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# GUIDE TO SUCCESSFUL TRADE SHOW PARTICIPATION



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## Guide to Successful Trade Show Participation

Participating in trade shows, with proper planning and preparation, is an excellent sales or marketing activity and a wise investment for many businesses. Participation is also very expensive. To make the most of your investment of time and money, careful and thorough preparation is vital. Following the eight steps and checklist below will help you make the most of your investment.

### Eight steps:

**1. Develop your strategy.** Many people exhibit at a trade show once, and when they do not achieve high sales orders, decide the trade show was not a success. In fact, few commercial buyers will place orders the first time they see a company exhibit. Buyers have few ways to judge the stability of a company during a trade show. They often judge your seriousness and stability by the number of times they see you display at the same trade show. Consider returning to the same show two or three times in a row before going to a different show – invest your resources in building the professional reputation of your business.

**2. Determine your budget.** Review your overall operating budget, and your marketing budget. Determine how much money you can *realistically* spend each year for participation in trade shows.

**3. Establish your objectives.** Decide what you want to achieve by participating in trade shows. To introduce your company and / or products to a new audience? Is it to enter a new geographic market? To increase sales in a market where you currently sell? To enhance the image of your company and / or brand? Or something else? Only once you have a clear objective can you work efficiently to meet that objective in the most cost-effective manner.

**4. Research the options.** For every category of products, there are numerous trade shows each year. Some will be more appropriate for your target market, production capacity, budget, etc. Learn what trade shows highlight your products, then compare those shows to determine the best one for you. Preparing a table like the one below, makes it easy to compare trade shows.

Characteristic	Show #1	Show #2	Show #3
<b>Juried*</b> show (yes / no)			
Location			
Dates			
Number of visitors			
Number of exhibitors			
Product focus			
Retail sales allowed (yes / no)			
Booth rental fees (per square meter or square foot)			
Display fixtures included in booth fees (list)			
Minimum booth size			
Educational seminars for exhibitors			
Advertising assistance available			
Special advertising for first – time exhibitors			
Special requirements / restrictions			

\* **A juried show is one for which you must submit your products to a panel of judges who determine whether they are of acceptable quality and design for exhibition in the show. Only very high quality products are accepted.**

**5. Visit your selected show first.** The decision to exhibit at a major trade show is an expensive one. Your business will incur substantial sample, travel, booth rental, shipping, communication, and marketing costs as a result. To get the most of your investment, consider visiting the trade show you have selected one time *before* you register to exhibit at the show. Familiarize yourself with the types of products, competitors, sophistication of displays, etc. then use this information to carefully plan how you can best present your products at that show the next season, as compared with your competition.

**6. Plan and prepare.** Careful and detailed planning, followed with thorough preparation, is the key to successful participation in a trade show.

- A. Obtain registration information and note registration deadlines and requirements.
- B. Plan a well organized, cohesive product line, rather than just a number of individual products. Make it easy for a shop owner to purchase a *group* of products from you, that can be easily and attractively displayed together in his / her shop. You will increase your sales by doing so.
- C. Plan and prepare the samples you will need for display, and think about how you will make your display attractive and exciting – so show visitors will *notice* your booth among all the others. (Trade show organizers such as George Little Management Company offer excellent on-line suggestions for developing effective displays. See the website, [www.glmshows.com/press/displaycopy.htm](http://www.glmshows.com/press/displaycopy.htm).) Make *two duplicates of every sample* – one to display, and one to leave home as a reference.
- D. Determine the fixtures and supplies you will need to set up the display – racks, hangers, shelves, hammer, hooks, etc. It will be difficult, time consuming, and expensive to buy or rent these once you arrive at the show venue.
- E. Research the specific requirements and restrictions of the show venue, the Customs regulations and procedures for taking your samples out of your own country and into the venue country, shipping costs and delivery times for transporting samples. Make appropriate arrangements to meet all requirements.
- F. Plan and print your marketing materials – business cards, product line sheets, price sheets, company profile. These must be *in English if your target market is the US*. Check carefully and correct any spelling errors, grammatical errors, mistakes in information. Buyers will consider such errors a bad reflection of your company. Print more copies than you expect to need. Print several hundred business cards, as this may be the only way potential buyers will remember you.
- G. Make travel arrangements including transportation, lodging, passport and visa applications, if required. These should be done several weeks to several months in advance, as transportation and hotels become fully booked well ahead of many major trade shows.
- H. Contact current customers and potential buyers in advance, alerting them to your exhibit and inviting them to your booth. When possible, schedule specific appointments with them during the show. Make contact weeks before the show, as buyers' time is limited and their schedules fill quickly.

