Secrets To Successful Trade Show Marketing

Events and trade shows represent the channel sales and marketing people everywhere love to hate. High costs, LOTS of time (before and during the event), typically followed by less-than-exciting leads and few converted sales. But when executed well, events do have their place in delivering solid, profitable revenue. You just have to get a few things right.

In this report you'll learn specific best practices for increasing awareness, new leads and closed business from your next event—with proven ideas to put to work before, during and after the show. You will learn how to:

- Engage prospects and differentiate your business before you arrive
- Increase foot traffic and conversations at the booth without spending a dime
- Train all attending staff to maximize brand presence and lead capture
- Prepare for successful follow-up before the show begins
- Establish, track and report on the results and ROI of your event efforts

I hope these tips help you make better use of the time, resources and both hard and soft costs that go into making an event or trade show more profitable to your business. If you have any questions or want to talk more about how these tips apply specifically to your organization, please don't hesitate to reach out.

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29 Tips For Making the Most Of Your Next Trade Show

These ideas are tactical, and don't equally apply to everyone, but something here should spark or accelerate awareness, interest, demand and sales from your next event or trade show.

Before the Show

Objective: Get people to the booth. Create awareness and recognition so that people recognize your company on the showroom floor and stop at your booth as they walk the exhibit hall. Here are some suggestions for how to strategically do this:

- Get a list of expected attendees.
- Target customers you'd like to work with or learn more about, send them an invitation to visit you at the show. Include your booth number.
- Do a pre-show email and/or offer to expected attendees.
- Let people know your Twitter handle, and that you will be tweeting during the show.
- Get on the pre-show promotions list on the Web site.
- Consider joint offers with other exhibitors—are there a couple of complimentary exhibitors you could partner with in advance to drive traffic to your site?
- Know what exhibitors are around your booth. Does it make sense to contact them and collaborate on a way to get people to both booths?
- Let your website visitors know that you will be at the show.
- Come up with creative ideas to get visitors to prioritize your booth. Maybe offer to validate their parking?
- Compile examples and stories of other customers making good $$ using your product in their space (online or offline).
- This could be the most important piece of all this; demonstrating directly to prospective buyers that this works in retail, that it's profitable, and that it's a safe bet to try it in their space.

At the Show

Objective: Make as many contacts as possible, collect as many emails as possible.

- Offer a show discount. XX percent off if customers place their order at the show.
- Drop business cards in a fishbowl for a prize.
- Offer free samples to all registered buyers.
- Have contact or order forms available for when you have more in depth conversations.
- Run a game to get people to stop at the booth.
- Build a quick-and-easy-to-read one-sheet to educate show goers on the ease and profitability of using your product. This should be the type of document that stops people in their tracks. They immediately see the value of using the product and want to talk with you to order.
- In the collateral, offer usage scenarios.
- Have a current customer join you at the booth and be a live testimonial. Alternatively, write up a one-sheet with customer testimonials or case studies of successful retailers who use the product.
- Get social media ID from all attendees (twitter handle, Facebook, etc.).
- Hire a college kid to hand something out at the door or near the registration table to draw attendees to your booth.
- Tweet during the show and invite followers to come by your booth.
- If sales are slow, send out an offer via Twitter, "the next five people to show up at the booth get XXX in addition to the show discount."

After the Show

Objective: Create long-term, lasting relationships with prospects that showed interest; build/expand the sales pipeline.

- Thank you to those who purchased at the show.
- For those that did not order at the show, categorize and prioritize leads.
- Follow-up immediately with personal emails and/or calls to "hottest" buyers.
- For other leads, it may make sense to prep something in advance in order to send a message out as soon as possible after the show. Speed is very important. Buyers have met a lot of people at the show, and you want them to remember you.
- Review your pre-show targeted list of attendees. Were there people that you did not get to meet, or collect contact information from? Consider a separate "Sorry we missed you" message with an offer to get a demo or presentation at their convenience.
- Gather their social media presence (Twitter, blog feeds, etc.) and follow, retweet and respond to them moving forward.
- Keep all contact information in your CRM and use for future e-newsletters, email drip campaigns, etc. Be sure to collect and maintain their permission to be emailed.

The Most Important Part Of Event Marketing

Two months after the Dreamforce show, the full messenger bag I brought back still sat untouched in my office. Unopened. Forgotten. Full of collateral, sales sheets, white papers, who knows what else.

The conference itself was fantastic. Great speakers, great networking, many interesting exhibitors. I followed up with a few I had particular interest in, but quickly forgot about the rest as I settled back into my regular routine.

Any of us who attend trade shows or events develop temporary Attention Deficit Disorder. It's impossible to avoid. Hundreds of booths vying for your attention, in between meeting after meeting. Then you hit the party circuit, get a couple hours of sleep, and do it again.

There's no way you can remember everybody, everything. All that money spent by sponsors and exhibitors to get your attention. And it worked. At least it worked at the time.

I had a bag full of collateral from I don't know how many vendors. A stack of business cards from vendors who told me they'd follow up.

All that time, energy and money to engage me at the show. And how many followed up? Not many. Not enough.

The most important part of event marketing happens after the event. You've made your impression. Now, after the dust has settled, make sure you capitalize and convert.

Eight Requirements For A Successful Event Strategy

Those who have managed or executed any event—a seminar, a user conference, or an industry trade show—will know it involves a thousand details, lots of moving parts, and other thankless tactics that, together, lead to success. But if you focus on and have a strategy or plan for the following eight elements, you're most of the way towards a successful event.

