

MOLDMAKING TECHNOLOGY

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Three Ways to Communicate Your Message at Trade Shows

If you do your communication chores correctly, a trade show should be a success.

By Tom Rankin, APR

When it comes to maximizing visibility and traffic at trade shows, possibilities are limited only by budget and imagination. Leaving aside more traditional forms of promotion such as advertising and direct mail, here are some thoughts on three other ways to communicate your message to show go-ers:

1. Communicating with Your Booth

When it comes to booth design industrial marketers would do well to take a page from the retail business. After all, a show is like a busy mall, and your booth one storefront among many. To communicate effectively in this environment—and before you even get to talk to anyone—you should think in terms of three “range perspectives.”

The first is that of the aisle walker: range, 15 to 50 feet. You need to tell visitors walking down the aisle not only who you are, but *what you do*. The number one mistake industrial trade show marketers make is assuming what they do is self-evident. Take a random walk down the aisles of any show and you’ll see that it’s not. Even if you’re a moldmaker and you have a huge stainless steel mold sitting in the middle of your booth, visitors can still be unsure of what you actually do. You could be marketing hot runner systems, CAD/CAM packages, heat treatment, or any number of other ancillary products or services.

So if you make molds, say so in plain English. Put it right up there at the top of the booth under your name. Even put it above that catchy slogan your cousin the advertising guru came up with.

The second perspective is the window shopper: range 10 to 15 feet. This is the guy who—having recognized that you are, in fact, a moldmaker—has stopped at your booth and is casually looking around to see if there is anything there for him. This is your initial selling opportunity and when all that money you paid for your booth design and graphics is going to pay off. Tell this guy your story; not in detail, but in summary overview. Make sure the body of your booth—whether it be a simple backdrop or elaborate, multi-unit structure—conveys your main selling messages, including relevant products and services and key benefits. That said, be very selective in what you say and avoid clutter—you’re trying to get this person’s attention, not explain your internet privacy policy.

The third perspective is that of the person who has actually come into your booth (or is standing at your table) and is waiting to speak with someone. Don’t waste this person’s time. If he or she has been sensitive to your initial communications, then they are pre-qualified and you don’t want them to walk away.

This, of course, is where the main substance of your booth display comes in. But it’s also where literature can play a key role. People at shows are comparison shopping and engineers especially like detail. In fact, they frequently have some particular list of specifications they are focused on, and until they’re satisfied your product can meet that criteria you are not qualified as a vendor in their eyes.

Literature also serves as a take-away. Sure, many people trash it before leaving the show, but many others keep it, review it, and—believe it or not—act on it. So don’t try to save a couple bucks by making people ‘register’ to get it. If they want it, let them take it. It’s what you’re there for!

That said, don’t go overboard either. Just as a cluttered booth design will inhibit good communication, so will having too much literature. Stick to key overview pieces or even produce a special show handout.

2. Publicity

Often overlooked, the application of a few PR tools can have a dramatic effect on your impact at the show, both among show attendees and influential trade editors:

- Send out a pre-show release. Many publications put together special trade show issues, and for major shows there are pre-

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show issues as well. Sending a short, well-written release on your offering to editors three to four months in advance of a show will give you a good chance of being included in this coverage. Not only will this increase your chances of being noticed at the show, but it also will increase visibility among potential customers who may not be attending.

- Invite the press to your booth. If you're a big guy, and if you have major news, you might try a press conference. A better alternative for smaller exhibitors is to simply invite key editors to visit your booth, enticing them not only with the wonder of your new products, but with the promise of press kits, and perhaps even an article idea or two. Editors attend a show to find out what's new: in products, technologies and ideas. Their more practical goals are to gather fodder for show wrap-up and other articles down the road. Some editors will prefer to set specific meeting times, while others like to wander at will. But being a good host and providing materials they can use can pay big dividends down the road.
- Provide press kits. Press kits do not need to be fancy. As their name implies, they are used by editors to construct other pieces. Folders usually have a double-pocket, die-cut for business cards, and are usually printed (often in elaborate color) or labeled to indicate the company and the nature of the event. Kits contents can/should include: a show overview release or cover letter summarizing the main items to be introduced or exhibited at the show; a fact sheet, or backgrounder on the company and/or the technology being introduced; a press release or releases on the product/s being introduced or exhibited (contrary to popular belief, it is not necessary that every product described in these releases be new, or even that the releases themselves be new. All that is required is that they be honest. It is perfectly appropriate to include a release on last year's product, so long as the release plainly states that it is being "exhibited," not introduced); photos of all and sundry; short application releases on the use of the product or technology; speeches/bios of any personnel presenting at the show.
- Send thank you's after the show, including any additional information you promised to provide, and confirming any article opportunities discussed.

3. Non-Verbal Communication

Personnel demeanor may more properly fall under the guise of salesmanship, but as it can have such a dramatic effect on booth traffic, a few comments are warranted. I think it safe to say we are all a bit put off by the overly aggressive sales type who stands in the aisle grabbing elbows and pulling people into his booth. Worse, however, are those curmudgeons who plop themselves into director's chairs in the deep recesses of their booths and either glare at passers-by with arms folded, or chat with their fellows, oblivious to any potential inquiry.

Booth duty is tough, I know. For those unused to physical activity, standing on your feet all day can be very grueling. And for those of a more introspective bent, the effort of making nicey-nice with rude convention-goers can be psychologically draining, especially if—as happens—your offering may not be the most scintillating at the show.

Try to bear in mind that your job is neither to entertain nor to do the entire selling job for your product or service without taking a breath. Rather, as Todd Grimm pointed out last month, you should try to touch and go: make contact, collect and provide information, seek to qualify, then move on. Strive to be friendly and pleasant, but keep the chatter to a minimum. Once you establish a little routine, even dedicated non-salespeople can do very effective jobs. And if you've done your other communication chores right, the show should be a success.

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