

A Fresh Approach to Recruiting Booth Staff

By Barry Siskind

Allocating staff to participate in a corporate exhibit program is fraught with challenges such as:

- Resentment from sales staff, who would rather not leave their territory to participate in a show where they are not closing deals,
- A perception that working the booth in an exotic location is a perk, like a paid vacation; whereas, in a less attractive location, it is thought of as a punishment for a sub-standard performance,
- A shortage of trained personnel who can effectively achieve the corporate exhibit's goals,
- The misconception that older and more experienced staff will do a better job than younger staff who have not developed strong customer relationships.
- The cost of training new staff is prohibitive.

While the validity of each of these reasons can be debated, what is crucial is to step back from your corporate perspective and look at what your customers want. When you compare your customer's needs to what you are doing to satisfy them, you might see that you may be missing a great opportunity.

The following chart, which is taken from a recent study by the Centre for Exhibition Industry Research, highlights the problem.

Preferred Exhibit Staff Profile by Job Function		
Job Function	Most Preferred by Attendees %	Exhibitor Representation (Mean) %
Sales/Marketing	56	30
Sales/Marketing Management	*	27
Scientific/Technical	51	3
Executive/Upper Management	46	27
Research/Development	50	3
Production/Operations	47	4
Engineering	42	3

Source: CEIR, The Role and Value of Face-to-Face, Exhibition Staff Practices, Report F04.12

In each category, exhibitors are under-delivering on attendee preferences. For example, the top three categories that attendees prefer to meet at a trade show are: sales/marketing, scientific/technical, and research/development. Each of these categories was preferred by at least half of the respondents. Yet, the closest that exhibitors came to satisfying attendees' desires was with sales/marketing at a mere 30%. The other two categories could have been completely ignored at 3% each.

If we agree that one of the primary rationales for face-to-face marketing is the ability to engage customers in the process of finding solutions, then we can also agree that we should be providing these attendees with access to the people they want to converse with. The solution, then, is to re-think the recruitment and training practices that may have served well in the past but may leave future performance expectations flat at best.

The following are the steps to a new and more dynamic human resources plan for your exhibit program:

1. Create specific profiles of the people you are hoping to meet at the events you participate in.

Profiles go beyond basic demographics and should include as much information about the people you are attempting to meet as possible. Remember that when you participate in a trade show you are selling to corporations but communicating with individuals.

2. Obtain senior management commitment to the importance of your exhibition program and your need for digging deeper to find people to represent your corporation at shows. When support comes from the top-down, it not only provides motivation for staff to get involved, it also makes it easier to obtain a commitment for the resources you need to implement your exhibit program.

3. Create a program that highlights the opportunity for staff to represent the corporation. Your staff is often motivated when they see how their help will benefit the organization as well as themselves. A new program allows you to tap into often forgotten human resources and convert them to company ambassadors. When launching this, you need to articulate each ambassador's role.

4. Communicate your rationale for expanding your search for staff. One of the easiest tools to use is the chart in this article. If your staff knows that customers have expressed a desire to talk to them, you have created a value proposition that can't be easily ignored.

5. Train staff on interpersonal skills, product knowledge, and what it means to be in the public's eye. The first step is to shed off the stereotypes of who is the best person to work at an exhibition. Successful booth staff do not have to be extroverts or "born" sales people. Rather, the basic need is their passion for the products and services and corporation they represent and a desire to share what they have learned. Once that's in place, the specialized skills they need to master can easily be integrated into their individual personalities.

6. Reward those who have successfully represented the company at a trade show. This goes back to having senior management support. Perhaps your CEO could sign a certificate to all your ambassadors, thanking them for their commitment. Maybe you can publish some of their success stories. Perhaps you can survey customers and determine how your staff has affected the relationship with the customer. There are a multitude of rewards that go beyond a monetary gift.

If you really want to positively impact your exhibit program, think about introducing a program that lets you uncover some real talent in your organization that might be eager to take on this new challenge.

Barry Siskind, President and Founder of [ITMC](#), is a trade show consultant, trainer, speaker, and an internationally recognized expert in trade and consumer shows. Each year, he addresses numerous conferences and association meetings around the globe. Over the past twenty-five years, Barry has traveled throughout the world working with thousands of public and private sector clients in virtually all industry groups. He creates, facilitates and delivers a wide range of services to companies involved in exhibit marketing. Barry is also a best-selling author of trade show business books: *The Successful Exhibitor*, *The Power of Exhibit Marketing*, *Making Contact*, *Bumblebees Can't Fly*, *Eagles Must Soar*, and his latest book *Powerful Exhibit Marketing*.