



Trade Shows: Going toe-to-toe with the big guys

By Dana Kader Robb

At one time or another, many of the small business owners with whom I work have mentioned a desire to “look bigger.” While I understand that urge, I also find it interesting that the company for which my husband works – which has 10,000 employees – holds meetings called “think small.” But that’s another topic.

At any rate, competing with “the big guys” can be done effectively if you take advantage of the opportunity to network via trade shows. At a trade show, you speak one-on-one with prospective customers and show your work at its best. No-one knows if you work in the living room, tiny office, or dirty warehouse. They see the finished effort, shiny and clean and presented by your best salesperson – you.

Divide your effort into three parts – before, during and after the show. Skip one and run the risk of wasting your time and money, as well as presenting a less-than-professional image.

Getting Ready

You’ve heard about a show that will be in your area and you’re trying to decide if it’s worthwhile for you to participate. Here are some questions to ask:

- ✓ How many people attended past shows? (Take the answer with a grain of salt. They may include exhibitors and staff in the best-case count.)
- ✓ Who are the people who attend? Can you get an attendee profile?

- ✓ Who are previous exhibitors you can ask about their experience?
- ✓ What type of promotion will be done before the show?
- ✓ Does the schedule give people time to attend seminars and see exhibits?
- ✓ Can you share space with someone to save cost, or trade a product or service for a lower price on a booth?

Experts say that 65% of your effort should go into pre-show details. Set some goals for what you hope to get from the experience. Are you gathering leads, demonstrating and selling a product or handing out literature? Will that activity help you to meet the objectives you’ve set?

Send cards with a “visit us at” message to your clients and prospects. Perhaps you can offer an incentive for coming. Studies show this may improve traffic up to three times from what you might have otherwise generated. If you can get a list of people who have pre-registered, or last year’s attendees, send them your mailing also.

If this is the first time you’ve exhibited at a trade show, talk to an expert about booth design (I’d be happy to make recommendations). Your booth does not have to be expensive. Affordable rentals are both popular and attractive.

At the Show

Anyone in your booth should be well-trained on your products or services

and should be “people” people. Staffers should not be eating or using cell phones in the booth, nor should they be sitting down or talking amongst themselves. Set tables at the back of the booth so that they do not block traffic from entering.

As you receive business cards from prospects (or have them fill out forms for a drawing) write notes on the back to help you remember their specific area of interest. Pause during your presentation to allow for questions or clarification.

If you are demonstrating an item, bring backup units in case one becomes inoperable. Also make sure that you have practiced using the item enough that you feel very comfortable with it.

If you’re handing out promotional items, tie them into a marketing strategy or show theme. And don’t just leave them in a big bowl for everyone to grab. Hand them out to attendees to increase the chance of face-to-face contact.

The Day After

Follow-up is vital. Develop a system for following up on leads within the first few days. Then do it! Ask the show promoter for an attendee list if one is available. Send a “thank you for coming” note as well as any promised information.

While the experience is still fresh in your mind, talk to your booth staffers and make notes for changes you’d like to make before future shows.