1. Objectives

What do you want out of the event? How (not what) will you measure? Why are you doing it or participating in it? These may seem like fundamental questions, but all too often companies engage in industry events because they feel like they have to, or (worse) because competitors are doing it or "we did it last year." But if you can't enumerate reasons and objectives for why you're doing it now, you might be best served to move onto something else that will provide more direct value to the business and your sales/revenue objectives.

2. Short-Term and Long-Term Success Measures

Depending on your sales cycle, you likely won't be able to justify and measure final ROI from an event right away. So it's important to define short-term and long-term success measures for your event. Short-term, for example, you might measure leads captured, meetings secured with prospects or influencers, etc. Long-term, you're looking at opportunities generated and closed. Here's a summary of three specific measurement points post-event.

3. Content Strategy

Content is key to any event. This includes not only the approach and position at your booth (including your primary message and offer), but also evaluating opportunities to create and communicate content before, throughout and after the show. For example, what blog posts or other content can you create and deliver before the show starts to engage attendees, recommend certain sessions, even publish a restaurant guide to get their attention? What speaking opportunities are there, or if you're not on stage, how well are you summarizing, blogging about or tweeting highlights from the event to your followers, customers and prospects? Some of my most popular blog posts summarize key points from a great event. Do the same, and consider publishing it right as the event ends so you're included in round-ups.

4. Offer Strategy

I'm not talking about pricing or product purchase offers, at least not exclusively. Sure, have a show special to get customers to take action, especially if you're offering a transactional sale that you can close on the show floor. But more important are the offers that differentiate you from other booths, that drive more attention and traffic to your booth in the first place, and that increase conversion to registration and/or follow-up from those attendees. This can be a white paper, an audit or assessment of a prospect's opportunity, a seat at an upcoming online event, or other offers and formats relevant to your audience. Make sure your offers are about the prospect, not you, to increase response and conversion.

5. Social Strategy

Play an active role in the event's social channels, hashtags and participants. Remember that there will always be prospects following activities and highlights via social channels that aren't at the event but wish they were. These are prospects, too, and can courted, registered and engaged just as well post-event. Consider engaging influencers who will have high-traffic social and blog feeds during the event, so they know you're there, are retweeting some of your stuff, and potentially writing about you to their followers. These are just a few of many considerations to take advantage of social channels at any event (even if you aren't there or aren't formally exhibiting).

6. Booth Assignments

Product training is great, but your booth staff needs to be tightly coordinated to take best advantage of the traffic walking by. The downside of having an event booth is that you're largely at the whim of whomever happens to walk by. Some will be good prospects, others won't. So it's important that you actively engage as many people as possible to increase the # of qualified prospect you drive deeper into the booth. At a high level, this means assigning some staff to the "perimeter" of the booth to engage browsers with a well-written, customer-centric question. For those that show interest or are deemed as qualified, invite them to a staffer inside the booth to continue the conversation, or rotate an "insider" back to the perimeter to prospect.

7. Networking Strategy

I've been to events where the majority of my success was hanging out in the lobby and engaging the right people as they walked by. Whether it's "planned serendipity" like this, or at the ever-present networking events and parties in the evenings, have a strategy for how you're going to divide and conquer among the various networking opportunities. Ensure your staff isn't hanging out together at evening events, but at minimum spreading themselves across separate tables to increase how many new people you're meeting and engaging. And for those who will be attending these networking events, agree on a strategy for collecting and following up on business cards and contacts captured there.

8. Follow Up Plan

Do yourself a favor and plan and write your show follow-up materials before you leave. Because when you get back, you'll be buried in work and emails and new fire drills. And the next thing you know it, it'll be a week later and those leads you captured will start to feel stale. So if you create your post-show follow-up plan up front, plus write the emails and schedule the post-event offers, all you have to do is load the list and press "go".

There's more to a successful event than these eight elements, of course. But they get you a long ways towards success.

That said, what's missing? What's on your requirements list for success?

How Social Media Can Increase Your Event's Attendance, Revenue and Participation

Originally published in the Puget Sound Business Journal

It was assumed just a couple years ago that in-person events, conferences and trade shows would diminish in number, attendance and importance with the onset of social media and the deterioration of the economy. But now, in fact, the opposite may be true. Business travel and event expenses are expected to increase this year, the annual CES conference in Las Vegas set an attendance record last month, and CMOs at companies nationwide are increasing their investment in events as a key sales and marketing channel.

I believe social media—the very trend that was expected to make in-person events irrelevant—is actually making them more attractive, more important and more accessible for businesses and attendees alike.

The reason is quite simple—social media channels and the content therein is dramatically increasing our awareness, interest and discovery of the amazing content, networking opportunities and other benefits that getting together in person provide, and is actually increasing people's interest in taking the time and money to be there.

There was once a fear that making event content more readily available online would discourage potential attendees from making the trip. Now we're seeing that the opposite is true.

Without significant staff requirements or expense, you can proactively leverage social media for your next event, conference or trade show too. Start with the following tactics before, during and after the event.

