



Confessions of a Trade Show Attendee: A Case Study

By Becci Ambroe

Over the last four years, I've learned a lot about the exhibiting industry. Although I had attended several trade shows in the past, I never really gave the exhibitor's side a thought. Why would I? The events I attended were more on the conference side of things, for educational purposes. The "expos" were bonuses. I know now, however, that the exhibitor's road from pre-show planning to post-show lead follow-up is long. Really long. There are details and checklists galore. There are top ten lists and do's and don'ts all over the internet. There are theories, strategies, and formulas for calculating success in terms of ROI and lead generation. Sometimes though, in all of those details, the simplest ideas can be missed. With that in mind, I have one question for you: When was the last time that you went to a trade show *as an attendee*? Or, more to the point, when was the last time you walked "the trade show floor mile" in the shoes of the very people you're trying to target? When was the last time you looked at your exhibit through their eyes?

Introduction: Last month, I attended two trade shows in Denver, one at the Convention Center and one at the National Western Complex. I would categorize the size and type of both shows as regional, possibly national.

- Both were organized by the same company.
- Both were business to customer (B2C) events.
- Both focused on the same type of products: recreational vehicles.
- The main product is, simply put, expensive; therefore, the buying cycle is a long one.
- The majority of exhibitors needed a large amount of floor space to demonstrate their products: the motorhomes, trailers, toy-haulers, and pop-up campers. Their products were their booths.
- Smaller booths, and there were quite a few at each show, contained "auxiliary" or "accessory" products, goods, and services that part-time or full-time campers might find useful.

Now, before you dismiss this article because your industry, product, or service are completely different than outdoor recreation, I hear you! **However, there are certain practices and standards for the exhibiting industry as a whole, and that's what this article is about. It's a study of all those basic do's and don'ts in action.**

Case Presentation: I roamed the trade show floor at both events for three hours. I would qualify myself as a B lead, at best. (I'm looking to purchase in 12 – 18 months. Depending upon your grading system, I might even be a C or a D lead.) I've done my homework, though, and I've narrowed down my choices and options. I attended both shows because I wanted to be able to compare brands and prices from dealer to dealer. I did attend a seminar. I also filled out as many "giveaway" forms as possible.

Observations: Looking at the exhibiting world from an attendee's perspective was really interesting and enlightening. Knowing what I know now, I noticed all kinds of things from promotional techniques to booth staff behavior to exhibit design. Here is a list of things that really caught my attention:

1. Although I bought my tickets well in advance, NO ONE sent me ANY pre-show promotional mailers, flyers, or emails.
2. One company, who had a tremendous amount of floor space, controlled foot traffic by the arrangement of their products; if attendees wanted to see their recreational vehicles, then there was only one entrance to their giant "booth." (I noticed this at both shows, too. During the first show, no one stood at the entrance. At the second show's entrance, I saw three booth staff members chatting with each other. Attendees were being ignored, and one staff person was munching on Doritos. To the side of the entrance, promotional items (those wonderful bags) hung from a stand, and attendees helped themselves.
3. I lost track of how many booth staff members were either texting or had their heads buried in their cell phones. I saw several folks, at the smaller booths, reading.
4. Some companies placed their staff members inside the vehicles, ready to answer any questions that attendees had. Some staffers also stood just outside the vehicles. Most were dressed in a way that identified them as "staff." At one point, I was asking a staff member questions about the features of a particular brand. In mid-conversation, the manufacturer's representative (not the company's and dressed differently) swooped in. My questions were answered, but there was no mistaking the territorial stares exchanged by these two "team" members.
5. Signs like, "Sold to: The Smith Family - Sold By: Bob" were haphazardly slapped to the sides of some of the bigger vehicles.
6. Most of the 10 x 10 booths had signage that was way past its prime. I noticed copious amounts of duct tape. Designs were simple, basically announcing the product or the company's name. Some exhibitors used pop-up displays or banner stands. Others simply used an indoor/outdoor vinyl sign that spanned the back of the booth space.
7. One auxiliary product caught my interest. As I filled out one of those lovely "giveaway" forms, the staffer made small talk. I didn't see or receive any literature (clearly, the preferred medium for product information at both shows) or contact information.
8. Although I had not intended to, I purchased dip mix, five packs for 20 bucks. (I also purchased one over-priced water and one over-priced beer.)

Discussions and Conclusions: Although part of the marketing plan is to learn about the specific wants and needs of each attendee, especially those decision-maker A leads, there will always be constants, no matter the industry or venue:

During the event, attendees will always:

- Be thirsty.
- Have sore feet. (Possibly sore backs and arms, too.)
- Suffer from information overload!

