

Planning for Lead Follow-Up: Ahead of Time

By Barry Siskind

I was at a trade show and met an interesting exhibitor. I was excited about his product, which had an application in my business, so I asked him to send me more information. Four months later, he called. So, I asked, "Why did it take you so long to get back to me?" The answer was, "After the show we were so busy processing orders we didn't get a chance to follow-up with anyone." Sound familiar?

I've heard variations of this story time and again from exhibitors who really want new business but can't seem to find the time to follow-up. The real benefit of all your hard work, planning, and executing a show goes out the window with the absence of a solid follow-up plan.

Collecting leads and not following-up is simply throwing your money in the garbage. Your first contact with a visitor should be within seven days after the show. That's not a long time, but for the visitor looking for solutions to business problems it can seem like a lifetime. They are ready for business and your products and services may be the answer. They are back in their office and excited about what they saw and learned at the show. If the timing of your follow-up coincides with their increased level of interest, the chance of receiving a positive reception is greatly enhanced.

All the studies show that a trade show lead is superior to leads obtained in other marketing venues for four reasons:

1. **They are serious buyers.** Ninety percent of attendees use exhibitions as their number one source of purchasing information. They come to shows for a reason. In fact 76% of them have a pre-set agenda. They know what they want and who they want to see. From your point of view, you are able to get these leads at half the cost of a traditional field call.
2. **They are more receptive.** 48% only need to hear from you once to make a purchasing decision because they have already seen your products and services and know what you have to offer before your follow up call.
3. **They have checked out the competition.** The beauty of a show is that it is a one stop shopping center where all the solution providers are found under one roof.
4. **They are ready to buy.** Attendees visit a show with an objective. They find and compare various solutions. 57% of these visitors will make a purchasing decision in the next twelve months.

In order to do your job in a timely manner, you can't leave planning your follow-up until after the show ends. Your follow-up program must be in place *long before* you attend the show. It's part of your show planning. You have to be ready to deal with the leads you get, or there is no point in collecting them in the first place. But, with some planning and a dash of common sense, you are well on the way.

So, what gets in the way? Why don't the vast majority of leads turn into business?

Research has shown that nearly 80% of all show leads are not handled properly. An astounding 43% of prospective buyers receive materials after they have made a buying decision with another vendor, while 18% report never receiving materials at all.

The three major reasons for this business travesty are:

- Poor quality leads,
- No follow-up resources allocated,
- No one was accountable.

Let's look at each.

Poor Quality Leads

Lead quality is the number one obstacle to the implementation of a follow-up plan. Often, exhibitors come home with a handful of business cards or a box of ballots and diligently begin their follow-up. It doesn't take long to realize that the business cards contain very little useful information. Beyond name, title, and address, what do you really know about the prospect? Each follow-up conversation now starts from the beginning. It's as if you and the prospect were complete strangers. Any relationship building efforts at the show are now wasted. And when following up with names in your draw box, the questions most often asked is "Did we win?" Clearly people were more interested in the prize than the product.

It's no wonder that sales people get discouraged when the leads they follow-up are of questionable quality.

In some cases, show leads are put into the hands of other people who were not at the show but are responsible for converting these prospects into business. Your well-orchestrated follow-up plan may involve many players working in harmony, each feeding the next with the information they need to do their job effectively. In this situation, you need to develop a way of gathering prospect information that is immediate, consistent, and filled with useful information. This is where a [lead card](#), in conjunction with a lead retrieval system, work best.

Lack of Resources

A common complaint heard from exhibitors is that after the show they are just too busy to follow up. When you return to the shop, there are orders to fill and pressing priorities that often leave your follow-up in the file of good intentions. Good intentions don't get business, but applying the right resources to your follow-up program will. The right resources don't have to be costly. In fact your follow-up program can be greatly enhanced with a minimum investment of a few hundred dollars.

When the show is over, your visitors return to their businesses excited about having found new solutions to their concerns. 88% of these visitors have never been called on, and the only way they learned about you was at the show. So, ignoring these people is tantamount to throwing business out the window.

Organize your leads by creating three or four categories such as immediate needs, long term potential, decision influencers, and so on. Create the categories that make sense for you. The next step is to find an effective way of acknowledging each visitor that came to your booth. A simple "thank you for visiting" or an acknowledgment that either their "name is being passed along to a field rep" or that "the quotation is being developed" can go a long way. Think about your categories and what you want to say to each. Now, write the letters (e-mails or faxes) ahead of the show.

The next step is to find someone who can fulfill all your show promises. When you come back with a hundred leads, typically most of these can receive their first acknowledgment by letter. The problem is that there is no one in your office waiting to send out a hundred letters. So, the trick is to arrange some temporary help. This is an inexpensive way of ensuring that the first response happens when you want it to happen. The expense of a few hundred dollars for temporary clerical help will more than pay for itself in the additional business you will receive. Once the first mailing is out, you or your staff can follow-up on a one on one basis in a more relaxed manner.

Lack of Accountability

There are two issues related to accountability: who is accountable for follow-up, and how is it monitored. It is one thing to hand leads off to a sales force or dealers and representatives. It is quite another to ensure that they are treated properly. One reason they may not be taken seriously is past experience. As we have already discussed, past experience with poor quality leads may have demotivated some of your representatives. After all, why chase a lead that they know nothing about, except that the prospect visited your booth at a show.

Get your sales force on board as early in the planning as possible. Once they have a clear understanding of how your leads will provide them with much needed information and an assurance that they will be passed along to them in a timely manner, their commitment to follow-up should increase.

Often companies will treat show leads separately and pay additional bonuses or incentives for their follow-up. This transfers accountability to the people on the front line. They now are accountable to themselves for additional rewards from their show leads.

The astute marketer will also establish systems for monitoring these leads separately from leads obtained in other marketing activities. This will establish a true return on the show investment which, because of long sales cycles, often isn't realized for months or years after the show has ended. By tracking real results of these show activities, marketers learn valuable information and are in a stronger position to allocate future marketing dollars.

Monitoring is often accomplished by adding additional information fields into an existing contact management system. You now can create regular reports on the current status of each lead. These reports become a valuable management tool. Tracking is the only way to truly know whether your show investment is really paying off.

The framework for an effective follow-up strategy should be completed and committed prior to any show, and it should be unique and company-specific. By developing a follow-up plan before the event, you will have earned yourself a position among the 20% of exhibitors who take the time to ensure that they get value from their trade shows.

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*.