

Harnessing trade show power

By Traci Matt
Associate Editor

When the National Convention of the Automotive Distribution Network begins at the end of this month in Nashville, it will bring more than 1,300 attendees to the city. Their headquarter hotel was sold out far in advance, prompting the organization president to assure pre-registered attendees, as well as last-minute drop-ins, they would have a place to stay.

According to Genevieve Nelson, research project coordinator for the Center for Exhibition Industry Research (CEIR), final results for 2008 trade show trends are still being tabulated. However, one industry forecast targeted 2008 trade show spending by exhibitors alone at over \$11.5 billion, up almost 6 percent from the year before. CEIR places the exhibition industry at \$24.1 billion a year entity.

No one can predict the damage the faltering economy and rising fuel prices will have on the convention and meeting industry, but most still swear by the value of face-to-face marketing and on-site education opportunities.

So where does this leave you? Is the trade show still a worthwhile investment for buyer or seller? Does the Internet eliminate the need for travel and a handshake? And what can you do to maximize each dollar spent as you travel to distant locales to meet with your peers?

Nelson said CEIR's studies over the past few years reveal some common show trends:

- 77 percent of qualified attendees at events are potential new customers for exhibiting companies;
- 39 percent have final say in purchasing decisions;
- 51 percent recommend the purchase of exhibited products;
- one-third of exhibition visitors have not previously attended a show;
- average attendees spend 8.3 hours over 2.3 days visiting exhibits on the floor; and,
- 34 percent of visitors are likely to recommend a product or particular brand showcased at an exhibition.

CEIR's research consistently reaffirms the power of face-to-face as the "premier" marketing medium. Approximately two-thirds of visitors place a "high level of importance" on personal interaction during the pre-purchasing stages of the customer's buying process. Customers also require face-to-face interaction in the later stages of the purchasing process to maintain the ongoing relationship with their vendors.

Although some predicted the death of the face-to-face exhibition due to virtual trade shows, little progress has been made in convincing the public to stay put. Much as the birth of the home VCR did not put movie theaters out of business, getting out and being with people seems to have an intrinsic value of its own.

"For all the money they save, virtual trade shows don't work for the same reason e-mail won't suffice when a conference call is needed," said ERA Show Promoter Polly Shea. "Electronic misunderstandings can abound."

"Expressions and tone play a vital part of the networking process. Questions can be answered, but much of the give and take during a face-to-face conversation never takes place. And what about hobnobbing? You can't put a price on that," she said.

One specific threat exhibition industry insiders are watching with trepidation is the reduction in the airline industry. Fewer seats, fewer flights, reconfigured hubs and uncertain fuel costs are keeping show organizers wondering how to ensure their exhibitors and attendees will be able to get where they need to go.

Donna Sanford, editor and publisher of *EXPO* magazine wrote: "What happens to our attendance when ticket prices jump 50 percent? What happens to our exhibits when shipping fuel surcharges exceed all other costs of exhibiting? What happens to our destinations when direct flights only exist between a handful of major cities? ... in 25 years in this industry, nothing, in my opinion, has had the propensity to bring us to our knees like the current airline crisis."

Others are not so pessimistic.

David Brull, senior director of the Trade Show Exhibitors Association (TSEA), said he sees "no threat" to the current trade show format.

"Shows are not going away. Face-to-

face marketing is still the most efficient way to make a sale, and trade shows are the easiest way for customers to evaluate a large number of products at the same time," he said.

Even though his latest numbers indicate 40 percent of their members are seeing less booth traffic, he said those with purchasing authority are still attending.

"Decision-makers are still coming to shows, but not necessarily the tagalongs," he said, "and exhibitors want to build relationships and expand business with those people. There are a lot of exhibitors out there that don't realize the potential if they do it right."

Brull said their members are indicating an uptick in popularity of the regional show, such as the Electrical Rebuilder's Association (ERA) Trade Show scheduled for this April in Kansas City.

"Regional shows are more of a trend these days, partly because of the ease of travel," he said. "Exhibitors like small regional shows because they have time to visit with people at their booths. Regional shows are a trend that is definitely gaining speed."

Shea said the educational component of exhibitions is what keeps their value unparalleled. Her show headliner, trainer Joe Davis, has been bringing rebuilders to exhibitions for years and will be in Kansas City again this year.