Before The Show

- Take a quick survey (informal is fine) of your members or expected audience to prioritize their existing social media tendencies (Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.)
- Use social channels to share offers to register, as well as highlights and teasers about the agenda, speakers and topics
- Identify prospective attendees based on their social content and bios, and send personal invitations to join you
- Start a Facebook or LinkedIn group specifically for your event, for attendees to start networking with each other right away
- Identify particularly socially-active registrants and invite them to be part of your event's "social team", so that they're spreading the word before and during the event on your behalf
- Create an editorial calendar of content to post on your blog, in the Facebook & LinkedIn groups, and via social channels that corresponds with the agenda and session topics planned

At The Show

- Create an official event hashtag, communicate it in all your pre-show and at-show marketing materials, and designate someone (or a team of people) on staff to share highlights, retweet others and keep the Twitter conversation hopping (not only for those in attendance but those who couldn't make it and are already prospects for the next event)
- Create and claim your event on Foursquare, and allow participants to "check in" there each day with a rotating set of special offers
- Record each event (even better, stream it live) and post it on your blog (with links through your social channels) for others to share
- Create session and end-of-day summaries of ideas shared, key participants and their social details, and post these in your various content and social channels to promote readership, pass-along and retweets
- Curate content and summaries written, shared and tweeted by others

After The Show

- Package and repurpose content from the event, and send links to these summaries to all attendees
- Build a list of those who participated online, tweeted or retweeted, and/or joined your event's Facebook page, LinkedIn page and Twitter handle (this is your immediate prospect list for next time)
- Convert your Facebook page, LinkedIn page, Twitter handle and more to immediately reflect and promote the next event
- Post social media-exclusive offers to book registration for the next event right away

Ten More Best (And Worst) Practices For Your Next Trade Show

I spent most of this week at the Collaborate conference with 5,000 Oracle users, administrators, service providers and vendors. As usual, the trade show floor was a case study in what to do and what not to do with your trade show booth. I've written twice about booth best practices here and here, but here are a below are a few more suggestions based on observations this week.

1. Less Is More

Most companies stuff their booth with too much stimuli—graphics, computer screens, stacks of collateral, boxes of giveaways. The more cluttered it looks, the more confused and dazed your prospects will be. If they don't see a quick, simple and easy hook, they're more likely to just walk by. Work harder to have fewer elements in the booth. Believe me, it'll work much better than the alternative.

2. Plan Your Booth Layout In Advance

If you order the backdrop and the front table and the graphics all separately, it's more likely to be too cluttered and uninviting once you put it all together. If you have the time and luxury of building the booth at home in advance of the show, great. Otherwise, start with a written "map" of where everything will go. This will help you visualize angle, prospect entry points, and any space or line-of-sight conflicts that will arise without better planning.

3. Use Fewer Words And Visuals On Your Backdrops (And Avoid The Bottom Entirely)

Does this sound familiar? You carefully design an entire booth backdrop graphic only to have the bottom half almost invisible, behind tables or people or other distractions. And what's on top looked great on paper, but on the show floor is way too much to read. What's more, even the content at the top of your visuals can be too much to read. Keep it simple, user fewer words to get your message across, and let your booth staff fill in the blanks.

4. Booth Training Can't Be An Afterthought

Your attending staff may know your business well, but have they worked a trade show? Do they know how to use a question or phrase to get prospects to pause and engage? Do they know how to qualify or scan badges or do exactly what you need them to do to make the show successful? Don't wait to do booth training an hour before the event. Get the team together in the office before everyone leaves (or at minimum a conference call is part of the team is remote).

5. Know The Schedule And Staff Accordingly

When are the big breaks between sessions? When do you expect traffic to be particularly heavy? Even if those breaks are just 15–20 minutes, make sure you're well staffed to take advantage of the booth traffic. The more attentive you are to the schedule and rhythm of the event, the less likely you'll be overwhelmed during rushes and potentially miss a big prospect.

6. The Little Things Matter

Have a handful of pens to write on business cards and complete surveys. Bring water bottles and energy bars for the booth staff. Bottles of aspirin too. Order the trash can. And the extra padding under the carpet. The little things really matter. Have a detailed checklist of these things to use at each show moving forward.

7. Come Early For Show Start Times, And Be Ready To Roll

Nothing worse than fiddling with your monitor or demo while the first booth visitors are arriving. Not much better when your booth staff is a few minutes late and hasn't yet set things up, or are putting their stuff away when good prospects walk by. Get everyone to the booth plenty early, especially on the first day, and make sure you're ready to roll well in advance. Better to get done and ready plenty early and enjoy a quick break or cocktail vs. scrambling and finishing late.

8. Teach Your Booth Staff A Set Of Small-Talk "Interrupters"

Few prospects want to hear an elevator pitch immediately as they walk by. Is there something you do that would catch their attention in less than two seconds? Is there something you're offering that's not product-related that will get the majority of your target audience to pause and ask for more? Teach your booth staff these "interrupters" as they're key to getting more prospects to engage with you. Which nicely leads into the next best practicw...

9. Are You Inviting Or Receiving?

If you stand back and wait for attendees to engage, you might be waiting for a long time. Unless you have something really interesting like a four-foot tall, 300-pound cake shaped like an actual elephant (see photo above), prospects will likely have no idea who you are or how you can help them. Receiving prospects is passive, and will lead to lots of time to ponder your own thoughts. Instead, invite your prospects in. Teach your booth staff to have the confidence and "interrupters" to do this consistently.

10. Don't Break The Booth Down Early

I know you're tired, it's been a long week, and you're ready to either get home or go have a drink. But prospects are still walking around, and it looks bad if you're breaking down the booth early. You never know when a really big prospect will walk by at the last minute. In fact, stay up and attentive for at least 10–15 minutes after the show ends. Attendees are still in the room, at minimum walking by on their way out the door. You paid a lot of money to be here, take advantage of every minute.

How To Work A Trade Show Floor

Whether you're heading to Dreamforce next week or visiting a local Chamber of Commerce expo, you'll get a ton more value if you have a game plan going in. Below are several tips for working your next trade show floor as an attendee.

