

Getting The Most Out Of Trade Shows

or...How To Convert Your Trade Show Visit Into Something More Profitable!

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Planning to attend a conference and trade show? Troubled by those conflicting conference/trade floor schedules, hours of aimless booth-wandering, missed sales contacts, and lost opportunities? Want more than bags of literature and sore feet? Don't we all! Getting something valuable out of a trade show is mandatory. They can be expensive, and since it's your hard-earned money and time being spent, coming up empty handed is a crime. Industry trade shows really are information and resource gold-mines for those who know how to work them. Read through these suggestions and see if you don't come home from your next trade show visit with more than you have in the past.

Working The Conference Program: Plan Team-Coverage In Advance

Most conferences have two or more sessions going at the same time. You can't be everywhere so prioritize those talks you are most interested in. Use the old "full-house-press" technique at trade shows. Bring your employees. Assign them talks and provide them written questions to ask the speakers, should you have some. This works really well if you reward them for thoroughness with a decent dinner or incentive. For the money you're paying to attend the show, you can't afford to miss something.

The Two-Session Two-Step

If your stuck at a show by yourself, be ruthless...it's your money! The "Two-Session, Two-Step" is a simple and effective way to increase information acquisition. First identify the speakers and write down questions/facts you need to get. Go to your most important talk, get the handouts, and take notes. Be quick to ask your question...then leave. Chances are the conflicting talk is still going on. Be bold, go on in, get the handouts (usually at the back of the room) and then corner the speaker outside the room or as he/she leaves the podium. Speakers really do understand! Indicate you hated to miss the talk but felt it important to touch base. Ask away...and please ask for a business card, you might need to follow up when you get home.

It's OK To Walk Out (...so long as you go to the trade show!)

There is nothing more frustrating than being bored to death or worse, being bored to death for a hour or two in a conference room! It's your money you've spent, so feel free to leave when your talk of interest is over. Boring speaker? Quietly excuse yourself without guilt! As a University Extension Specialist, and frequent conference speaker(of course, my talks are never boring...), I'd rather you were happy so feel free to leave... just so long as you head towards the trade show floor while your waiting for the next talk of interest. Visiting booths during

scheduled programs is smart, especially if you have some serious product inquiries. It's peaceful, un-pressured and booth sales-staff are able to give you their undivided attention!

Working The Trade Show Floor:

Working the trade show floor can be exhausting and frustrating. Plan ahead, pace yourself and have a list of what you came for. Get what you need from whom you've identified and then take a long break. Clear your mind of all the "I've got to do this next" items. Now your ready to tour the floor from start to finish and have some fun. Begin with a different attitude and purpose. This tour is not to grab literature or ask questions, but rather to extract the hidden gold from the trade show floor by carefully looking, listening, sniffing, and thinking.

Discover (Uncover) Market Trends

Seldom does an opportunity to expand your market fall into your lap, and trade shows are more than just what's new and who's selling it. A sharp observer can spot trends and opportunities before products are established to meet the need. By observing how folks respond to a new product, you may be also able to predict secondary needs generated by that product. Home computers generated a huge market for custom-logo mouse-pads, computer furniture and disk-labels. Likewise, bedding plant plugs generated plug trays, plug dislodgers and intricate seeders. Here's how to recognize trends and opportunities.

New Plants

Most seed and plant distribution companies perform spot market tests of new or unusual plants they aren't sure will sell. Many growers have a few oddities to attract folks into their booth. You won't find a big display labelled "new plants", but rather one or two, set off to the side or on the back table of the exhibit. Observe what other growers are picking up, asking about, scrutinizing or carrying home. A keen eye and the willingness to listen for "what's new" can send you home with a long list of new materials your competition doesn't have...they didn't attend.