Why is this important? What can you, as an exhibitor, do to address these needs, and can that action tie into your marketing plan, somewhere/somehow? Maybe, maybe not. But allow me to zone-in on that final bullet point. All of the products that I saw, touched, and sat in have similar sounding names. For example, Forest River (the manufacturer) carries the Sandpiper, Cedar Creek, Blue Ridge, and Wildcat brands. Sounds simple enough until you look at Heartland's brand names like Bighorn, Elk Ridge, North Trail, and Prowler. They blur together very fast, especially when they cover a trade show floor. Compare the names of your products to those of the competition's products. How similar are the names, and what, if anything, are you doing to help attendees remember you AND your brand?

Now, on to the conclusions about that list of specific observations.

1. Perhaps event management did not distribute a list of attendees to the exhibitors. Perhaps the list of attendees was just too long to create an effective pre-show marketing campaign. I have received a few "you're a winner" announcements in the mail since both shows. I haven't responded to any of them.
2. I realize that this was a B2C event, but what a missed opportunity for that company! Maybe the staffers were just treating both shows as another day on the lot. Maybe they see all attendees as "just browsing" and soft leads. However, attendees had to pay for their tickets and parking. While 20 dollars isn't a ton of money, it's enough to demonstrate more than a slight interest. Final thought about their behavior: Doritos. Seriously? There should never be any public displays of eating at a trade show. Period. (Incidentally, I did notice that one group had ordered pizza; I smelled it, but I didn't see it because the staff wasn't eating in the public's view. Good for them!)
3. There's also no texting or reading while in the booth. Period.
4. The matching polo shirts made this team's members easy to identify in a huge crowd of people. Although this company had booth staff actually engaging attendees, team members should work *as a team*. If, for example, you know that one of your vendors is sending staff to support you, then be certain that somewhere along the line, everyone is clear about how to work together. While the manufacturer's representative was probably only trying to help, he undermined the other staff member's knowledge. Since he was dressed differently, it took me a moment to realize that he wasn't another attendee. Some might even say that by interrupting, he was just being rude. I can't help but wonder, if they were dressed the same, would this have occurred?
5. I can see the reasoning behind placing "sold" signs on some of the vehicles. The idea of showing attendees the number of rigs sold or the fact that folks were actually buying on the spot can be encouraging to hesitant attendees. However, did the salesman's name need to be added? Did the signs need to look so sloppy? (Was this a wasted marketing opportunity? What about Polaroid pictures, used with permission, of the happy family?) It kind of gave me the impression that there was some sort of competition going on. Competitions are fine; they motivate staff, but again, keep this idea behind the scenes. You don't want an attendee thinking, "If Bob sold more rigs than George, well...should I try to find Bob to be my salesman?"

6. Your booth design and signage should be a reflection of your company. Replacing torn graphics and beaten stands isn't as expensive as you think.
7. Poorly planned giveaways are just another wasted opportunity. It's been weeks, and I still haven't heard anything from this vendor. I tried searching for the product online, but I couldn't find it. Perhaps I should have asked for the literature because filling out the giveaway form was not enough.
8. I was there to browse, not spend, yet, I bought dip mix. Here's the really interesting thing; there were three vendors who offered basically the same product, "All-natural powered mixes. Just add...fill-in-the-blank." Why did I purchase from one vendor and not the others? He asked me to try it. He handed me a sample. He was playful and knowledgeable. He wasn't pushy, but he wasn't passive. All of the vendors had product samples; however, he was the only vendor who treated me as an A lead. He saw every person who passed his booth as a potential sale. In my case, he was right.

I realize that not all shows are B2C, and that, for some reason, these types of shows are...different. Rather than deliberate planning and execution, the exhibitor mentality seems to be focused on a numbers game. As a result, many great opportunities are missed. Hopefully, you're a savvier exhibitor than that. In fact, I realize that your booth staff may be so well-trained that they would never dream of eating or texting while in the booth, much less interrupting a co-staffer. I realize that you've done your homework, too. You've created a great booth, and your marketing campaign is stellar. If that's the case, then you truly have "walked the trade show floor mile." Good for you! A different perspective, like that of an attendee, can really help you see that you're doing absolutely everything you can to make your next trade show event a sound marketing and sales investment.

Becci Ambroe earned her Master of Arts degree in Creative Writing from Regis University in 2010. Since then, she has been the Project Coordinator at Blue Goose Exhibits and an Adjunct Faculty Member of the Community College of Aurora. In past positions, she was an online writing instructor with Ashford University, created and revised dozens of learning activities for The A Game, wrote and edited policy and procedure manuals, led training seminars, and published several articles in a Pittsburgh-based magazine.