Know Your Objectives Going In

What are you there for? Knowing your objectives will help narrow where and how you spend your time. Are you looking for partnership opportunities? Trying to get better and smarter about a particular function or business application? Are you tasked with bringing back insights and best practices to others back at the office? Set some objectives up front, and customize your approach accordingly.

Highlight Booths OrVendors You Know Need To Meet

Review the exhibitor list and prioritize vendors you know you need to spend time with. Consider setting appointments with them in advance to get more of their time and attention. If you're attending as a representative of your organization, consider sending the list of exhibitors around to your team and asking them to also highlight vendors they'd like you to engage with on their behalf.

Consider Printing Biz Cards With A Different Email Address To Use On The Show FLoor

This works for your event registration too, as many trade shows use "badge scanners" for exhibitors to capture your contact information for follow-up. There's a ton of value in developing ongoing relationships with vendors and exhibitors relevant to your work, but you also don't want your primary email address flooded with spam. If you create your registration and a short stack of business cards with a slightly different email address that redirects back to you (i.e. mattheinz@heinzmarketing.com instead of matt@heinzmarketing.com), you'll still get the information but can redirect everything into a separate folder with Email Rules for reading later.

Do A Quick First Lap And Take Notes

When I first visit a new trade show floor, I like to do a quick lap around everything—scanning booths, getting a sense for who has something interesting, and taking notes of which booths I particularly want to come back to. At any show, there will be new vendors you didn't know before, or "old" vendors who do a particularly good job at educating and engaging their audience. For example, perhaps an exhibitor you previously hadn't highlighted is running a series of training events at their booth. Better to know their schedule and when you need to be back there early on, vs. missing something important because you hadn't checked it out first.

Don't Be Afraid To Politlely Say No

Exhibitors often train their booth staff to actively engage those walking by. If you're interested and ready, stop. But manage your time wisely, and don't be afraid to say no and keep walking. Be polite and smile. The same goes for the middle of a conversation that may have turned into an unwanted (or too early) sales pitch.

Think Twice About Taking The Giveaways

Do you really want it? Do you really need it? Will you really use it when you get back home? It is worth lugging around for the rest of the day or stuffing into your carry-on luggage in a couple days? If you're just going to throw it away or leave it in your hotel room later, you're wasting the vendor's money too.

Ask For "Soft Copies" Of The Sales Collateral

Having a PDF to read later might be much easier (for both attendee and vendor) than lugging around a bunch of brochures.

But Take Copies Of The Value Added Content

Many booths will have great, educational content that I believe is very much worth taking with you. Copies of white papers and research reports, books written by subject matter experts and more. Great materials to read on the flight back and share with the team when you get back to the office.

Visit Your Priority Booths During A "Lull" To Get More Attention

If you only spend time on the show floor during the "rush" times (between general sessions or during programmed breaks), the popular booths will be flooded and you won't get the time you need from booth staffers. Instead, plan to come back when you can afford to miss something on the conference agenda. The booths will be far less busy, and staffers will have more time to dedicate specifically to your questions.

Look for the subject matter experts, and ask questions that will help you learn

Many booth staffers will be sales reps, and you can learn a ton from the really good ones. But if you're done your homework, you can seek out the real thought leaders and subject matter experts from each vendor. Do your homework in advance and find out who at each company is writing their blog posts, who is featured in their white papers, and who is quoted most often in their press releases. Ask for those people when you visit the booth, or set up time with them in advance.

Trade Show Booth Best Practices: Observations From Dreamforce

I'm among more than 30,000 people that attended the 2010 Dreamforce conference, and it's as nuts as you would imagine. I had some time to check out many of the vendors, new technology and emerging SaaS businesses on the trade show floor.

I learned a lot, both based on what they're doing as well as how they handled prospective customers walking by. A booth space at Dreamforce costs a LOT of money, so I was interested in seeing how some companies capitalized on the opportunity, and how others let subtle things impact their ability to capture and engage prospects.

Here are some of my observations—good and bad alike.

The Good

Making eye contact and saying hello. The best booth staffers were engaged, scanning the crowd, and being proactive at making direct eye contact and greeting visitors. This was a great way to get myself and others to break their stride, pause for a moment, return the salutation, and start to engage on what they do. Many booths failed to do this. Eyes down and watching your Blackberry is not a good way to get prospects.

Script the first five seconds. It was very clear which booths had thought beforehand about their value proposition, and what specific handful of words would get the most visitors to say "wow, tell me more." Your first few words, those first five seconds of your introduction, will help me decide if I'm going to learn more or move on.

State your benefits in bold letters. If I'm walking by, deciding which booth to visit, I need a reason to stop. If I'm scanning the booth, I want to see words that imply what I'll achieve by working with you. I don't want you to tell me you're a cloud-based application. I don't need a list of features. What will it do for me? Why should I take the time to learn more? It's part of the hook, part of getting prospects to stop and engage.

Move longer conversations out of traffic flow. Especially in a crowded exhibit hall, once you've identified someone who wants to learn more or see a demo, get them out of the aisle and into your booth. Move there somewhere you can have a more direct, less-distracted conversation. This will add more value to that deeper conversation, plus allow more prospects in the flow of traffic to walk by and engage with others working your booth.

Value-added takeaways. The best booths at Dreamforce offered a book, a how-to guide, a sales automation or nurture marketing cheat-sheet, something of independent but related value that will make me smarter. I don't want to take home a bunch of brochures, that's what Web sites are for when I'm back at the office. Give me something I want to read on the plane home, something that will teach me and demonstrate how much more you can teach me if we keep working together.