The further away the trade show is, the more likely it will be that these non-commercially distributed plants will not be common in your area. Move quickly and make sure your customers know you have something new. Example: I've often observed new plants released in Georgia take two years or longer to become "new plants" in Virginia or Oklahoma. Look at Homestead Purple for example...it took five years to get into the trade after its debut at a trade show in Georgia. You can capitalize on the production, and marketing delays, but only if you attend the trade show.

New Equipment

New equipment can be an investment or a catastrophe, depending on whether its sophistication matches your needs. The only way to judge this properly is to outline your production and management bottle-necks in writing before you go to the show. Computers, conveyors, rolling benches, and two-way FM radios are great, but is it what your business really needs to run better? You might have to ask quite a few questions of quite a few sales representatives to get the big picture and make the best choices. Keep a sharp eye out for small, time and energy saving devices too. One grower recently told me that a plug dislodger was the best investment he ever made, and by far the least expensive.

New Markets

Ever wonder how some growers seem to have product ready just as the purchasing trend begins? Just having new plants isn't marketing! Seeing around corners and into the future, and then doing something about it is. Where do you start? Well, the first step is listening in on trade-floor conversations. Ever pass by a grower on the trade floor complaining about something to a fellow grower? For every complaint there exists a potential new market for something or someone. Listen to sales representatives, growers and grower's spouses! Take notes. Example: many growers' complained years ago about how hard it was to pull plugs from plug trays. Someone listened, built and patented a plug dislodger.

One good product usually supports like-items. A strong interest in a perennial cultivar may spark interest in a companion annual. Example: If you want to sell tons of this year's perennial-plant-of-the-year, *Perovskia*, demonstrate it underplanted with annual *Setcreasea purpurea*. It makes a stunning combination, whereas *Perovskia* by itself is boring to most folk. There's been a lot of marketing surrounding *Perovskia* this year, so you might have been able to sell a lot of *Setcreasea* too. Of course, only if you had been to the PPGA, or Southeast Greenhouse Conference Trade Shows and happened to see a photo of this companion planting in one, small, nursery booth. Had you done so, you would have had time to propagate and prepare! By the way, three Georgia growers did!

Look for hard-good/plant product-associations. When butterfly feeders showed up in two booths at the SNA trade show last year, right along side hummingbird feeders, one could guess that plants that attracted hummingbirds and butterflies would be in high demand by next spring. How? Someone else had just spent lots of money on market surveys and invested in butterfly feeder mass-production...why? Simple...a trend was coming! Time to call your local garden center owners and inquire.

Ask Tough Questions, Get Free Advice

By far the most overlooked grower-value of any trade show is the availability of experts and experienced trade profes-

sionals. I'm not talking about university professors either (may my colleagues forgive me...). What about all those industry people who have lifetimes of experience. They are everywhere at trade shows! As an extreme example, I once bumped into a regional sales representative from a major fertilizer company. Just for the fun of it, I asked him a complex chemical reaction question I and another faculty member had been wrestling with for weeks. He had the answer on the tip of his tongue! He happened to be a trained chemist too! It made my day...and it was free advice. You would be amazed at the diversity of backgrounds held by the people in our industry!

Preparation, Persistence and Patience

There is a strategy to getting good answers to tough questions. First know what you are asking for. Map out the companies and individuals you feel might be able to help you prior to the show. Be sure you have details of your problem written down so the resource person can get the big picture. Paint a clear picture of your operation and your goals. Don't ask for solutions, ask for suggestions or referrals. Secondly, don't bother asking questions during peak booth hours. Industry folks just don't have the time and other growers will interrupt their chain of thought. The best time is during the trade show talks you are not interested in. Peace, relative solitude and an attentive resource person is what you are after.

Finally, consider the golden rule of information exchange...show appreciation. Buy the helpful resource person a cup of coffee, lunch or you might even offer to take the speaker/sales representative out to dinner since they are helping solve your business's problems. Treat a sales rep right and you'll have a resource for years to come. Be sure to write down their suggestions, thank them for advice, and get their business card! Want a friend for life? If they've done you right, write their boss or CEO a complimentary letter!

