

# Getting PR bang for your trade show buck

by Andrew Shephard

Trade shows can for some be a necessary evil, many businesses struggle with the best way to include trade shows in a modern marketing communications plan so here I'll give you a run-down of how B2B shows can be used, whether you are exhibiting or not, to the most cost effective PR outcome.

## **If you're going to do it, do it right**

Spend time and energy to research the shows and events available to you carefully, thoroughly and really early!

Most show organisers are rather good at outreach and promotion - before you know you'll be fielding questions from inside your own organisation or the boss about what the company's PR plans are for this year's prime event. Or worse getting drawn into committing to a great sounding show package only to discover something far more appropriate and influential a week later.

During the research and decision making process speak to customers and partners to get recommendations. Ask them why they go to shows and what they expect to learn. Make a short-list for a year to 18 months and keep it rolling on.

Then cost each one out completely, include the preparation, attendance and travel and accommodation costs not just the stand, media materials and exhibition space. Most good conference platforms will pay expenses so beyond the time involved preparing and attending there's little cost to consider but ensure the time is well spent. A good tip for conference presenters is to stay for the whole conference, not just the day you are on stage, and participate in other people's Q and A sessions - people notice things like that.

Once you have a priced up a short-list it's usually fairly evident which event is the most viable for you and your business objectives. But don't sign anything just yet.

Engage with the organisers, negotiate and negotiate some more - get concessions, inclusion in pre-event mailers, attendee lists, cut price promotion (sponsorship) worked into the price you pay - ensure your stand (if you are having one) is in a great position too, there is almost always flexibility and being active is good news for the organisers too.

Once you've made decisions on each event the way you approach PR and other activities should go something like this (depending on your decision above):

## **Option 1 - Exhibit - but don't hide and keep everything secret 'till day one of the show!**

Also don't blow all your budget on the stand graphics - consider a smaller stand and a larger volume of associated marketing noise, as this will always make a bigger impact, unless all you want is to scare-competitors or wow clients with the sheer size of your stand?

### **Promote your team's attendance far and wide - months in advance**

Don't ignore show previews, they are low cost pre-show promotion - get organised early and inclusion is easy, especially if you have good images available. Be ready to tell the media exactly what you'll be there for and what people can learn by visiting you.

Plan all PR and media relations activity to drive visitors to your stand, not press to your stand. Journalists don't need to talk to you at a show, their attention is better used on a day when they are not talking to 13 other similar businesses on a strict 25 minute timetable, with no lunch break. Take them to lunch two months in advance, and give them the story you considered ideal for the exhibition.

The advice here is - use the media to influence visitors to the show and to your stand through what they write beforehand. This time shift approach is not just a nice theory, our clients report significant foot-fall increases if the exhibition PR focus is slid back up the timeline - it also offers a low stress alternative to rushed press meetings in a trade show environment.

If you do have something worthwhile and timely to announce at the show then expensive events and fancy press packs say something (not always good). As an alternative plan some selective media work at the show, but remember launches are not going to be a surprise or as attractive to the press as you might think they should be. Rather than planning a mid afternoon media-cocktail-party make life easier for the press you really want to speak to. Have a media trained senior spokesperson on hand briefed and completely accessible for one or two complete days, book some meetings in advance but be prepared to be flexible to accommodate sliding schedules, offer breakfast, phone briefings (if it's timely news the fact that the journalist can't be there in person shouldn't matter) or a briefing in a cab back to the airport.

Lastly a top marketing tip - follow up sales and customer leads you get quickly and ruthlessly, exhibitors get preferential access to visitor contact details for little or no additional outlay, buy them to build your own marketing lists. And re-book if it was worth it, but not immediately - the do-it-today deals are generally easily matched at the other end of every event's sales cycle for next year and... there's nearly always a better show.

## Option 2 - Attend aggressively, and have a presence for less

If exhibiting is inappropriate or too expensive get a conference platform by pitching yourselves as perfect contributor (maybe a year in advance). This is inexpensive and effective at influencing delegates and visitors but requires thought and a professional delivery. And if platforms are not available attending aggressively might involve starting a side-show of your own - arrange a mobile demonstration in a nearby hotel and hi-jack event attendees, or offer visitors a free coach to transfer them from the railway station and present to them en-route.

While you make your presence felt with customers and other key contacts, capture the media socially, in the evenings perhaps - although you will be competing for their attention with the main (paying) exhibitors, a cleverly attractive evening function can attract a lot of media and they are free agents. As per the previous guidance above, make sure you promote your own attendance well in advance, even if your presence only involves squatting on the corner of a partner or distributor's stand. Make the most of it, as the media is generally happy to cover you, providing you are actually there.

## Option 3 - Attend passively, but don't waste your time

If you end up with a show which doesn't justify any major investment that year, go along anyway - as a delegate - but make sure you research who is there in advance, make a point of sitting in on other people's presentations, have a snoop in the press room for any sign of the press or big efforts from competitors so that next year you'll be better informed.