

10 Tradeshow Booth Staffing Secrets

When you ask the average booth staffer about trade shows, their first thing that comes to mind is long hours, sore feet, some fun, and work piling up back in the office. This may be true, but needless to say we do shows for the benefits that we receive by way of lead counts and exposure in the market place. Below are some of the "secrets" that can help unlock the potential of shows for you.

1. **Exhibiting without Borders:** Staff in the aisle where the attendees are walking by. It seems like where the booth carpet meets the aisle carpet, often becomes an impenetrable "line in the sand" that staffers rarely venture past. We all want to be "out of the box" in the way we think, so consider the exhibit space as "in the box," and the aisle as "out of the box." This is where it gets a little uncomfortable, but if we can get out there and engage people as they come by, this will result in remarkably higher lead counts. I staffed an exhibit yesterday where an attendee was going to walk by the exhibit without stopping and I engaged him, only to find out that he has operations on 3 continents and represents about a 5 million dollar sales opportunity for our client. This guy was going to walk right by the tradeshow booth! The only reason I pulled him in was because I was in the aisle. The business is there and we need to be in the aisle to get it. Sometimes the show may ask you don't staff in the aisle, but go ahead and do it until they tell you otherwise.

2. **Watching gets you a Goose Egg:** Engage attendees... period. Recently I attended the nation's largest trade show and did some stat counting on the trade show floor. With one exhibit, I watched 74 attendees walk by a 60' section of exhibit in 10 minutes, with only 2 of them being approached by the booth staffers. The results speak for themselves: 2.7% of attendees were being reached by the staff during the time I kept track. Why would the results be so low? Simply put, it is because they did not engage attendees. The opening line that works for anyone, in any show, is "What brings you to the show today?" That question can't be answered with one word (yes, no, or fine) and will require the attendee to stop and think about their response. Now the door is open to qualify them and move onto the next step.

3. **Divide and Conquer:** Surround staffers around in-booth attractions to get the maximum benefit from your investment. Having a game or some type of entertainment is a tremendous method for generating high traffic in your exhibit booth space and at your hospitality suite. The key to any attraction is to engage and qualify the attendees while they are waiting for the attraction or when the attraction is completed. Many organizations pay a tremendous amount of dollars for a great in-booth attraction, only to have attendees escape with no interaction with the booth staff. We need to surround the attendees and make sure that we get an opportunity with them. Another method to insure interaction is to tie the in-booth activity to the qualifying process. We should work with the magician, trick shot pool guy, robot, or game organizer to make sure they can work into their script a qualifying question that we can see. Not that this is any of us, but when it comes to in-booth activities, it seems that the norm in the trade show industry is to attract attendees, only to have the staff not participate in their role of interacting with the attendees.

4. **Play Zone, Not Man to Man:** Create zones in your exhibit space that each staffer is responsible for. Depending on the size of your space, you may have 5'x5' (or 10'x10') zones in an exhibit space that each staffer is responsible for. Often, staffers will congregate at the main approach the exhibit and then leave a portion of the exhibit unstaffed. Assign zone 1 to staffer "A" and let them know that this is their space and they are responsible for it during their time slot. You are much less likely to have a staffer slip off with some prospect to chat and abandon their post. This creates personal accountability as well, and does not allow leads to slip by the "back door," never to be engaged by a staffer. In addition, this technique naturally solves some of the problem of staffers congregating and talking to each other, rather than to attendees. Creating zones can work in the largest and smallest of exhibit spaces. It does, however, require a sufficient number of staffers in the space.

5. **Pre-Set Appointments at the Show:** The primary reason we attend shows is to talk to people that can influence the sale of our products and services. What better way to insure that we get the chance to talk to the right people than to set a specific time to talk to them at the show. One of the keys to making this work is to do confirmation calls the morning of show to confirm the appointment and give landmarks that make it easy for them to find you. You will need to get their cell phone number so you can catch them at the show.

6. **Make Your Giveaway Part of What You Do:** Try to find a way to tie your giveaway into what you do. This might be a direct tie-in; for instance if you are Apple, you would likely give away an iPad or a similar giveaway that is directly tied to what you do. Many organizations are service-oriented, and in that

case you might offer a percentage off their first purchase or a free on-site assessment. If you want to give away something that is unrelated, that could work too, if the only people eligible are those who are qualified to make decisions about your products or services. This means that attendees that are just “trick or treating” for all your free giveaways only get a Jolly Rancher and in order to register for the premium drawing, you have to be qualified.

7. Trade Shows, Nightclubs and Mixers: Trade shows are strange. What I mean by that is there are very few places where you stand around trying to talk to strangers and garner enough interest from them so you can tell them what you have to offer. This process is uncomfortable and the only other places you may find yourself doing this is at a nightclub or an after-hours mixer put on by some association. It is uncomfortable and one way to ease this angst is to find a couple of hand-picked people from your staff to be designated crowd gatherers. They clearly need to be more out-going and gregarious than the rest of the staff to qualify. Make it their job to be in the aisle staffing and to hand off the attendees to other people staffing the exhibit space (this does not exempt others from engaging or staffing in the aisle). They are not responsible to do anything, but catch the attendee, qualify them, and hand them off to the staffer who can get into the details of the possible project. After the hand off, they go back into the aisle to get some more attendees.

8. Practice Catch and Release: Once we engage attendees, we find out that many are not qualified. At this point we need to employ the practice used by many fishermen called “Catch and Release.” We caught them, now we have to gracefully let them go. The easiest way to do that is say “Thanks for stopping by, and I hope you have a great rest of the show.” We are now able to gracefully let them move on and you are now free to engage other attendees. In this process it is good to bear in mind that we don’t want to hand out our giveaways until we know they are qualified.

9. Bring Only the Staffers that Want To Be There: The best person to staff exhibit displays is the person who wants to be there. Picking staffers has to start with a basic criteria being met. The staffer should want to be there. If the staffer does not want to be there, they will not represent the organization well. This becomes especially important, knowing that 85% the results that your organization receives is directly tied to the experience that the attendees have with your booth staffers. Regardless of position, from CEO to the Janitor, we need to have someone who will represent the organization well – and that starts with the person who wants to be at the show.

10. Have a Huddle Every Morning: Each morning, of each day of the show, have a booth staff meeting. Before the chaos of the show begins, gather your staff and have a pre-show meeting (roughly 1 hour prior to the start of each day). At this meeting you can give an update on the quality of leads coming in, kudos to the best performers, announce any mid-stream adjustments, timing of activities, and update everyone on how well you are doing against the goals that have been set. On an individual level, set specific target goals for each staffer so they have something to shoot for and compete against. This can be given prior to the event or can be handed out at the event. Also, this is a great opportunity to discuss the “best practices” in exhibit staffing; along with the 10 deadly sins of staffing (this may have some variation by company depending on your goals).

There is no better teacher than our experiences and observation. These top 10 secrets are derived from both sources and if we are able to learn and use these top 10 behaviors and attitudes, we will surely double our lead count at our next event.

About the Author: As President of Skyline Exhibitor Source, John focuses on the overall vision and direction of the company's large exhibit projects and provides guidance in education, implementation and creative ideation. John has been directly involved in the trade show industry for the past 16 years.

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