

Ideas and
inspiration
to make you
say



Exhibiting Yourself!

A guide to getting bottom line results from exhibitions and trade shows.

Just about every day of the week there are exhibitions being held in Australia. The themes range from technology and earth moving equipment to small business, investment and education. Thousands of dollars are spent on the design and construction of stands, the furnishings and fittings, and on the displays and staffing.

Chances are that on at least one occasion your practice too has decided to strut its stuff at one of these exhibitions. Convinced by the promoter's glossy brochures and glib sales spiel that much new business and hordes of good contracts will be the result, you rent a sizeable stand.

And maybe when the exhibition is over, you like many other exhibitors, leave with a vague feeling of discontent; a feeling that somehow you didn't do quite as well as you'd planned or promised yourself. But then you justify your involvement by saying "at least it was worth it for the PR value."

Wrong! Nothing could be further from the truth. If your practice takes place at an exhibition, there is no way that the considerable expenditure can be justified only by the very intangible value of public relations. With the amount of money that's involved in putting together a good display you could take many potential customers out for a slap-up lunch. That way you'd get far better PR value than you get from an exhibition.

Exhibitions are a great way to display your practice, your services and your people if you do them well. To make the financial outlay worthwhile you've got to both maximise and measure the returns from this form of marketing endeavour. If you can't see the possibility of tangible business eventuating from your involvement, don't get involved in an exhibition. Or find a way to improve on your participation so that you do get the sort of results necessary to make the whole exercise worthwhile.

Putting together a display for an exhibition that will produce results isn't that difficult. It just takes a little common sense, some thought and the discipline to stick to your objectives once you've decided what they are.

1. What do you want to achieve?

Obviously when you decided that it was a good idea to take the stand, you had in mind something you thought you might achieve. For example, you might believe that the exhibition is an appropriate venue to launch your new service or you really just want to increase your profile in the market place which the exhibition services. Both reasons are perfectly legitimate as general overall philosophies. How you turn those philosophies into specific, measurable objectives for your exhibition presence is critical.

There are three prime, specific results that can be achieved at an exhibition:

- You can make cold, hard sales on your stand (ie get people to decide to purchase your services).
- You can meet people, qualify them as prospects and make appointments for later follow-up.
- You can be exposed to people you and your practice might not otherwise have met, gaining names, addresses and phone numbers to add to your bank of suspects.

Alongside these possible results is the potential for image enhancement (or public relations as it is called). The first three results can be measure quite easily; the last, the PR value, is not so easy to measure.

Ask yourself then “Do I want sales, appointments or suspects?”. Then give some thought to the nature of your practice, the services you have to offer and how your people will come across. Relate these to your perception of the exhibition itself, the sort of people it will attract, the other exhibitors (particularly the competition) and so on. Then make your decision based on what you feel can be comfortably achieved by you and your people in the exhibition environment.

Whatever you’ve decided you want to achieve is then the objective upon which all other decisions about the stand and your display should be based. You will plan your display, your stand strategy and your staffing accordingly.

If, for example, you have a great piece of computer accounting soft-ware and you want to sell that product then you’ve obviously got to have supplies of the software there; and back up supplies, too. It’s no use running out just when you get busy. You’ve got to have cash and credit card handling facilities, ability to give change and so on. Most importantly, your staff will need a sales track (a script) specifically designed to make sales happen in the exhibition environment. The stand itself has got to attract the attention of heaps of potential customers and excite their interest, to generate potential purchasers to ‘work on’.

On the other hand, if you’re aiming to build prospects you need to put your act together differently. Your stand may be calmer, with an atmosphere that lends itself to browsing, and should provide a wide, comprehensive and, most importantly, interesting display of the services you are promoting. Your staff need a sales track that helps them to quickly eliminate ‘tyre kickers’ (people who aren’t potential clients but have the annoying habit of asking questions and wasting time) and get the needed information from

bona fide suspects. They need a clear, easy-to-manage system to write down details, too.

2. Get a crowd puller for your target market.

When you display yourself at an exhibition, the first object is to get the people you want to visit your stand. If you have a bland, uninteresting stand, chances are that you'll get no-one, let alone the type of people you want to visit your stand. On the other hand, if you decide to give out small diamonds for free, it's a fair bet that you'll be buried under an avalanche of people who may, but probably will not, be potential clients.

The secret, therefore, is in analysing the motivation of the people you want to visit your stand and in deciding what their hot button is to get them to make that visit. You need to put yourself in their shoes and ask the "what's in it for me?" (WIIFM) question. Potential buyers always need a clear answer to the WIIFM question and the visitors you want to get to your stand are no different. Offer them a WIIFM that appeals and they're already on their way to you.

If you just want anybody and everybody, it's a different task to that of trying to attract a specific group of people like small business operators, for example. At the moment it is popular to use the 'fill-in-this-coupon-and-enter-the-competition-to-win-a-trip-to-Canberra (or anywhere)' approach for getting anybody and everybody. Obviously, the people using this method are really just looking for names, any names. At the recent exhibition I visited there would have been half a dozen such 'come-ons' and, boy, were the general public giving them a nudge. Most of the serious competition winners had settled down with a stack of coupons and were going to get their names on every one of them. Their objective was winning! If quantity of entries means any-thing, the operators had kicked a goal. One wonders, though, whether the coupon fillers were even remotely interested in whatever the product was.

No, if you're serious about winning business, gimmicks such as competitions are not for you. In what will your prospect be really interested? That's the question, and when you get that right, you're home and hosed. If you've decided that your target market for this exhibition is people in a particular industry, ask yourself what they have in common. It could be that they use automatic widget winders. Maybe then you should have an automatic widget winder on your stand, operating if possible, or a photo or a model of one or of something associated with it. Then the rest of your display should be build around this, showing simply, clearly and interestingly how your practice can assist users of that equipment.

