

FOUR WAYS YOUR TRADE SHOW BUDGET IS BEING WASTED...

AND HOW YOU CAN STOP THE BLEEDING

An executive brief from Divinitas Displays, LLC





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IT'S NOT JUST MONEY YOU'RE WASTING....

Your trade show program is a vital component of your sales and marketing strategy. And since it's probably the most expensive, as well, chances are it's a black hole of waste and inefficiency.

Based on decades of experience in the trade show industry, we estimate that, if you're like most companies, you are throwing away 25 percent to 40 percent of your trade show investment due to a variety of missteps, ranging from poor exhibit design to a lack of proper marketing coordination.

That's not to say trade shows can't be an extremely effective investment. A trade show is the one marketing activity that puts your company face-to-face with customers in large numbers. Studies demonstrate it costs roughly 22 percent less to contact a potential buyer at a show than it does through traditional field sales calls, and that the majority of attendees show up with the intention of buying.

No, the heart of the problem is misplaced priorities: You are bleeding dollars because your trade show program is a strategically vital activity that's being managed as a hodge-podge of tactical chores.

This disconnect leads to the four most common trade show mistakes committed by organizations like yours.

Because this is a top-down problem, it demands a top-down response. As a senior executive, you must recognize these mistakes and correct them. This will help you put a halt to the financial waste that is occurring with your trade show program. More importantly, it will enable you to halt the waste of your brand equity, because when managed strategically, your trade show program can be your most potent brand expression. In turn, it can be your most effective weapon for impressing customers, driving sales and boosting market share.

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So, what are the four most common mistakes?

MISTAKE #1

NOT HAVING CLEAR AND MEASUREABLE TRADE SHOW OBJECTIVES

Statistics reveal that more than 90 percent of exhibitors can't quantify any kind of return on investment — or even their return on objectives. That's because many of those companies had no real plan. Consequently, they were unable to measure achievement. The fact is, trade show planning and management tend to be reactionary and tactical.

First, for many companies, trade shows are more of a habit than a carefully considered element of a marketing strategy. This is due in part to the role trade shows have long played in the culture of commerce. Trade shows can be traced to the ancient bazaars of the Middle East, to trade fairs of medieval Europe then to the more structured commercial exhibitions that began in 1700s' Europe and North America. Trade shows have always been regarded as an essential means of getting goods in front of buyers.

This cultural DNA is still prevalent in today's market: Companies go to trade shows not with specific objectives in mind, but because that's the way things have always been done. For some organizations, this also creates a visceral fear of NOT going to certain trade shows — the fear of conspicuous absence: "If I'm not there, the market may assume something is wrong with my company."

Secondly, the responsibility for planning and managing trade shows is often an awkward and inefficient collaboration between sales and marketing departments. It's not unusual for the budget to be bifurcated: exhibit branding and show promotion belongs to marketing, while sales pays for the exhibit space, exhibit construction and logistics. This arrangement can also create conflicting perceptions and expectations. And the ad hoc nature of the arrangement leads to tactical thinking on everyone's part.

The result is a lack of focus, poor coordination, wasted money and lost opportunities.

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TO STOP THE BLEEDING:

Measurable return on investment requires a unified vision and clear objectives. It must also take into account that objectives can vary over time and from show to show.

Thus, at a minimum, your team should have a standard process for assessing and defining objectives for each show. Some key considerations may include:

- ▼ Have we identified the best prospective customers expected to attend the show?
- ▼ How will we qualify and capture customer interest?
- ▼ What is our forecast — numbers of contacts, leads, opportunities and actual orders?
- ▼ What are our key communication goals: new product introduction?
Product demonstration? Showcase unique service or support capability?
Special industry or market focus?
- ▼ Customer intelligence — what do we want to learn from customers?
- ▼ Market intelligence — what market trends do we hope to explore at the show?
- ▼ Competitive intelligence — what are our competitors doing that present either threats or opportunities?
- ▼ Media relations — are there editors, analysts, bloggers or other industry influencers that we want to meet?
- ▼ Strategic outreach — who are the technology partners, distributors or other third-party players that we should spend time with?
- ▼ How do we define success? What are the metrics, and how do we capture, evaluate and share them?

Just as each show requires its own new financial investment, each show also needs to have its own objectives, strategies, messages and measurements. This is key to establishing consistent success as well as for holding your team accountable.

MISTAKE #2

ASSUMING THAT A TRADE SHOW IS ONLY A THREE- OR FOUR-DAY EVENT

In most companies, the employees managing a trade show program are focused on tactical details and the logistics of the program rather than its strategic purpose.

