

Getting return on your trade show investment



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T&L Nursery created a fun and engaging social media promotion to attract visitors to their trade show booth at last year's FarWest Show. PHOTO BY PETER SZYMCZAK

IT'S EASY TO let your marketing activities take a back seat during the summer as your calendar fills up. Exhibiting at a summer trade show, such as Farwest, can provide a lot of bang for your buck.

According to the 2014 B2B Demand Generation Benchmark report, trade shows were ranked by marketing experts as the activity that generates both the most and best leads. In fact, 77 percent said they created a “somewhat” or “very high” quantity of leads, and 82 percent said those leads were of “good” or “excellent” quality.

Besides the ability to generate leads, trade shows present an unmatched platform for networking and learning more about industry trends and best practices. However, there's no question that companies are demanding more for less in every area of marketing, and trade shows are no exception.

That's why it's critical that exhibitors make sure that their trade show booth is creating a smart return on their investment. Here are six strategies for ensuring a polished trade show presence.

Consider booth design.

Growers as well as landscapers are big believers in “curb appeal” — you know, adding a pop of color to the front yard with flowers and plants. Booth design is no different. With all the other exhibitors vying for attention, you want yours to stand out, even if you don't have the biggest or glitziest booth at the show. Focus on making the space you have inviting and approachable, with bright colors and plenty of tables with literature. Consider adding a plush carpet to make it more comfortable for your visitors (and employees) to stand, as well as seating areas if space allows.

Target your message.

The best booths are those that have a clear goal for the show, whether it's to introduce a new product or showcase a certain line. Knowing what message you want your guests to leave with can help you focus your booth design, your literature and your employee training.

Choose a giveaway.

There's a fine line between swag that's

good, and TOO good. Everyone has been to the trade shows where looky-loos are lined up down the aisle to drop their business card to win an iPad or flat screen TV. But in hindsight, some of those exhibitors might find that they have too many leads, most of them unqualified.

A better strategy is to choose an item that will entice people to pause at your booth and prove useful, but that won't break the bank. Try to think beyond the obvious items such as coffee mugs, tote bags or pens. Instead, try to choose something that visitors can use during the show and ideally will want to take home — perhaps a keychain sunscreen, a microfiber cloth or a refillable water bottle.

And never underestimate the power of bite-sized treats. Make sure they're not too messy and that trash cans are readily available — and frequently emptied.

Develop a lead capture system.

Whether you're going low tech with the old “business card in a flower pot” or choose to use an app, you want to make sure you're collecting information from booth visitors. (At Farwest, you can rent a badge scanner to capture leads.)

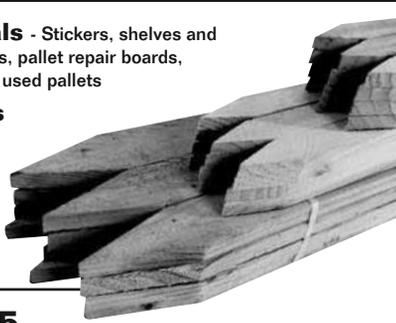
You might decide to “gate” your giveaway behind the exchange of information, or you might choose to collect information only after you've talked with someone. Oftentimes, those leads are the best because they are people who are truly interested in your product or service, not just wandering around grabbing freebies indiscriminately.

If you choose to be more selective with your collection, definitely take the **>>>**

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Pivot Points

time to capture a few sentences about your interaction so you can follow up with a targeted message after the show. Everyone wants to know that they were remembered so jotting down a few details of the conversation can pay off in the long run.

Train your booth personnel.

This might be the most important part of all — making sure your booth hosts are up to the job. Making small talk, answering questions and smiling all day can be exhausting, so you have to make sure that the people you choose to represent you have that can-do, upbeat attitude that will make your booth a welcome place to visit.

Ideally, your prospects and visitors are going to have questions about your products or services. You want to make sure your booth representatives are adequately trained to cover any detailed questions they may receive.

You'll also want to cover strategies for getting that elusive business card and extending the conversation past a simple "yes" or "no" in answer to a question. Spending time role-playing with your exhibiting employees will pay off many times over when you get to the show.

Get out and enjoy the show!

It may be tempting to retreat to the safety of the booth, but to really make the most of a trade show, it's vital to get out and make the connections that you are there to foster.

And by all means, attend the panels and presentations; your show planners have put intensive thought into coming up with a schedule that will highlight industry trends, best practices and thought leaders in order to provide you with information that will allow you to grow your business when you get back to the office or store.

If you rotate personnel in and out of your booth, each of your employees can attend presentations, network and roam the trade show floor themselves. After all, that's a great way to check out what the competition is doing, and maybe even get ideas for next year's booth! ☺