The Bad

Scanning badges without context. Unfortunately, "can I scan your badge?" isn't a good example of the scripted five seconds referenced above. Offer me some value in exchange for the scan. Even if it's just to enter a drawing for an iPad, at least I understand the value being exchanged. If you want to add me to your mailing list, promise me something valuable in return. Email tips on sales automation, for example.

Failing to qualify. If you don't know who I am, what I do, what I need, how do you know it's worth giving me a five minute deep-dive on your product? Not every booth visitor is a good lead, not every booth visitor should be pitched the same way. Know my role and my objective first.

Scanning for someone better. If I'm talking to you, at least pretend that you're interested in our conversation. It's obvious when you're scanning to see if someone better walks by.

Ignoring loiterers. If I pause on my own, stop and stare at your booth on my own, I'm interested. I don't understand why I'm not immediately engaged with a handshake and welcome, especially when booth staffers are looking at and around me anyway. If you're already busy giving a demo to someone else, take a quick moment to welcome me into the conversation. Make me feel welcome, otherwise I'm likely to move on.

Check your email. We've all done this at trade show booths. It's bad. If you really must check your email, make sure your booth is staffed by someone else and walk a few feet away to do your business.

Brag about your hangover. It's not a badge of honor. Yes, we may all have had too much fun last night. But you're here this morning to work.

How To Profitably Generate Leads and Sales From Trade Shows

Trade shows represent the marketing channel sales and marketing people everywhere love to hate. High costs, LOTS of time (before and during the event), typically followed by less-than-exciting leads and few converted sales.

But as much as I also typically shy away from trade shows as a front-line marketing channel for demand generation, they do have their place in delivering solid, profitable revenue. You just have to get a few things right. This list is by no means exhaustive, but it's a start in the right direction.

Pre-show expectations: First and foremost, make sure you understand what trade shows can do, and what they likely cannot do. Trade shows are busy, attendees are scattered and flustered on the show floor, so having a lot of high-quality conversations that lead to short-term revenue isn't likely the expectation you want to set. Fast deals are bluebirds, with the majority of attendees earlier in the buying cycle, which means a longer lead time to being ready for your sales pipeline. Most trade show revenue, therefore, will be long term. Go into the show with that mindset and you're already a step ahead.

Establish and estimate required ROI: Before going any further, do the napkin math to make sure your fully-burdened spend (including out-of-pocket budget, travel costs, as well as the opportunity cost of the team's time) is worth the expected sales. Know up front, before the show is green-lighted, whether it has a chance of being a profitable effort, ideally with an expectation of exactly how many sales need to come directly from attendees. More often than not, this ROI will either keep you from wasting further time on a show that's destined to be a failure, or at minimum will give you guidance on the investment and strategy required to make it a success.

Pre-show buzz and "appointments": Get a copy of the attendee list if possible, and give expected booth visitors—before they're inundated with messages at the show—a reason to stop by. This is where knowing your audience and their pain points can make it easy to map that knowledge to an offer or message that prioritizes a trip to your booth over others. If they plan for it, they're more likely to not only stop by, but invest a little more time in your presentation.

How you approach prospects: At the show itself, how do you engage traffic? How do you get browsers to break their gait, pause in front of your booth, and engage with your staff? What message or offer can your booth staff deliver in three seconds or less to a passing attendee that will get at least 50 percent of them to stop? It's likely something related to your value proposition—a sample, a no-risk trial, or even a challenge. These types of offers will likely generate the most visitors and better prospects.

After-show follow-up: Sadly, this step is ignored, forgotten or just plain dropped by many sales and marketing teams. But it's arguably the most important step of all. You've just invested a significant amount of time and money to capture sales leads early in their purchase cycle. At the show itself, they were overwhelmed with messages. And few of the other exhibitors will do anything coordinated to follow up. Think in advance, before you attend the show, what you want your follow-up to look like. Whether it's all from marketing, or combined with some sales team follow-up directly, plan for this in advance so your team can hit the ground running as soon as the show is over. Even if you decide to give attendees a day or two to get home first, having this done beforehand will ensure the plan is well executed and measured.

Nurture nurture nurture: Knowing these leads are early in their buying cycle, make sure they are added to your broader lead nurturing efforts. If you don't have one, come up with a plan that "touches" these leads on a regular basis with relevant information, messaging and offers to ensure you stay top of mind well after the show. If you made a good first impression at the booth, that's a great start. If you fail to follow up and build momentum on that early start after the show, your expected ROI will fall as well.

Track results regularly and long-term: If you know going in that collected leads will likely take longer to close, you're less likely to deem the event a failure after just 30 days of follow-up. But no matter how long your sales cycle, measuring conversion and close results from collected leads is critical. If you're a Salesforce.com user, putting all collected leads into a unique Campaign is your best choice. But no matter what you use, have the patience and discipline to watch conversion over time.

A Better Way To Qualify Leads At Your Next Trade Show

The problem with most trade show qualifying questions is that they're black and white, and they're far too focused on identifying pipeline stage and purchase readiness.

That's not a bad thing to ascertain in general, but at a trade show your prospects are overwhelmed already and not in a buying/evaluation mindset. Asking questions about their qualification and readiness to purchase can come across as too much, too fast.

Instead, ask questions that are both conversational and situational. Listen for any of a series of buying signals (based on needs, pain, symptoms) that determine whether the prospect has a situation or problem you might be able to solve.

Questions like this could include:

Why are you here?
What are you looking for?
What do you need to bring back to justify this trip?

If you get positive answers to these questions (based on your buying signals), it's appropriate to ask about timeline to solve said problem. That gives you, effectively, a two-stage qualification process at your next trade show or event.

