



Exhibiting a profitable return

Michelle Daniels discusses how firms can generate a great outcome from conferences and exhibitions.

Exhibiting at conferences and exhibitions is a popular tactic used to boost a firm's visibility and forge relationships with new contacts and clients. In talking with marketers and business development professionals in firms, the challenge though is how to ensure new work opportunities do indeed arise from this often sizeable investment in time and money.

So, here are some practical tips. They're designed to help your firm make the most of the commercial opportunities available when exhibiting.

Start the planning early

Exhibition and conference organisers always have set deadlines and, if you miss these, you will lose opportunities to secure the ideal location in the venue, have your details prominent in the event's publicity, make the most of early bird discounts and be part of other general promotion. Start the planning process at least three to four months before the event, even longer if you are exhibiting overseas.

Set a goal for the event

Like any business activity, it is important to define what goals and objectives you want to achieve here. You may be looking to launch a new service or area of expertise, or meet potential clients in a specific sector. The key thing is to ensure all your team know what the objective is. This insight will help your firm be more focused in its planning and preparations and enable it to measure the return on investment in the event that much more easily.

Limit yourself to just one or two promotional messages

Exhibitions and conferences are busy noisy affairs and, as people move around the venue, you only have a second to attract their interest. It is sensible then to keep promotional messages to a minimum (just one or two) and focus your whole stand experience around these. Avoid having a cluttered stand and visuals with complex graphics and small, dense text. Remember you've literally got a second to get a person's attention.

Plan engaging ways to draw people in

Competitions, offers and interesting experiences are all used to entice people into exhibition stands. Fun often beats expensive, so think of a competition or activity which is in tune with your key

message and can help you secure your share of potential visitors. Reflect on the profile of the exhibition visitor to select something which is more likely to appeal to them.

At the same time, ensure any participation in the activity is in exchange for their business card. Irrespective of whether you run a competition or not, do plan how you are going to capture interested visitors' details. You need a quick and unobtrusive approach to gain their permission here. Many exhibition organisers now offer bar code readers of visitors' badges (as an additional option) to exhibitors. It's often worth paying for this, so you can quickly capture details and receive a comprehensive list at the end of the event.

Select giveaways with longevity

The giving away of free goodies is popular amongst businesses trying to build name recognition amongst exhibition visitors. The challenge is that there are a lot of the same sort of goodies being given away and it's getting harder to differentiate. With any giveaway choice, select an item that is likely to be used and retained by the prospect you want to do business with. Steer away from food-based goodies as, once consumed, your aide memoire is gone. Also avoid items which are likely to be passed on to family members (soft toys, stress toys, etc).

Consider what would be retained by your target prospects. Talk to promotions specialists and get their advice on what is most likely to resonate and also fits well with your branding and key messages at the event.

Make the most of the noise and interest in the exhibition build-up

Through social media you can generate some sizeable free publicity about your attendance at an exhibition. Plan what messages you are going to communicate (and when) to add to the general noise around the event and build anticipation.

Exhibition organisers usually monitor any mentions of their event on social media and often share those they find. This can give a nice boost to your publicity. Also don't forget to alert clients, contacts and prospects that you'll be present. You may want to use the event to set up meetings and discussions with specific people.

Don't underestimate the logistics

It is always sensible to have a practice-run in constructing your stand in a space



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marked out with the dimensions you'll have at the event (masking tape is good). This really helps to identify any potential problems and miscalculations in good time. Ensure your team are briefed and know where they need to be (and when) at the event. Be mindful of the set times exhibition organisers allow for receipt of deliveries and ensure yours arrive then.

When you are permitted access to your space, give yourself plenty of time for the set-up. Do remember electrical points for lighting, internet access and other stand essentials are usually charged as optional extras. As part of your planning, be clear what is included in the price you've paid and what is not. For these 'extras' there may be early bird booking deadlines in return for discounts so try and make the most of them to keep your costs to a minimum.

Be a delegate as well as an exhibitor

Whilst you should ensure your stand is always fully staffed, it is also helpful to experience the rest of the event from time to time. This can give you valuable insight about competitive offerings. It can also help you to find out what hot topics are being discussed amongst the visitors. If possible, have members of your team attend some of the exhibition's workshops as these can prove a great means to meet with and chat to visitors. Also frequent visitor refreshment areas to

network with potential contacts and clients in a more relaxed setting.

Have your follow-up ready to go

As your team will be tired (but hopefully elated) after the event, it is sensible to have your follow up to the prospects you've met ready and waiting to go out. To maintain interest and recall of your firm amongst the contacts you've made, you will need to communicate whilst the event is still fresh in people's memories. Of course, do try and tailor your follow-ups to the specific conversations you've had with people, just don't leave this until weeks after the event when that conversation has been forgotten.

Summary

Exhibitions and conferences are a great way to meet new clients and contacts and improve your market intelligence in terms of competitor offerings, hot topics and potential long term issues. They are, however, a sizeable investment in money and time. The key then is to plan your involvement carefully to ensure your firm does indeed generate a good return.

This doesn't mean having an infinite budget pot and going with the largest, gizmo-laden stand. Instead it is more about:

- being savvy in your planning and understanding of the event's visitor profile
- making the most of all the cost-efficient opportunities around the event
- being distinctive with one or two simple messages
- having a carefully thought-through and appealing follow-up.

To improve the long-term return you generate from exhibitions, set aside time immediately after the event to conduct a debrief with the team. Use this to discuss lessons to learn for next time (whilst the experience is fresh in people's minds) and allocate relationship-building responsibilities with specific prospects to team members. Also get together again several months down the line to review the outcome of those activities and assess how successful the firm has been in achieving the goal it originally set for the exhibition.



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