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The Marketer's Ultimate Guide to Selecting the Right Trade Show

It Won't Stick

How do you determine which trade shows get your precious marketing dollars? Do you use the "spaghetti on the wall method"? The let's throw it out there and see what sticks approach? A little trial and error.

Throw uncooked or under-cooked spaghetti on the wall. Go ahead...try it! What happens? Nothing sticks. It falls on the floor. You've wasted spaghetti, and now you've got a mess to clean up. When your program consists of "uncooked" (not vetted) trade shows, you'll be disappointed with the results. They'll fall flat. And you'll have a mess to clean up too.

Lackluster results might even lead you to believe, that exhibiting at trade shows shouldn't be part of your marketing mix. Bottom line is your trade show experiences will be doomed from the start, if you're at the wrong show.

Blasting through the vetting process and making assumptions about a show, might get you into boiling water if the assumptions don't stick. Trade show success starts with selecting the right show. And this process takes time and legwork. Trusting without verifying can backfire. BIG TIME.

Three Things You Must Know FIRST

1. Your organizational objectives.
2. Your marketing objectives.
3. The audience you want to reach.

Determine how these objectives connect with what you want to achieve at a show. Pinpoint the objectives, and set clear, tangible (measureable) goals.

Connect with your senior leadership team about corporate objectives, then the marketing team for marketing objectives. And if you *are the marketing* team, you should know your own objectives. Hopefully. But just in case...marketing objectives include:

- Increase Sales
- Build Brand Awareness
- Grow Market Share

- Launch New Products or Services
- Enter New Markets

Understand how trade shows fit in with the overall marketing program and strategy. What's the "why" for exhibiting? Is it to increase Sales? Launch a new product or service? Both?

Align the decision to exhibit at a show, with the organizational and marketing objectives.

Who are you trying to reach? You've got to know who your customers and prospects are, what they value, what problems they have, and what solutions they need. And what **you need** are **buyer personas**.

"Built from real words of real buyers, a buyer persona tells you what prospective customers are thinking and doing, as they weigh their options to address a problem your company resolves." – Buyer Persona Institute

Each tradeshow attracts a different audience. Even shows within the same industry. Understanding your personas and what drives them, will provide key insights into whether a trade show aligns with the best prospects for your business.

If your personas don't align with a show's attendee profile, that's a clue. Eliminate guesswork by selecting shows that best match your objectives, and your buyer personas.

Navigate the Sea of Shows

Organizational and marketing objectives? Check! Buyer personas? Check! Let's go show shopping! Um...wait a minute. With 14,000+ trade shows in the U.S. and Canada every year, how do you find shows that are a good fit?

Look *inside* first. Talk to your product managers and the sales team. Ask them which shows they believe are valuable and why. But don't just take their word for it and plunk down dollars (sometimes thousands of dollars), on a lovely piece of concrete real estate. You've got to do your homework!

Find out which trade shows your existing prospects and customers attend. Ask them how they spend their time on the show floor.

- Do they plan ahead of time which booths they will visit?
- Do they attend seminars, or break out sessions?
- What are their goals?
- What do they want to accomplish?

Talk to your suppliers and partners about their trade show program, and their experiences. And research your competition. Where are they exhibiting?

Check out these sources for finding shows:

- Expo Central International <http://expocentral.com>
- Trade Show News Network – Top 250 US Trade Shows <http://tsnn.com/top-250-us-shows-list>
- Exhibit City News Trade Show Calendar <http://www.exhibitcitynews.com/tradeshow-calendar/>
- m+a expodatabase <http://www.expodatabase.com/trade-shows-america/usa/>
- Events in America <http://www.eventsinamerica.com>

Find Your Tribe

You've navigated the sea of shows without drowning, and you have a list of potential shows. Perfect! Now what? Search for *your tribe*.

Successful exhibitors are data driven in their decision making process. Weed through the fields of show facts and figures, and find attendees with similar wants, needs and behaviors.

Get detailed information about attendee needs, expectations, interests and their demographic profiles. How do the show attendees compare to your customer personas? You don't want everyone. You want your tribe!

The decision to exhibit and the level of investment you make, should be based in part on the size and value of the show's attendees. If it isn't, fix that!

Make sure the attendees are part of your target market and fit your buyer persona. Solid attendee demographics will give you the foundation for making decisions.

Can you answer YES to three key questions?

- Do the attendees represent enough potential revenue or value in reaching, to justify the investment to achieve those objectives?
- Does the size of the total potential market justify exhibiting to reach them?
- Do the attendee demographics match my client personas?

The pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, is a comprehensive attendee profile that defines the show audience the same way your company defines, and segments its markets and personas.

If you've got that, you're on the right track. But if you discover the attendees for a show are not part of your tribe...STOP.

What You Need from Show Management

Show management can provide gobs of information for exhibitors. Like peak hours, attendee demographics, competitive intelligence and more. But they usually don't pony up this information as part of the space rental process. To get anything insightful, you'll need to push for more.