**7. Participate.** Complete your registration, pack your things, and go!

**8. Follow-up.** The show's over. You're tired. You just want to rest. *WRONG!* Just as important as your preparation and participation in the trade show, is your follow-up afterwards. Thank people for visiting your booth. Send the samples, brochures, price lists, or any other information or products you promised. This is *critical* to building your reputation as a reliable supplier. Fill the orders you took, promptly and accurately. Invite buyers to purchase from you again. And develop a mailing list to contact in advance of exhibiting next season.

## Trade Show Checklist

The following checklist will lead you through the preparation planning details that will make a difference in the success of your trade show participation.

### 1. Develop your strategy

- Select your trade show – decide if you will return to a trade show you previously attended, or a trade show you have not attended.
- Decide if you wish to *visit*, or *exhibit* at the trade show.

### 2. Determine your budget

- Calculate how much money you have available for trade shows during the upcoming year.
- Prepare a budget detailing:
  - show registration fees
  - booth rental fees (*only if exhibiting*)
  - trade show labor charges for unloading / loading / transporting goods to booth
  - rental fees for display fixtures, lighting (*only if exhibiting*)
  - transportation, lodging, passport and visa fees, local transportation, meals
  - samples (*only if exhibiting*)
  - shipping costs and customs documentation/ clearance fees (*only if exhibiting*)
  - marketing materials including booth signage, business cards, price lists, etc.
  - miscellaneous
- Based on available funds and projected budget, determine whether you can afford to participate at this time.

### 3. Establish your objectives

- Decide what you want to achieve by participating.
  - Introduce your company and / or products
  - Enter a new geographic market
  - Increase sales in a current market
  - Enhance your company's image
  - Other \_\_\_\_\_



### 4. Research the options

- Identify trade shows for your product/s and target market.
- Create a comparison chart (*see example above*) for trade shows identified. Include:
  - juried show (yes / no)
  - location (including proximity to target market, major shipping routes)
  - dates
  - number of visitors (buyers)
  - number of exhibitors
  - retail sales allowed (yes / no)
  - both rental fees (per square meter or square foot)
  - display fixtures, if any, included in booth rental package
  - minimum booth size
  - educational programs / seminars available to trade show participants
  - marketing / advertising support – general
  - special marketing / advertising support – *first time exhibitors*
  - special requirements / restrictions
    - mandated use and payment of union labor for moving samples / materials from / to unloading dock to booth space
    - use of electrical appliances (including supplemental lighting, fans, etc.)
    - signage requirements (size, type, style, method of hanging)
    - treatment of display materials with flame retardant
    - other safety or fire restrictions / requirements

## 5. Visit your selected show *without exhibiting*

- Register as a *visitor*.
- Spend two to three days at the show.
- Note:
  - Types of products exhibited – do your products fit well?
  - Is the show well – attended, or are there only a few visitors?
  - Sophistication of displays – can you create a display that people will notice, as compared to other exhibitors?
  - What types of marketing materials do exhibitors provide?
  - What are the best booth locations – those the visitors see first (before they become tired)?
  - Which are the least desirable booth locations (out of the way, hidden from easy view, at the far end of an aisle, where visitors will be tired, etc.)?
  - Are there places to buy meals? What are the prices? If they are very high, you may want to consider buying snack food in a grocery store elsewhere and carrying it to the show, if allowed
  - Is there free local transportation for exhibitors to selected hotels / groups of hotels? If so, note the hotels, as this will save you the cost of local transportation

