speaker, rent a room and give a seminar, hold a how-to at your booth, or tweet or text a message to your client base letting them know where you are presenting.

Build Relationships

After the show, you can write a review for your trade publication or website, highlighting new and exciting things you saw there. Creating a multi-part review will help bring visitors to your site several times to learn about everything that happened at the show, creating additional TOM for your company.

Since most handouts end up in the trash can, create something small that will remind the visitor about your company, and then followup by sending—or hand-delivering—something personalized and useful such as a memo pad or calendar. Remember to show off what you can do vs. what is easy to buy.


If the show is a multi-day event, you and your staff should check in with each other for a few minutes at the end of each day to make sure everyone is OK and that all work at the show and the office is taken care of (the plant does not go away for these days). Take time to listen and offer help where it's needed. (Sometimes all that's needed is someone to listen.)

Have a follow-up communication written, designed, and printed so that you can put it in the mail as soon as you get back from the show with your list of contacts and business cards. Even better, have a business card scanner or badge scanner at the show

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and send that data back to your office every night so that your CSR team can send out letters or messages to people the next day. It can be a generic letter that says you will follow up with a more specific communication as soon as you get back to your office—certainly within a week.

The multiple touch method works: maybe a phone call or hand-written letter from you to the hot prospects and a form letter or scripted CSR call for the tire-kickers. When this is done right, with a goal that is realistic, you will get the exposure you need with the prospects you want.

Give the contacts some time, maybe a few months, to see how many are converted to completed sales, then look at your results and judge how successful the show was in terms of how well it met your goals. Finally, use this information to adjust or refine your goals, booth, presentation, follow-up, etc., to make your next trade show even more successful. 



Steven Portrude brings over 35 years of printing and marketing experience to Harwill Express Press, Lawrenceville, NJ. After graduating from RIT, he added to his already extensive knowledge by working for a trade printing firm

and then a large magazine printing firm before rejoining his parents in 1987 to eventually become the President of Harwill. He oversees the day to day operations and sets the direction and tone of the company.