For the typical trade show manager, the overriding motivation is disaster avoidance: get the display and equipment to the show floor without damage or lost pieces. ... Make sure that show setup is completed on time and that everything is working. ... Make sure sales literature has arrived. ... Reserve hotel rooms for everyone. ... Confirm the daily schedule of show-floor duty. ... On the last day of show, supervise display knockdown, crating and shipping. If nothing awful happens over the course of the four- or five-day event, count it as a success.

Here's the common fallacy at work: With all this attention to tactical steps, there's an underlying assumption that the serious and strategic work of selling is already baked in to the exhibit itself, along with its accompanying literature, demo stations and on-duty sales personnel. In other words, the assumption is that by simply showing up and erecting the booth, the job is done.

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TO STOP THE BLEEDING:

Start by directing your trade show team to look at the calendar differently: Most trade shows should be viewed as 60- to 90-day events — if you take into account all three phases that shape the perceptions and behavior of most show attendees:

- ▼ Three to five weeks of preshow research, planning and preparation.
- ▼ The event itself — on the show floor, in conference auditoriums and meeting rooms, as well as the surrounding venues such as hotels, restaurants and hosted off-site events.
- ▼ Three to five weeks of post-show evaluation, follow up and consummation of purchases.

PRESHOW:

The majority of show attendees are buyers, and to many a trade show represents a serious annual pilgrimage that is immensely important to themselves and their businesses. Well before arriving, they will have done considerable research on conference topics, exhibitors and new products. And approximately 75 percent of all trade show attendees make out their schedules before arrival. So if your courtship of your targeted buyers has not commenced well in advance, you probably won't be on their schedule.

Fortunately, most preshow promotion is basic blocking and tackling:

You can start by leveraging available merchandising and other resources offered by the show management.

- ▼ Conduct preshow mailings and e-mailings to registered attendees — preview your product, offer a chance to preregister for a drawing (i-Pad or some other worthy prize to draw traffic).
- ▼ Get current press kits into the show pressroom (physical or online).
- ▼ Issue press releases on new products — announce product demos to take place at the event.
- ▼ Announce your show participation on social media — yours as well as those sponsored by show management.

The goal is simple: Convince your target buyers they must allocate time in their busy schedules to seek and visit your booth.

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AT THE SHOW:

Trade shows are busy, noisy affairs with hundreds of exhibitors, so you need to help attendees find you. In addition to your preshow promotion, look for ways to extend your trade show footprint beyond your booth to promote your presence.

- ▼ Invest in on-site advertising if your budget permits, with signs, banners, rotating spots on public monitors, hotel room drops, etc. Again, start by checking what is already available in your exhibitor merchandising package.
- ▼ Present a paper or participate in a panel discussion.
- ▼ Sponsor an event.
- ▼ Ensure your exhibit projects a powerful presence that engages and disrupts (see Mistake No. 3).

POST-SHOW:

Be sure to follow through on all of your preshow and at-show efforts. One recent study revealed that roughly 80 percent of exhibitors fail to engage in critical post-exhibition marketing to attendees. Being among the other 20 percent will boost your odds of increasing your total number of sales opportunities and establishing new long-term relationships.

- ▼ Use both email and traditional mail to follow up with prospects who visited but didn't buy — thanking them for their time and offering them a chance to opt-in for updates on useful information, such as use cases, research, etc., as well as product information.
- ▼ Sometimes just a simple, old-fashioned thank-you card can make a lasting impression.
- ▼ Extend LinkedIn invitations to prospects.
- ▼ Ask attendees to participate in a simple survey — with an incentive like a Starbucks or iTunes gift card for their time.

Most important: As a matter of ongoing policy and best practices, insist that your marketing and sales team develop a comprehensive 60- to 90-day game plan for each trade show.

MISTAKE #3

FAILING TO LEVERAGE YOUR FULL BRAND POWER

Too often, trade shows are considered isolated activities — separate from the company's larger branding strategy.

Many managers miss opportunities for creating real brand synergies by simply defaulting to the most rudimentary formula:

- ▼ Clad the exhibit structure with the company logo as well as images borrowed from other marketing elements.
- ▼ Include shelves or tables to display products and literature.
- ▼ Maybe incorporate a video monitor.
- ▼ Have a few chairs or stools, so visitors have a place to sit.

Clearly, an exhibit design should have such essentials, but a default approach will yield default results. Woody Allen once remarked that 90 percent of success is just showing up. But that doesn't hold true for trade shows. If you don't shine, you will leave a lot of money on the show floor.