Business Cards Are As Good As Gold

One of the most important items I collect at the Southeast Greenhouse Conference is business cards. I just don't have time to meet everyone, nor can I predict what problems or needs will arise over the next year. Ask, cajole, beg, swap and out-right steal every business card you can...even from other growers! When you get back home, sort them by any method you choose, wholesale, retail, equipment, supplies, etc. You don't even need a fancy card file, just fill shoe boxes labelled by group.

Why do all this? When your between a rock and a hard place, and your business needs something fast, those cards can make things happen. Cards give you people's names, job descriptions and local resources, saving you the frustration of wading through the corporate web to get a helpful answer. To me, business cards are like gold coins, the more you have, the easier your life will become.

Don't Forget...Bring A Notebook And A Friend

Ever kicked yourself for not remembering something valuable someone said, or showed you? Bring a notebook and permanently attach it to your belt. You never, ever, know when you'll need it, so consider it as important as your purse, wallet or watch. I personally like the light-weight fold-out aluminum/leather notebook cases that allow you to store your business cards, paper and your companies literature.

Why bring a friend? Just like Perry Mason's cross examinations, you'll find two growers remember different details from the same conversation. Teaming up sometimes allows you reconstruct the whole picture. Husband/wife, owner/manager, you name it...getting a second set of ears, eyes and brains will ensure your company's information search and retrieval will be successful.

See How They Sell, And Do Likewise!

When I started a business many years ago, it was a big mystery how folks got their message across, and made the sale. I noticed some booths were swamped with people, some were not. If you are like me, you'd probably like to know how and why things work. If you just stop and force yourself to look at detail, it's easy to see the reasons behind the different levels of success. Successful booths somehow captivated a growers interest. If you study the booth carefully, you can see and conceptualize the company's market strategy, style and methods that a consultant would charge you thousands for. As you walk the floor, ask yourself the following...how are they doing it? The answers are valuable, useful and free!

Using Your Eyes

Find a successful, crowded booth. Ask yourself these questions with your eyes: Why did this booth/product appeal to these growers? Is it colorful, is there a focal point, benefit or unusual item that catches attention? Does the booth signage tell you what they are selling rather than who is selling? Is there a simple, easy to read message you can't miss. How do they make themselves different from their competitors? Are the sales reps happy, attentive, dressed nicely? Is the booth clean and well organized? Does it allow you to walk in or invite you take a closer look? Then ask yourself what is it that they've done that I could capitalize on to bring new customers into my wholesale, retail or landscape business? Yes, a wholesaler's front-door business image is critical too. Finally, take notes on presentation ideas and display organization...you may be needing those ideas sooner than you think.

Using Your Ears

This is easy to do and fun too. Find another successful booth but don't really look at it just yet. Stand off to the side, shut your eyes and listen to the conversations and noises around you. Do the sounds alone suggest success? Does the booth have friendly, enthusiastic voices? Do they

sound knowledgeable? Are they doing a good job answering questions? Listen to the growers too. Are they sounding interested, appreciative, or trapped? After comparing a few excellent and less-than-successful booths, you'll pick up on the greatest marketing secret in the industry...the sound of enthusiasm sells product! When you get back to your greenhouse, do you hear the same sounds as you did at those successful booths? If not....

Using Your Nose

Yup, your nose! Yet another subtle but deadly factor in marketing your business's product is smell. Many booths have large machinery, fertilizer, plastics, etc, that can flat-out stink! With a little ingenuity and a spritz of "new car smell" or aerosol fragrance, your now looking at, and smelling, a fine trade show exhibit. Consider that we are in the flower business and that customers think our products, greenhouses and garden centers should smell good! Many exhibitors incorporate subtle flower/food fragrances, or better still, stage live fragrant flowers into their presentation plan. See if your nose can spot these enhancements as you walk the floor! Perfumes, aftershaves, you name it...smell imparts a strong message and it can help sell! Now I ask you, seriously, what does your business smell like? Does it matter...you bet it does!