12 Ways To Get More Referrals At Your Next Trade Show

I wrote this post for the Real Estate Professional *magazine in advance of this fall's National Association of Realtors Annual Convention & Expo, but I thought many of the points were relevant across industries and event types. Take a look and let me know if you agree.*

A key objective for most attendees of the annual NAR Convention each year is to meet other agents and brokers, and build a stronger referral network. Yet, without a strong proactive plan, most agents fail to get the introductions and new relationships necessary to drive significant new referral and customer growth in the subsequent months.

This year, before you head to Anaheim, build a plan around these 12 easy-to-follow steps and you'll come home with exponentially more business opportunities to increase your sales and income in 2012.

1. Set Goals Up Front

How much business do want to do next year? How many new referrals would you need, and how many new relationships do you think it would take to get there? This may all be "ballpark planning", but having a goal before you hit the convention floor will help you be more proactive, prepared and ready to execute.

Good goals could include the number of new people you meet, number of business cards collected with explicit and expected follow-up, etc. Don't expect to get customer referrals on the show floor. Starting and fostering peer relationships comes first.

2. Know You're Building Long-Term Relationships, Not Just Short-Term Referrals And Revenue

Don't expect your new agent and broker friends to send you referrals the following week. Some might, but most relationships will take long-term nurturing to generate ongoing referral volume and income growth. Not unlike some of your potential home buyer and seller relationships—they may eventually transact, but not right now (and if you try to rush them, they may go elsewhere with their business).

3. Know Who's Going That You Want To Meet

In the weeks and days before the show, look for those who are talking about their upcoming NAR trip via social networks, hashtags, industry discussion groups such as ActiveRain and more. Build a list of top agents and brokers in other markets that you'd like to meet.

4. Contact Targets In Advance (Be Bold, But Sensitive To Thier Time)

Don't wait until you get to the show to try and set up meetings. Contact your targets in advance and ask to meet each other, even briefly for a cup or coffee or 5–10 minute introduction. Be bold, but sensitive to their time and schedule.

5. Take Three Times The Business Cards You Think You'll Need

The very last thing you want to do is run out of business cards. It's far better to come home with a big stack of your own cards than to be in the middle of the best industry networking event of the year, and have nothing but a scrap of paper to write on. Make sure you have a good pen within arm's reach at all times as well (vs. buried in your purse or back at your hotel room).

6. Offer A Complimentary Service To Other Agents And Their Customers

What could you offer new agent/broker partners and/or their customers, for free, to encourage follow-up and quick referrals when everyone is back at the office? A free report of listings in your area? A free "choose the best neighborhood" consultation for their customers who may be moving? How about a "get to know our area" presentation for the agent and others in their office after the show?

Consider printing this offer on the back of your business card, or print separate but same-sized business cards to hand out specifically with this offer.

7. Go To All The Parties

Your feet will hurt. You will get tired. But you're there to work—to network, to meet others, to take those relationships back home with you. Find out in advance about as many of the after-hours parties, get-togethers, tweet-ups and other networking events as you can find. Sign up for them early if they require registration, but otherwise put them on your calendar so you remember when and where they are. Consider going early too, as it's the best way to scope out the scene and meet other early arrivers with quality conversations before the scene gets busier and noisier.

8. Catch Up On Work In Public Places

If you need to catch up on email or other work on your laptop, don't do it in your room. Find a public area like a hotel lobby or corner of the convention hall where other agents and brokers are also walking by. This won't be the quietest and more productive space to work, but it'll increase the chances that you run into someone you want to meet, or that you'll have a chance encounter with someone new who could be added to your referral network.

9. Meet Other Service Providers (Not Just Other Agents And Brokers)

Think of the service providers at the show as your gateway to dozens of potential referral sources. Most of the service providers you'll see on the show floor have relationships with hundreds, thousands, sometimes tens of thousands of other agents and brokers. Oftentimes, you can leverage these vendor relationships to get introductions to multiple referral partners at once—either at the show directly or afterward.

10. Ask Everyone For Their Business Card

This may seem trivial, and real estate professionals are generally good about this anyway. But don't walk away from any conversation at NAR this year without asking for a business card. Keep a separate pocket in your jacket pocket or purse to put these cards so you can gather them cleanly at the end of the day or show, and have them ready for follow-up afterward (more on that below).

11. Write Specific Requests ANd Context On The Back Of Their Biz Cards

Use the card you receive to take short notes about what you may have promised to send your new potential partner. Write notes with other trivia you may want to remember later (where they went to school, a common interest, etc.).

12. Follow-Up Immediately After The Show

This is the most important part of building an active referral network from the NAR convention. If you do everything above and fail to follow-up, you've killed your opportunity to nurture new relationships into sales and income.

As soon as you get back home, have an assistant or intern or high school student immediately turn your stack of business cards into a spreadsheet. Write a common follow-up email that you can customize (if necessary) to each person you met. Add them to your social networks, and follow up with anything specific you may have promised.

Marketers today measure everything. We want to know, in real-time, how well something's doing, who responded, how much money we made.

The instant-gratification channels we increasingly use at the core of our marketing mix lend themselves to this. We have more tools to manage and measure our marketing than ever before.

And then there are trade shows.

Trade shows and events in general are among the most

expensive and least monetized marketing channels we have. It's not just the cost of the booth. It's the soft cost of all the time marketing spends getting ready for and executing the show. All the time your salespeople are away from the phones and shuffling their feet in the booth.

Few organizations count up the total cost of shows, and even if they did, most couldn't tell you if they made their money back, let alone made the event profitable.