Talk to show management. *REALLY* talk to show management. Have multiple conversations. Meet with them face-to-face. **Visit the show.** Get answers to your questions, and get what you need to select the right shows. This process takes the most time, but it's critical. So make the time!

Exhibitors pay for the promotional strategies show management implements to ensure the event is filled with attendees who are in your target audience. If management does little to promote to attendees, and isn't continually attempting to grow or maintain the attendee base, you're paying for a service that isn't being delivered!

And that will have a direct impact on the quality and quantity of leads!!

Ask them about what do they do to promote this event, and how they stay in contact with the attendees throughout the year. What's their promotional budget? What's their plan? Get specifics!

Ask for examples of successful exhibitor strategies from previous shows. They should know what works and what doesn't. If show management is unaware of, or unconcerned about what their exhibitors are doing, that's a SIGN. And a signal for you to steer clear of that show.

Contact the exhibitors from previous shows. Talk to those who are trying to reach the same audience. Don't contact your competitors. But do find out which of your competitors are exhibiting. Show management can provide details about the size and location of your competitor's booth space, and any significant strategies they've implemented in past years.

Find out how your company might be involved with ongoing communications to the attendees. There could be opportunities to generate awareness all year long. Talk to them about sponsorships.

- What sponsorship opportunities are available?
- Will they work with you to find a sponsorship that meets your goals?
- How willing are they to tailor-make a sponsorship, that is aligned with your objectives for the show?

Show management's inability to thoroughly answer your questions and provide solid data, should sound the alarm!

“What Gets Measured Gets Managed”

You need solid data to select the right trade shows. And show management should be able to explain their number crunching. At a minimum, here's what you need to know:

- The total net attendance in the past three years, and projection for the next year.
- Attendee demographics including: job titles, function, industry represented and location.
- Total net square footage of exhibit space used by all exhibitors combined.
- Top ten exhibitors and their square foot of exhibit space.
- Cost of space per square foot.
- Space available for future shows.
- Location and show dates for the next three to five years.

Got all that? Good! And find out if an independent auditor certified the last show. If yes, get your hands on a copy of that report.

A Four-Letter Word...AUDIT

You might be thinking, what is a trade show audit? Here's the “official”, not all that interesting definition:

It's a third party independent review, that objectively confirms the audience attendance figures and demographics collected in the registration process, and involves contacting attendees to validate attendance and demographic data.

Sounds like a fascinating read. Right? While the process of auditing might be as fun as an afternoon at the dentist, the results are important to you, and essential in the decision making process.

So now you're thinking, why audit a trade show? Well an audit...

1. Provides confidence in the audience numbers reported by the event or trade show organizer.
2. Provides consistency in how the numbers are audited.
3. Ensures the show objectives are realistic and achievable.

But who determines the audit standards? The EEIAC does.

The Exhibition & Event Industry Council Audit Commission ([EEIAC](#)), is an independent organization composed of exhibitor and event personnel, who are

charged with monitoring a consistent set of event or trade show audit standards, which independent auditors must follow to have their audits certified.

Who are these EEIAC certified third party auditors for the exhibit industry?

- [BPA Worldwide](#)
- [Exhibit Surveys, Inc.](#)
- [VAULT Consulting](#)

Unfortunately, only a handful of trade shows are audited by a third-party. Why? Well according to associations and show management, exhibitors aren't asking for audits.

If exhibitors don't insist on audits to verify data, show management isn't going to make the investment. Don't let this deter you from asking if there's been an audit. Ask! If exhibitors push show management to validate their numbers, they're more likely to have the trade show audited.

Quick note about surveys. A survey is *not* an audit. They are two different animals. A survey usually provides a more in-depth analysis of attendees such as buying power, audience activity, strategic planning and competitive analysis.

Surveys can provide a ton of insight. But they are not certified and may not have been completed by a third-party firm.

The Ripple Effect. Choose Wisely Grasshopper.

Have you ever dropped a pebble into a pond when the water was calm? Ripples begin to spread out in all directions. The pebble is small, but the effect is far reaching.

The ripple effect from exhibiting at the wrong show goes a long way too. It'll touch everything from the quantity of your leads, to the quality of your leads, all the way down to your bottom line.

The foundation for a successful trade show experience starts with the right show. Exhibit at the wrong show and you'll waste time, money, achieve little or no results, and you'll be totally frustrated.

But that won't happen to you! At least not again. No more trial and error with disappointing outcomes. Now you know *exactly what to do*, where to go, who to talk to, and what you need to determine whether you should be exhibiting. You have the recipe for success!

1. Start with organizational and marketing objectives.

2. Add a little understanding of how a trade show fits in with your marketing program.
3. Toss in your buyer personas.
4. Mix in your show and attendee research
5. Top it off with some data.

There you have it! The not so secret recipe for finding the right trade show. Every. Time.

Bon Appetit!