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TO STOP THE BLEEDING:

Recognize that trade shows are battlegrounds. They're usually large, busy, noisy and visually chaotic events where attendees have a thousand choices of where to spend their time and attention. You must be well armed and strategically focused to thrive in such an environment.

Arrive prepared for battle.

To assure a successful trade show for your company, your exhibit must be more than a static billboard for your products. It must deliver a brand experience that creates an emotional connection with your audience. This requires that you follow a few key principles:

▼ Create “stopping power” by projecting your best brand “face.”

Chances are, you have already expressed your company's personality and value proposition in your advertising programs, website, direct marketing programs and other marketing activities. Reinforce that brand equity in the design of your exhibit. It should make the most of your brand template — from logo, to color palette, to images. More importantly, an exhibit gives you the opportunity to project your brand creatively in three dimensions — to create an imposing beacon in a sea of bland competitors. Your audience should immediately recognize your exhibit as uniquely yours, but in a way that is different and more exciting than how they have ever seen you previously.

▼ Communicate your unique value proposition.

Your presence at a trade show must be about more than your product or service. It must communicate the unique and strategic purpose your company fulfills for the market — and for individual customers. Find ways to showcase the intangibles that separate you from a crowded field of competitors. What are the rare or innovative assets you offer customers that go well beyond product features? What makes you special? Remember, the most powerful branding doesn't merely express what it is you do, but why you do it; this is what creates emotional connections — the foundation for enduring relationships.

▼ Be disruptive.

This is more than just standing out in the crowd; it means creating an experience your visitors will remember and appreciate. Engage them in unexpected ways. Give them something to do, or something arresting and unusual to see, hear or feel. Consider the creative use of light, color, motion and unusual structural elements. Find new ways to make your exhibit interactive — with hands-on demos, touch-screen kiosks, social media and other innovative methods. The most innovative exhibitors create the most innovative experiences. Examples include a full-service Irish pub, a gymnastics demonstration, a juggling spokesman, a Dixie jazz band and a full-scale dining car. At one of its large annual users' conferences, high tech company Computer Associates installed a full-size go-cart race course. There is one common trait that makes such creative experiences successful: They are designed to help communicate and demonstrate the company's strategic value proposition.

Your exhibit should embody who and what the company is, and why it is so unique and important to the market. Most of all, it should invite customers into a shared experience that makes them embrace your brand.

MISTAKE #4

FAILING TO LEVERAGE THE EXPERTISE OF YOUR EXHIBIT PARTNER

When a company approaches trade show planning and exhibit design as a checklist rather than a strategy, it builds mediocrity into its program.

Nowhere is this recipe for underachievement more evident than in the way the trade show team interacts with its most important partner: the exhibit design and management company. This is the firm tasked with designing and engineering the company's exhibit and managing the complex logistical details of a busy show schedule.

In addition to a lack of strategic thinking generally, there is an underlying failure to recognize the exhibit company as an essential resource. Granted, as in any industry, not all firms are created equal, but an innovative, full-service exhibit company offers a wealth of trade show experience — from exhibit concepts to show support and logistics. The breadth of that experience — often across hundreds of client companies and dozens of industries — equates to knowledge and deep insights that no company can possibly duplicate internally.

So, when trade show managers treat their exhibit company like an order-taker instead of a close partner, dozens of expensive and avoidable problems and setbacks are almost certain to occur. A few common examples:

- ▼ In the design phase, managers don't provide clear budget parameters, forcing the exhibit company into unnecessary guesswork and causing multiple design iterations, delays and expenses.
- ▼ Managers specify exhibit layouts without considering their effect on infrastructure, including ease of assembly and requirements for electrical and network equipment elements.
- ▼ Managers neglect to provide full details of the trade show schedule, leading to potential scheduling and maintenance problems, as well as lost opportunities to properly design the exhibit for multiple configurations.
- ▼ Managers specify certain types of exhibit materials or structural methods without considering such factors as weight and durability, causing major cost overruns with shipping and maintenance.
- ▼ Managers don't share enough information about target audiences, missing opportunities for mapping design characteristics to audience expectations and needs.
- ▼ Managers fail to loop their exhibit company into ongoing program planning and review processes, resulting in miscommunication, logistical snafus, and unnecessary rush work for exhibit alterations and repair.

Given the complexity of the typical trade show program, no company can expect to be totally free of occasional glitches and fire drills. But at least 80 percent of all trade show problems and their associated financial waste can be avoided.

