

Staying Relevant in a Changing World

By Barry Siskind

One of the great benefits of attending an exhibition is the opportunity to network with industry colleagues, suppliers, and buyers. Yet, we see people with their eyes cast downward, mesmerized as their fingers fling across a miniature keyboard at lightening speed.

Have face-to-face interactions faded into the ether, never to be seen again? Have we turned a corner on human interaction and lost our way? The answer may not be as simple as yes or no.

The real culprit in the mix is demographics. The baby-boom generation (ages 40-63) were comfortable meeting people face-to-face. It was how they developed trust and confidence in the people they chose to do business with. They developed a keen sense of what was acceptable behavior and what wasn't. If a stranger was friendly, professional, and offered a genuine handshake and a smile, then this group was more apt to deal with them as opposed to those who looked like sharks stalking their next meal.

Then came the World Wide Web and personal computers, which grew from interesting machines on our desks to necessary tools in our pockets. The Generation X (ages 28-39) and the Millennials (ages 18-27) grew up in this age of technology where modern advances seemed to take them further away from human contact.

The older generation shook their heads in disbelief; the younger generations opened doors of opportunities their parents never thought possible.

Now those organizations who hope to achieve above average results from their exhibit investments need to change. Those companies who have moved away from displays that simply showcase a product or service to ones that offer the attendee an opportunity to engage in the solution are seeing unbelievable results. Those who are stuck in the dark ages are being left behind.

How do you embrace change and create an exhibit plan that is relevant, measurable, and meaningful? Here are a few suggestions that will point you in the right direction:

1. Know your customer. Your customer isn't a corporation but the individuals it employs. Who are the individuals that are most interested in your offerings? What are their likes and dislikes? How do they connect with their world? What sites are they most active in? How do they define the community to which they belong? These are the types of questions you should be asking.
2. Embrace technology. If you don't have a social media presence, develop one. The longer you procrastinate, the greater the risk of becoming irrelevant in the eyes of those you are trying to communicate with.

3. Know your products/services. Go beyond features, benefits, and advantages, which were selling points used with the baby-boomers, to the new world where customers decide on what elements of a product or service are most relevant and meaningful.
4. Create a display that quickly captures their imagination. You can't tell this generation of visitors you understand their perspective; you need to show them. This requires careful thought to everything that is visible including your signs, graphics, demonstrations, and product displays to ensure that your audience connects instantly.
5. Engage...engage...engage. Ensure that each step in your exhibit plan opens an opportunity to engage the visitor. This will include everything from the shows you select, the display, and how your staff interacts with the audience.

The trick is to focus your exhibit plans around the question, "What is most relevant to my customers?" If you are not sure, then you need to do the research. We are entering a new era where many of the rules and techniques that worked so well in the past are no longer producing results. If you take the time to understand how the demographics of your attendees are changing and take the appropriate steps to meet those changes, then you can't go wrong.

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