Too often, ROI on an event comes up after the fact. When all is said and done, someone asks if it was worth it.

Well, was it? And by who's definition? Would you do it again? Should you do 10 more of them?

Managing and measuring ROI on your next event starts well before you get there. Here are a few tips to do it right the next time.

Define clearly what success looks like first. There should be a sales or marketing objective independent of the event that is different than your pre-show expectations. The event, after all, is just a channel. So, why are you doing it in the first place? Is it about sales? Awareness? Satisfying a partner relationship? Know the objective up front, and then decide what specifically success looks like.

Don't do it alone. Get the event's key stakeholders on board with that definition—before you plan, before you commit. If there's disagreement early about the objectives, it's good you got that out early vs. hearing about it the day you get back.

Triage the slippery slope of ideas based on your goals. Events and trade shows have a way of getting out of control quickly. The sales team wants tickets to the customer-only exclusive event. Then they want to sponsor it. Meanwhile, a partner wants you to go in on an awards reception sponsorship and your biz dev guy says it's critical to a pending deal.

These things may be true, but are they priorities? Are they core to the reason you're going, and the means by which you'll measure success? These aren't easy conversations to have, but if your plan is rooted in a universally-understood set of objectives, it gets a lot easier to say no to the peripheral tactics that will only take your focus away from the more important work.

Establish immediate and longer-term measures of success. Someone's going to want to know if the show was successful the day you get back. Depending on your objectives or what you're selling, that may not be entirely possible.

If the show was about making a partner happy, you can usually do that temperature check right away. If you're selling impulse-buy products on-location, same thing. But if you're working long sales cycles, the show may be more about making good impressions and capturing leads.

And that's OK as an immediate measure of success. Just make sure there are farther-out measures you're managing as well. Leads should turn into opportunities, which should eventually turn into closed deals. How many opportunities and closed sales do you need from the show after XX weeks or months?

Knowing that number, and setting the expectation that you'll measure it not the next day but in due time, helps set expectations and establish post-show milestones for evaluating effectiveness.

Plan your post-show activities before you leave. It's highly likely that your show or event ROI is contingent on significant post-show activity. Lead follow-up, the sales team following through on commitments they made to prospects at the booth, etc.

Most organizations don't think much about these activities until they're back—when they're tired, less focused, and likely starting to think about the next thing on their plate. If you not only plan for but prepare post-show activities as part of your pre-show work (literally build it into your project plan), it's far more likely to happen—quickly and completely. No matter how you're measuring ROI from a show, this is critical.

Templatize a post-event ROI report. Do this before you leave as well. It can be a simple one-page Word doc or short PowerPoint presentation. If you've established success criteria up front, circle back and at the right intervals (within a day or two, at the time you will measure pipeline contribution, etc.) with a quantifiable report and update.

Your executives will appreciate the follow-up, will appreciate how quantifiable you've made the event evaluation, and will be far more likely to approve event expenditures in the future if they have the confidence that 1) it will be profitable, and 2) you're responsible enough to know whether it is or not.

In the past, we highlighted several best practices to help Dreamforce attendees get the most out of the show. Today, we highlight tips for the hundreds of exhibitors and vendors attending to promote and sell their products and services. Getting so many vendors in one place is a big draw for many attendees, but there are many strategies and tactics that separate successful vendors from those who go home empty-handed.

Eight Requirements For A Successful Event Strategy

Those who have managed or executed any event—a seminar, a user conference, or an industry trade show—will know it involves a thousand details, lots of moving parts, and other thankless tactics that, together, lead to success. But if you focus on and have a strategy or plan for the following eight elements, you're most of the way towards a successful event.

Anatomy Of A Better Pre-Event Email

In the next few weeks, Dreamforce attendees will receive literally receive dozens of emails from exhibitors. It promises to be an interesting study in different strategies, objectives and perspectives in engaging an audience before you (potentially) see them live at the event. Here are several things I've noticed from past Dreamforce pre-event emails (the good, bad and ugly) and would recommend to drive greater performance this year.

Trade Show Best Practices: Observations From A Past Dreamforce

A booth space at Dreamforce costs a lot of money, so it's interesting to see how some companies capitalized on the opportunity, and how others let subtle things impact their ability to capture and engage prospects. Here are observations (good and bad) and recommendations for what to do this year.

Ten Best (And Worst) Practices For Your Next Trade Show

At an Oracle event earlier this year, the trade show floor was a case study in what to do and what not to do with your booth and overall presence. Here are a few recommendations based on observations that week.

A Better Way To Qualify Leads At Your Next Trade Show

The problem with most trade show qualifying questions is that they're black and white, and they're far too focused on identifying pipeline stage and purchase readiness. That's not a bad thing to ascertain in general, but at a trade show your prospects are overwhelmed already and not in a buying/evaluation mindset. Asking questions about their qualification and readiness to purchase can come across as too much, too fast. Instead, ask questions that are both conversational and situational. Listen for any of a series of buying signals (based on needs, pain, symptoms) that determine whether the prospect has a situation or problem you might be able to solve. See some examples here.

Things To Do (And Not Do) At Your Next Trade Show Booth

Two years ago at Dreamforce, I picked up a number of best and worst practices from participating exhibitors (summarized here). Last year's event was even bigger, with more vendors doing smart and dumb things (intentionally and otherwise). Here are some of the things I picked up.

The Thin Line Between Great Presentations And Sales Pitches

I have no problem with sponsors who help underwrite a conference to get their stage time, but the last thing they should do (for their own good, as well as for perception with attendees and prospects) is give a sales pitch. Many companies assume that featuring a customer on stage automatically makes the content more interesting and less self-serving. But a sales pitch is still a sales pitch. There were four particular differences between a stinker and a winner. Here are those differences, good lessons for those who want to similarly leverage conferences, stage time and customer participation to drive real value, preference and interest.