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TO STOP THE BLEEDING:

Once you have adopted a strategic approach to trade shows as a matter of policy, the next step is to select an exhibit firm that is capable of being a strategic collaborator – and then treat that firm like a trusted partner.

Selecting your exhibit partner:

Beyond a deep portfolio of high-quality exhibits and experience across a wide range of industries, which are minimum requirements, your selection criteria should include:

- ▼ **Sales and marketing knowledge and experience.** You don't need a glorified cabinet builder; you need a partner who understands the role that trade show programs play in a broader marketing strategy, and is knowledgeable in all marketing activities and how they contribute to business objectives.
- ▼ **Stellar design capabilities.** This includes innovative architectural design as well as graphic design. Top-drawer exhibits require both.
- ▼ **Technology savvy.** To stay ahead of the curve in a world of everchanging communications technology, you require a partner who can integrate everything from wireless networking, to touch-screen displays and video walls, to social media, to advanced materials, to whatever comes next.
- ▼ **Full-service logistics capabilities.** Once your program is designed and created, your partner must have the ability to manage that program end to end, including exhibit storage, shipping, setup, knockdown and maintenance.
- ▼ **Professional standards and business practices.** This should embody business integrity and the highest standards of accountability regarding costs, quality and service.
- ▼ **Grasp of the big picture.** Partner with a company that not only can handle logistics, but also can help you make the needed paradigm shift in thinking holistically and strategically about trade shows. That partner should become an extension of your company's marketing or even the business, working proactively to develop marketing solutions to help move the needle.

It's unlikely that more than 20 percent of exhibit companies meet all these criteria, but it's worth finding one that does.

Working with your exhibit partner:

If your marketing and sales team has been reoriented toward a strategic, objective-driven approach to trade shows, it should regard your exhibit firm as part of the team, and should treat it as such. To ensure the best return on your program investment, the collaboration should follow a top-down process:

- ▼ **Start with the big picture.** Your team must provide the exhibit partner thorough overview briefings on your company. This should include organization, history, current products and services, markets served, competitors, industry trends, product roadmap, growth targets, etc.
- ▼ **Detail sales and marketing strategies.** Your exhibit partner should be given a full view of your marketing strategy, including current and prospective market-share targets, value proposition, media, market messages, lead-generation goals, product and sales content, social media strategies, etc. For the sales strategy, they should understand your sales objectives as well as the structure of your sales organization, including the use of both direct and indirect sales channels. and whether the sales structure is different for individual markets.
- ▼ **Jointly develop a trade show strategy,** based on a shared understanding of the company's business goals. Define and review the individual events on the show schedule. Both broadly and by individual events, define the specific role of the trade show program in achieving the stated marketing and sales objectives.
- ▼ **Establish transparent budget parameters.** Establishing the goals of the trade show program provides only half of the equation your firm needs to develop a cost estimate for exhibit design and management. To function effectively as a trusted partner, your exhibit firm should be provided an approved budget or budget range. For many companies, holding the trade show budget close to the vest is a natural inclination. But it's also highly counterproductive in terms of wasted time and money for everyone involved. Budget transparency is essential if the whole team — including your exhibit partner — can determine how (or if) the stated goals can be met within the firm cost limits.
- ▼ **Establish clear communication and reporting relationships.** Because a trade show program involves multiple functions and authorities within your organization, there should be clarity on how the exhibit firm and its key players fit into your organizational structure — on issues ranging from design approval, to billing inquiries, to account management, to logistics coordination.
- ▼ **Implement and follow a schedule of strategy sessions.** The full team should have collaborative planning sessions before each event as well as evaluation sessions after each event. Additionally, periodic program review sessions should be conducted to determine if changing market conditions or other forces merit adjustments in the show strategy.

Remember that a trade show involves the transport of your company to distant venues — to treat potential customers to all the benefits and values your brand represents. To make that transport seamless and effective, you must trust the people who will help get you there. At the same time, your trade show partner must understand the full scope of what it takes to help you succeed — not help you pour money down the drain.

Instead, maximize your presence — and your investment — by changing the way you think about trade shows. Stop the bleeding by shifting the paradigm — and transforming your trade show program into a powerful, strategic business driver.

ABOUT DIVINITAS

TRANSFORMING BRAND EXPERIENCES

Divinitas is a full-service exhibit consulting, marketing, design and management company based in Orlando, Florida, with offices in New York, Chicago and Las Vegas. The company specializes in helping clients create unique brand experiences that connect with customers and stimulate sales. The company's "4-Point Certainty Program" is a detailed set of best-practice commitments designed to assure program objectives and client satisfaction.

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