Your working model will attract a lot of people. Most rubberneckers will have a look and depart; the automatic widget winder users will linger, look and ask questions. Snap. You're on your way. You've zeroed in on your market and got them.

3. Computers are props, not stars.

Computers have made a big impact in every field of human activity; accounting is no exception. In fact, many of the services accountants provide use the computer routinely as a tool to do the job. And that's what the computer is – a tool, not a craftsman. You and your people alone are the skilled professionals in whose hands the computer can be made to perform its tasks.

At an exhibition, therefore, it is the talents and abilities of your people that should be displayed and not the banks of blinking, winking, and beeping computer screens that we see so often. Don't fall into the trap of decking out your stands with computers and forcing visitors to peer at screens till their heads spin. By all means, have the computer tools that you need there, but as support to you, and not as the stars.

Potential clients expect professionals like you to have all the equipment you need. They don't need to be shown it, they want results. Showing a prospect how your computer works is like a plumber trying to get business by showing his wrench. So, demonstrate and tangibilise the results, the real benefit to the clients.

And remember this: a computer has never sold anything, only people can do that.

4. Never drink or eat at your stand.

It is anticipated that most readers of this article can give a polished and polite performance of these human activities. Nonetheless, there is nothing quite as off-putting to a visitor as rounding the corner of a stand only to find the representative about to sink his or her glistening choppers into a hamburger with the lot. (Particularly so if the spectator is a vegetarian or a devout non-hamburger eater.)

No-one expects staff on exhibition stands to give up eating or drinking for the duration. There's no point in having staff lose contacts through malnutrition or dehydration. Just arrange their rosters so that they can get a regular break to satisfy these basic human needs from time to time. Or, if you've hired a huge space, have an area, concealed from the public, where they can rest, relax and indulge in these activities.

Of course, if you are really looking to score points and rack up results, encourage your staff to do all their drinking and eating while visiting the stands of your competitors. You should, however, be ready to repel retaliation when it comes.

5. Don't sit around doing nothing.

So many people seem to think that their role on the stand is purely to be some form of human adornment for the display. So they sit and do nothing. Or even worse, they read the paper, comb their hair, put on make-up, listen to the radio or watch a miniature television set.

Come on. What sort of interest does this reveal to potential customers? What does it say about your practice and its ability and inclination to do business?

People who look bored, uninterested or otherwise occupied will do more to scare potential visitors away from your stand than anything else.

What should stand staff do?

They should adopt cheerful, friendly, non-threatening positions (no matter how much their feet hurt) and endeavour to reflect a welcoming attitude without appearing aggressive. At all time they should unobtrusively keep the stand's housekeeping up to scratch. If there are demonstrations or displays requiring their involvement, the aim should be to present these in a way that draws attention, excites interest and invites question and comments.

Above all, when they are simply standing, waiting for something to happen, they should be careful not to adopt a pose that is too aggressive. You know the type: arms folded across the chest, fixed smile over clenched teeth like a mother-in-law getting ready to welcome here daughter's no good husband. While none of us consciously mean to look as forbidding as this it is easy to slip into such a posture. The effect on visitors is disastrous: they stay away in droves.

6. Keep refreshed, alert and willing.

Most people who are involved in an exhibition put in pretty long hours and, after a few days, it sometimes starts to show. Better to roster more staff on and give people time to relax than to persist with people who start to snooze on their feet or who suddenly fall apart at the slightest reason.

Make sure, insofar as it is possible, that your people get early nights before the show and that their show workload is not too heavy. If it's possible, give them a chance to get outside for some fresh air once or twice during each day's session. Such planning will reap rewards when staff are dealing with stand visitors. They will be refreshed, alert and willing. They will achieve the desired results.

7. Never ever say "Can I help you?"

Anybody who operates a stand at an exhibition and who asks "Can I help you?" should be led to the nearest brick wall, blind-folded and given a final cigarette. If the nicotine doesn't kill them, they should be shot.

You see, all of us have been conditioned since childhood to answer any shop assistant's "Can I help you?" with an automatic "No thanks, just looking". We only want the help of a shop assistant when we are ready and that isn't usually when it's volunteered. SO we dismiss them, just in case they try to sell us something we don't want.

So, such an approach from you will produce the same automatic response. Ask that fatal question and you'll get the same conditioned reflex reaction every time.

It's a strange reaction when you think about it. After all, people have come to the exhibition because they are looking for something. They paid their entrance money so that they can search out what they want and maybe buy or get further information. What they don't want is you invading their comfort zone so bluntly.

Rather, most customers want you to cajole them and ease them gently into conversation. Try asking them a question to which they cannot give a simple "yes" or "no" answer. Say something like "How do you handle your books?" or "What features in this money maker's manual appeal to you?"

You should get together with all of the people who will operate your stand before the exhibition and come up with as many different customer approach phrases as possible. Opening statements that are designed firstly to relax the visitor and then to get them talking.

In terms of actually presenting the features of your service or the practice itself it's always worthwhile to work from a prepared and previously rehearsed script. Shooting from the lips is like playing Russian roulette: maybe you'll win or maybe you'll lose. Results – whether suspects or real live prospects – are obtained by people who know what they want to say and when to say it.

Stands at exhibitions can produce results that make the investment of money and time by your company worthwhile. Whether you get such a return depends only upon your approach and commitment to making the stand work.

Adopting the appropriate strategy and observing simple rules such as these can be the key to real success.