The Most Important Part Of Event Marketing

Here's a hint. It happens AFTER the show.
Learn more here.

How To More Accurately Measure Trade Show ROI

I'm a broken record about defining what success looks like up-front for any sales or marketing effort, and trade shows are no different. But trade shows, especially for B2B sellers, are more complicated because very little happens (or at least is monetized) right away. To more completely and accurately measure the business value and sales impact of your next trade show, define and measure success at three critical post-event milestones.

There are lots of great B2B sales and marketing events throughout the year, but Dreamforce (Salesforce.com's annual user conference) is by far the biggest and clearly among the most influential. Whether this will be your first time attending or if you've been to many, having a game plan and strategy up front for a conference this big is essential.

Here are several best practices for making the most out of your time at Dreamforce (or any conference you're about to attend).

Why Attending Events In Person Is Still So Important

There are many reasons why a trip to Dreamforce may be worth your time, but in general I'm a big fan of regularly finding events that get me out of my office, away from my usual environment, and somewhere I can accelerate my business, my own learning, and my value to our clients all at the same time. I love the growing trend of online-only conferences, as well as the ever-present availability of Webinars to help me learn. But nothing will replace the value of being there live. Here are five reasons for this.

The Four "Other" Things You Can Learn At A Great Conference

You're there to close some business, meet partners, hear speakers and network with fellow attendees. But if you look between the lines, and pay closer attention to what's going on around you, you can also absorb a ton of best (and worst) practices about running or participating in a successful conference. Here are several.

Dreamforce Session Recommendations For B2B Sales And Marketing Pros

Registration for specific sessions at next month's Dreamforce conference fill up fast, and as usual the overall schedule is chock-full of some great sessions featuring best practices, expert speakers and more. Navigating the agenda on your own can be dizzying, but if you're a B2B sales or marketing professional, here are some of the sessions I most recommend based on the topic, agenda and/or speakers.

The Do's And Don'ts Of Conference Hashtags

Most conferences these days feature a hashtag for both attendees and followers from afar to "meet" each other and share highlights from the event. Dreamforce (#DF12 this year) is no different. For both marketers and enterprising individuals looking to accelerate their own networking ROI, conference hashtags also represent a significant opportunity to catalyze your objectives. But like a lot of things, there's a right way and a wrong way to do it. Here are a handful of best and worst practices.

How To Take Notes At A Conference

Over the years, I've developed a system for how I take notes at conferences, and (more importantly) how I process and use those notes afterward to extract their value for my business and our clients. Here are several recommendations based on my system for how to not only take better notes faster at Dreamforce, but also ensure that those notes are immediately put to good use and effectively archived for yourself and others without extra work.

How To Make The Most Of The Parties And Networking Events

Dreamforce is chock-full of parties—those sponsored by Salesforce.com as well as sponsors and exhibiting vendors. These events are a great opportunity to relax and enjoy the company of fellow attendees, but they're also an important opportunity to meet new people, add to your network, and create new business opportunities. Here are six tips for better engaging and leveraging these parties in your favor (while at the same time enjoying yourself and having fun!).

Getting The Most Out Of An Awesome Conference (Once You're Back At The Office)

The flow of inspiration and ideas at a conference like this can be overwhelming while still away, but it gets worse when you're back in the office. Unfortunately, those pages and pages of notes often get relegated to a pile on the side of our desks, or forgotten altogether once we dig into the backlog of emails, re-engage in the daily fire drills, and otherwise get overwhelmed by trying those great new ideas in the midst of the everyday madness that surrounds us. To get the most out Dreamforce, and maximize your productivity and execution on all those great ideas, you need a little preparation, a little discipline, some organizational best practices and two short sharing exercises. Here's how to do it.

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To more completely and accurately measure the business value and sales impact of your next trade show, define and measure success at three critical post-event milestones.

1. Immediately After The Show

When you walk back into the office, what can you measure? How will you immediately know if the show was a success? Your likely measures for this include leads (or names) captured, meetings held, briefings or demos completed, etc. Define these measures up front and drive your strategy and execution accordingly.

2. 30 Days After The Show

A month after the event, you should have at minimum qualified all of the leads you captured and placed them in the appropriate stage in your pipeline. Many of the leads may go right into a nurture track. Some will require further qualification, and others may be actively engaged on a short path to purchase. But ideally, after a few weeks of working the immediate product of the event, you have a sense for what pipeline expectations should be in the next few months.

3. Six Months After The Show

Depending on your average sales cycle length, this is the milestone at which you should start to expect closed business, booked sales and revenue recognition directly from the event. There will still be leads you're nurturing, but six months should be enough time to see closed business and a solid pipeline of expected new sales in the subsequent six-month period.

Ideally, you establish goals for these three milestones not only before the event, but before you commit the resources in the first place. Because if the goals don't add up to enough business to justify the event, save your time and money for something else.

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Matt Heinz is the Founder and President of Heinz Marketing Inc. Matt brings more than 12 years of marketing, business development and sales experience from a variety of organizations, vertical industries and company sizes. His career has focused on delivering measurable results for his employers and clients in the way of greater sales, revenue growth, product success and customer loyalty.

About Heinz Marketing

Heinz Marketing is a Seattle marketing agency focused on sales acceleration. Heinz Marketing helps clients achieve sustained sales success by growing revenue from existing customers and cost effectively identifying and winning new customers.

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