## 6. Plan and prepare to exhibit

- Obtain registration form.
- Submit trade show registration and payment.
- Plan a well – organized, cohesive line of products that can be displayed well together.
- Review requirements / restrictions of trade show venue:
  - mandated use and payment of union labor for moving samples / materials from / to unloading dock to booth space
  - use of electrical appliances (including supplemental lighting, fans, etc.)
  - signage requirements (size, type, style, method of hanging)
  - treatment of display materials with flame retardant
  - other safety or fire restrictions / requirements
- Design display: samples, method of showing them, signage. Determine display fixtures and set – up tools needed.
- Prepare samples.
- Review customs regulations and procedures for exporting and importing your products:
  - Certificate of Origin
  - export and import documentation
  - labeling
  - customs clearance procedures at port of entry – receiving country
- Research, select, and schedule suitable shipping method for your trade show samples.
- Plan and print marketing materials, *in English if for US market*. Include *country* in all addresses. For telephone, fax numbers, *include country code* in parentheses. Check carefully for, and correct any typing or printing errors:
  - business cards (several hundred copies)
  - product line sheet (photos and descriptions of each product)
  - price list (note FOB \_\_\_\_\_ and / or landed costs, prices listed in U.S. dollars if U.S. trade show, expiration date, pricing terms, full company contact details)
  - company profile
- Prepare concise **one-minute** verbal introduction to your company and products. *Visitors to your booth will give you no more time to capture their interest!*
- Make travel arrangements:
  - passport, if required
  - visa/s, if required
  - air tickets (*note baggage restrictions – number of pieces and weight allowances*)
  - lodging
  - vaccinations, if required
  - change currency, if needed
- Send e-mail notice to potential buyers alerting them to your participation; include booth number, if known. Ask for appointments with your most important target buyers.

- Arrange full sales coverage of your booth. If you will be having meals or meetings outside the booth space during show time, or will be attending educational seminars during show time, make arrangements for someone to cover your booth.
- Label and pack samples, display fixtures, marketing materials, etc.
- Organize all documents required at show (business licenses, or other proof of status trade show organizer may require exhibitors to show).
- List inventory available for immediate shipping.

## 7. Participation

- Arrive at the trade show venue on time to set up booth display.
- Pick up and read a copy of the trade show directory and industry publications offered. These offer good information on the exhibitors (your competitors), industry trends, etc.
- Arrive at booth on time each day, to present a reliable image of your company and avoid missing potential buyers.
- Greet all visitors with a smile and friendly, but not aggressive, “hello.”
- Request business cards from visitors to your booth, or have a small basket with a sign encouraging visitors to deposit their business cards. Save all cards for future contact.
- Note all requests for information, samples, or other follow-up. It is wise to keep one notebook for such requests.
- Attend appropriate educational seminars offered by trade show organizers, but arrange in advance for someone to cover your booth during your absence, to maintain your company’s professional image and to avoid missing potential buyers.
- Do not sleep* when in your booth, even if you are very tired or there are few visitors – this presents a bad image of your company.
- Do not eat in your booth.* Even if allowed, this does not present a professional image of your company.
- Be on time and well – prepared for all appointments you scheduled with potential buyers.
- Wear your registration badge at all times when at the trade show venue.
- Walk around the trade show to view other booths – note the products and displays. *However, note that most shows do not permit exhibitors to enter other booths.*

## 8. Follow-up

- Follow – up immediately on all orders and requests for information, samples, etc.
- Develop a list of all visitors to your booth, and their contact information, for future marketing use.
- Consider sending a thank you e-mail to all visitors to your booth, inviting them to contact you in the future if they have need of your products.
- Review your successes, and those things you can improve for next time.
- Begin planning your participation for the next show!

