Gathering Leads: Where Did the Trade Show Profit Go?
By Barry Siskind

Over the years, The Center for Exhibition Research (CEIR) has published some amazing work. Everyone involved in the exhibition industry aught to be a fan of this association.

Past CEIR publications have shown the value of face-to-face marketing as well as solid information that brings home the shortcomings of exhibitors with solutions to become more powerful.

One such recent research study, was entitled “Exhibitor Sales Lead Capture and Follow-up Practice Trends.” 1[1]

The research was the result of interviews conducted in June 2012 with 198 exhibitors. The results highlight a problem that has plagued exhibitors for decades **– how to get realizable and measurable results from the show investment.**

The first part of the report deals with methods of capturing lead information. A large number of exhibiting companies interviewed used a lead retrieval system offered by exhibition management or a paper based lead form to capture contact information and product details. Yet, less than 30% of their booth staff asked for additional information, such as demographics or other lead-qualifying criteria.

The intention of gathering quality leads is to have them followed up by sales and marketing personnel with either an e-mail, offering additional product description, or a phone call. When exhibit managers were asked about how leads were tracked, 69% answered that they didn’t know. If exhibit managers lack an understanding of the importance of qualified leads, the information never gets passed along to their front-line booth staff who will assume that sketchy contact information will suffice.

Think about it. What is the real purpose of meeting your prospect face-to-face? The answer is two fold: first, to uncover potential business opportunities and second, to engage them in a conversation that makes you both part of the solution to the issues and problems you both face. Both of these reasons are what motivated the visitor to attend in the first place, yet when the conversation they had at the booth is relegated to a few bits of product information and interest, you negate them as people and potential customers.

The solution then is to take the leap towards knowing more about the people you meet at an exhibition, record the information properly, and use it as part of the post-show follow-up.

The logical beginning point is developing the questions you need an answer to ahead of time and train your booth staff rigorously in the methods they need to employ to ask and record answers. For example, in my book, *Powerful Exhibit Marketing*, I taught exhibitors how to qualify. I use

1[1] CEIR report # SM 39.12

an acronym called, “ACTION.” This represents six bits of information that go beyond the basics. Here is a brief explanation of the ACTION questions:

A = Authority
Does this visitor have the buying authority or can they influence the buying decision?

C = Capability
How closely does this visitor fit into the profile of someone who will ultimately buy your product or service?

T = Time
Is there a close relationship between your selling cycle and the visitor’s buying cycle?

I = Identity
Have you developed a formal mechanism for recording contact information?

O = Obstacles
Why could or would this visitor not want to do business with us?

N = Need
Do they need this product or service?

Acronyms are fine. They give you a structure to use so that your staff asks similar questions of each booth visitors.

The trick, then, is to develop the questions that work for you. Ask yourself:

1. What are the key criteria I need to understand this visitor’s perspective?

2. How can I train my staff to ask the appropriate questions of *each* booth visitor?

3. What do I need to develop to ensure that they record information that I can use for follow-up?

If you can not work with the ACTION questions, then hone them to fit your unique situation.

Now, when your staff is talking to visitors, they have questions to help them focus the conversation. During the conversation, they should be recording the answers they get either on a paper-based lead sheet, electronic lead retrieval system, or a combination of both. Then, once these leads come back to the shop, your sales and marketing people have solid information to continue the conversation.

The last step is to put into place proper follow-up systems that track each lead. This step will answer your ultimate question **– was my trade show investment profitable?**

An important part of your show preparation is to ensure that you and your corporation get real value. This is accomplished with well-trained booth staff and the systems that will help convert conversations into business.

Barry Siskind, President and Founder of ITMC, is a trade show consultant, trainer, speaker, and an internationally recognized expert in trade and consumer shows. Each year, he addresses numerous conferences and association meetings around the globe. Over the past twenty-five years, Barry has traveled throughout the world working with thousands of public and private sector clients in virtually all industry groups. He creates, facilitates and delivers a wide range of services to companies involved in exhibit marketing. Barry is also a best-selling author of trade show business books: *The Successful Exhibitor*, *The Power of Exhibit Marketing*, *Making Contact*, *Bumblebees Can't Fly*, *Eagles Must Soar*, and his latest book *Powerful Exhibit Marketing*.