Be Part Of The Show, Not Just A Spectator

Is your business lost in space, surrounded by competition, covered up in a vague dust of imageless frenzy? Fix it at trade shows! Participating in trade show, especially regional shows such as the Southeast Greenhouse Conference, can introduce you to out-of-state markets, suppliers you never knew existed, and increase your sales immediately. I know of several Georgia growers who exhibited products, only to be scoffed at by fellow growers. Two years later, their business is booming, and their market is as big as they want it to be...because other growers know who they are, what they grow and where to find them next year!

Bring Your Business Bio-Sheets

Can't afford a booth? Need to become known within the industry? Have prepared a few dozen half or full page sheet (front and back) with a description of your business, its products, your picture, your goals and philosophy, your hobbies, employees, location, policies, contacts, shipping range and methods...everything! Be doubly sure to have business cards ready. If anyone, a fellow grower for example, seems interested in buying from you, or if a sales rep knows someone looking for your product line, that sheet allows the right image to come across..."open and ready for more business!" It also put you ahead of the competition who forgot to bring their "bio-sheets." We all buy more readily from people we feel we know....make it easy for folks to get to know you.

If You Like It, Let 'em Know

One of the easiest ways to formalize a good working relationship with suppliers and distributors at trade shows is to let them know what they are doing right. Everyone lets them know when things go wrong so be different. If you are impressed with a company or sales representative, let them know at the trade show. As a general rule, people will remember you far longer, and statistically, will speak more highly of you more often, if they perceive you as a supporter. Why bother? Not only does it reward the good folks, it spreads your good name as well. Think about it this way...if you had a wholesale customer who needed a product ASAP, and he was a big fan, how fast would you respond to his needs? Ever stand in a trade show booth for days on end? It's gruelling! Make someone's day and pick up their spirits...spread the kind words...liberally.

Post-Show Etiquette and Follow-Through

Allow me to share this personal experience. I've spent a time or two in a trade booth, knocking myself out to get the product noticed, make a sale, and keep my job, only to be greeted by a silent telephone when I returned home. It was depressing. When I followed up via business cards and notes, I found growers had tossed the literature, lost my card, and forgotten how to get a hold of me. But they often said they actually needed my company's product! What I would have done to hear that the week before! Here's how to make the most of what you've collected.

Sort, Prioritized and Toss Printed Materials

There are times when the literature collected seems endless. To weed through the pile, ask this question: Is it just possible that this product or company might help my business, or be something I'm interested in within the next two years. If so, file the literature, if not, out it goes. The collected literature goes into your show file, because that's where you saw it first. You'll remember it easier that way.

Follow Up On Contacts Within 15 Days

It matters very little how hard or effectively you worked the trade show floor. If you don't follow up with the sales representative concerning your needs or interest, you've probably lost the advantage. What advantage? The edge over competing sales calls, sales activities and internal demands that a trade contact generates. That followup call tells the representative that he or she was successful, and also tells marketing department head that this rep should be kept! Let the representative or company secretary know, (or leave an answering machine message that indicates), that you are following up on the trade show visit with "so and so". I have been amazed at how rapidly trade show inquiries are followed up on. Remember, most companies spend several thousand dollars/booth/show. They live for that follow up phone call! For best results, don't let this opportunity for excellent service get cold.

Make A Show File..., Clean It, And Keep It Handy!

The last thing you should do is to pull out last year's "show file" for the particular trade show you attended, clean it out, and replace it with this year's programs, receipts, trade show literature, and even those pesky business cards if you wish. Any past years' literature you are still interested in should be followed up on by a call for new information. File next to other trade show folders for easy comparison.

Next year, prior to the show, pulling the updated files will serve to remind you of expenses to be planned for, what you saw, who went, who you visited with and where it was you stayed...in other words, things that allow you to plan for next year's show. That way you can concentrate on how to get the most from your next trade show visit.

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