



Engage the Customer: Making the Most of Trade Show Demonstrations

By Becci Ambroe

Glue that suspends a man from a steel beam, a knife that cuts through a can, a hand-sized mixer that creates salsa in seconds: These are all product demonstrations that you have probably seen on TV. It's common knowledge that product demonstrations are a highly effective sales tool. In fact, product demonstrations at trade shows are on the rise, and it's for a good reason. In 2010, the Center for Exhibit Industry Research (CEIR) ranked [Product Demonstrations](#) as the third highest factor that affects attendee recall. There are plenty of articles about "how to give a demonstration at a trade show." In all of them, "engage the customer" is one of the commandments; however, ideas for *how* to engage the customer are usually missing. Oddly enough, you can learn a lot about "how to engage the customer" if you look at some of the principles used in [Dialogue Education](#), a theory founded by [Jane Vella](#) and used to teach adult learners around the world. After all, the purpose of your demonstration is to educate your customers; your customers are adults. By using four of the basic principles of Dialogue Education, you can learn how to successfully engage the customer during product demonstrations at trade shows.

Principle 1 – Immediacy of Learning: Adults want practical and immediately useful information. On average, the adult attention span is 20 minutes. The magic number in the trade show industry ranges between five to seven minutes. As you create your demonstrations, keep this principle firmly in mind. How is your product or service useful to the customer? How is it practical? What is the best way to convey that information to the customer? If you have a demonstration already, how long is it? Can it be shortened? Is the information engaging?

Be certain that the message in your demonstration is focused and valuable. Be specific. Avoid tangents. Only supply "extra" or background information if the customer specifically asks for it. That's the idea behind this principle. For example, there are actually 10 principles of Dialogue Education; however, only four of them are applicable to the subject of this article—how to engage customers during a demonstration. Although the history of this theory and the other six principles are interesting, they do not constitute "practical and immediately useful" pieces of information to you, the reader. Likewise, your customers don't have time to waste, so don't bore them with fluff.

Principle 2 – Needs Assessment: Adults know what they need and want to learn. The "Needs Assessment" will tell you what information is "practical and immediately useful." Always start planning your demonstration by learning what your customer needs. The demonstration is about them. (You know this; this is another trade show commandment.) "What do you want to learn?" is the essence of a needs assessment. The answer will tell you two things: what the customer already knows, and what the customer wants to know. That first piece of information gives you a starting point; the second piece of information gives you the demonstration's goal. Perform a "Needs Assessments" as a part of your pre-show planning:

- Conduct a short survey/poll on your Facebook page or website.
- Give attendees a call.
- Send a survey through Constant Contact. (They have great templates for surveys and polls; they also offer free trials!)
- Send a Tweet to your current customers/clients: “Name one thing that you want to learn about...”

Note that you may or may not receive a large number of responses. Although that prospect may be discouraging, it is also another vital piece of information. It is helping you determine who is interested in your product or service. In other words, in addition to telling you *what* your customers want to know, a needs assessment tells you *who* wants to know about your product or service; it is helping you to prioritize your leads. Look at your responses in terms of who is answering and who isn't. What variables are common to each group? Take a closer look at your data. Sometimes “nothing” isn't really nothing.

After you perform the “Needs Assessment,” compile the results; give yourself a visual representation (pie chart, graph, spread sheet, etc.) of the information you just learned. People often miss this step. Compare it to your goals and marketing plan. You may discover that your expectations or projections aren't in-sync with your customers' needs. Most likely, you will find that the needs of your customers and potential customers will vary, which means one demonstration will not “fit all.” Use the results to determine how many demonstrations you want to create and to fine-tune your marketing messages and booth design.

Principle 3 – Feelings, Ideas, and Actions: Adults learn and remember best when there is a simultaneously emotional (feelings), cognitive (ideas), and tactile (actions) experience. When adults feel, think, and move at once, they learn and remember better. You already have your demonstration goals in mind from the needs assessment and your marketing plan. Tackle those goals by incorporating these elements within the demonstrations:

- Emotional: What problem are you solving with your product/service?
- Cognitive: How does your product/service solve the problem?
- Tactile: Whenever possible, let the attendees, not your booth staff, use the product/service.

Often, the biggest demonstration hurdle occurs when the product or service isn't tangible or when the product is too big to fit into the booth. Budgets are also a possible constraint. That's where creativity comes in! Many folks battle this problem with interactive monitors (iPads), videos, or other technology-based options.

Another solution would be to create a booth activity in place of a product demonstration. The main focus of the activity still links the emotions and thoughts of the customer to your company's solution. This is also useful if your trade show goals include a branding message. (Check out this [Exhibitor Magazine](#) article about the award-winning booth activity created by [Deckel and Money Penny Exhibits](#). It's a great example of incorporating a booth activity into a “branding” marketing plan.)

Principle 4 – Safety: Adults need to feel safe as they learn. Have you ever had a “mean” teacher, someone who made you feel stupid if you asked a question or gave the wrong answer? Have you ever experienced a broken promise? This principle is a simple one; it means there must be trust. It refers to your booth staff and the reputation of your company. There is a reason why online product reviews and service review websites have gained such appeal. A comment from a customer to a customer is safe; it is trustworthy. The reviewer has nothing to gain by endorsing (or trashing) a product. In the same way, your booth staff and your company must be seen as “safe” in the eyes of your customer. If not, then the first three principles don’t matter.

Engaging your customer as you demonstrate your products or services can be tricky. Like every facet of your trade show exhibit, it takes planning and creativity. While you may not have created the glue that sustains the weight of a man, you do have the power to create an engaging and memorable trade show booth demonstration.

Becci Ambroe earned her M.A. degree in Creative Writing from Regis University in 2010. For the past two years, she has been an online instructor at Ashford University. In past positions, she created and revised dozens of learning activities for The A Game, wrote and edited policy and procedure manuals, led training seminars, and published several articles in a Pittsburgh-based magazine.