

Choosing the Correct Trade Show

Exhibiting or participating in international trade shows can be a positive marketing tactic, one that has the potential to open doors to a range of new markets.

But the problem can be that, with so many shows to choose from, how do you determine the one you should attend, the one that best meets your needs and objectives?

The following points or considerations that may help you make the correct choice have been gleaned from a variety of sources.

If the show you are thinking about attending has a long history, there are areas you can plug into for information that will help give you a feel for the show's potential.

Information, for instance, can be gathered from show management (most such organizations have very good and valid data), from one of several independent organizations that rate shows, or from talking to others who have participated in previous shows.

One of the best bets is to gather information on the type of audience that previous shows have attracted, as well as information on the composition of the exhibitor base.

Shows for a broad audience will attract exhibitors with products for a large, undifferentiated audience. They usually are quite large, attracting huge crowds. Conversely, shows for narrow segments of industry tend to attract fewer exhibitors and attendees.

But, while numbers are worth considering, they should not be the sole factor on which to base a decision to attend or not attend a particular show. The number of attendees should be weighed in terms of the quality of the attendee that will be visiting your stand.

From the information you receive from show management, there will be names of companies that exhib-

ited previously. Look carefully at this list and ask yourself, among other questions: Are these companies selling to the same clients you want to reach? Are any of them direct competitors? Have they participated consistently in previous shows? Yes answers suggest you should look further into this show. It could be for you.

Getting a profile of attendees is equally helpful. Are they from the types of company to which you would like to sell? Do the representatives have purchasing power or influence? Are they people you might already be reaching in other ways? If the answers are yes, you most likely should exhibit at this show.

That being determined, it is recommended that you attend the show — initially as an observer, rather than as an exhibitor. This way you get the real feel of the event. Plan well in advance, so you visit the show at which you are likely to exhibit the following year.

Prior to the visit, evaluate all pre-show publicity and promotions — they often are geared to the different groups that the show is trying to attract, giving you a good profile as well as indicating which industries the show managers consider more or less important.

You also can call some of the companies that have exhibited at previous shows. Have "specific" questions ready to ask, such as: how many people visited your booth? Can you trace any sales to show participation? Are you planning to attend the show again?

You should now have sufficient information to attend the show. The pre-registration package you receive can also be helpful in evaluating the show, informing you who is attending, where their exhibits are located, names and titles of those staffing the exhibits (it helps when

you want to meet specific people, especially if they have influence in facilitating a sale).

Arrive at the show at least a half hour before opening on the first day. This way you will see how well organized the show people are. Are there too few staff registering visitors, so that long line-ups result? Is registration smooth? Are the registrars friendly and well informed?

Before visiting specific exhibits that you pin-pointed during your research, walk the entire show area. It will give you the feel of the layout, an indication of heavy traffic areas, how many people visit or pass by a booth (is it traffic flow or attendee composition and quality that creates the activity?), and the location of your competitors.

On the last day, return to the show and casually visit a few exhibitors who sell non-competitive products to your market. The exhibitors, though likely tired, usually are willing to provide their rough evaluation of the show.

General, rather than specific questions are appropriate at this time, as head counts, prospect identification and other tallies will not be completed until after the exhibitors have returned home.

When the show has closed, contact the show managers, requesting their post-show evaluation, most of which is quantitative, including facts and figures on show attendance and traffic. Many include personal factors which can help you put your observations into perspective. You might also want to re-contact some of the exhibitors.

In the end, be sure you know — before participating — how each show stands in your industry sector. Participation costs money and you want to be sure you are spending it on a venture that will give you the best bang for your buck.