"We have seen the value of the education bandwagon for years," she said. "Our planning meeting participants confirmed again the need for lots of seminars and live demonstrations in Kansas City. We will be teaching rebuilders how to price goods, co-exist with parts houses, get the most out of their computers, develop and service warranties, sell scrap, and make smart choices in credit card processing. Richard Vensel is even going to teach a class on workstation design. And the technical topics are a whole other list: Ford/Delco regulators, testing late model units, hi-pot testing, slip ring replacement, on-vehicle testing, heavy-duty market applications, it just goes on and on."

She said the goal is to make shops more knowledgeable and more profitable.

"Seminars keep shops on the leading edge during an economic downturn. Technical seminars at the ERA Show are designed to keep shops up-to-date and

enable them to prosper even during times of uncertainty,” she said.

Exhibitors beware

TSEA’s Brull, along with a host of exhibition experts, advise exhibitors that making the choice to attend a show is just the start of the real work. According to Exhibit Surveys, Inc., during the average national trade show about 80 percent of a company’s potential customers will visit their booth—yet less than 50 percent will actually speak to a company representative.

“Your booth staff has to be engaging,” said Brull. “People need to think of your booth as a retail store and you need to invite them in.”

In fact, he said an effective method to train booth staff is to have them picture the show as a shopping mall with each booth representing a store in the mall.

“The best training I had for working a show floor was the time I spent working at the GAP in the mall,” he said.

TSEA offers “cheat sheets” for exhibitors in the form of small, laminated cards called “Great Lines” cards. These “lines” are intended to engage customers in meaningful conversations resulting in sales. Some samples include: “What’s important to you in the companies with whom you do business?” How reasonable does that sound to you?” “What end results would you like to see in...?” “How is a decision like this typically made?” and “What do you see your needs to be?”

Brull said another key is getting the right people to attend. This is part of the educational program his organization provides to exhibitors.

“It’s most important to do your pre-show marketing correctly. If you can drive your attendance to your booth you have the best chance to make a sale because 60 to 80 percent of attendees decide who they’re going to see before they even get on the show floor,” he said.

The pre-show contacts should only be “one to two tops” but need to stand out. Odd-sized postcards highlighting show giveaways or other incentives work best.

“You need some enticement, but it doesn’t even have to be anything expensive,” said Brull. “Exhibitors just need to realize that with a little bit of extra work on their part they can see much bigger returns on their exhibiting.”

Although the average cost per attendee

that visits an exhibitor’s booth has increased more than 25 percent in the last five years, CEIR says the majority of attendees rank exhibitions above sales calls and trade publications as one of the “most useful courses of purchasing information.” More than 80 percent said exhibitions:

- keep them up-to-date on the latest trends and developments in their industry;
- save company time and money by bringing many vendors under one roof;
- help their company make decisions about what products and services to buy; and,
- provide an opportunity to discuss problems and ideas with professionals in their industry.

A full 83 percent say they “rely” on exhibitions to keep up on important trends and new developments.

Attendee motto: Be prepared

Preparation is as important for the rebuilders as it is for the representatives they are coming to see, according to Shea. The first step is to pre-register and save hassles at the check-in desk.

“It’s a much smoother process for the rebuilder if their badge is already made and waiting for them when they arrive,” she said. “It’s just a nicer way to start out the weekend than standing there filling out paperwork.”

Knowing what you plan to accomplish before, during and after a show will help maximize your resources. Take stock of your inventory and make a list of new things you’d like to see. Consider bringing key employees along to be another set of eyes and ears while you take in the mountain of information available over the weekend.

It’s important to have a plan before you start out on the show floor. Shea said it pays to review the booth map in the newspaper before you arrive, but some things may have changed so review the updated show guide. If there is a vendor you particularly want to spend time with, make an appointment in advance.

Bring a comfortable bag for carrying literature and be sure to leave extra room in your suitcase for papers and freebies. If you aren’t able to carry the literature, ask exhibitors to mail it to you.

Bring a small notebook to record contact information, orders you make, and useful technical information which may come up in casual conversations. Be sure to bring plenty of business cards and hand them out.

“It’s important for everyone at a show to pluck up their courage and get to know each other,” said Shea. “Each year I hear that the value of the networking pays back attendance costs many times over in technical knowledge, supplier availability, and friendship.”

E R E