

Approaching Prospects on the Show Floor

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This report is one in a series of reports all geared to helping exhibiting companies achieve better results and gain value from exhibition participation.

The complete series is available at: www.ceir.org

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Most people are comfortable handling customers in normal selling situations - in a client's office during a business appointment or on the retail floor. Exhibiting is different with dozens - maybe hundreds or thousands - of people walking by. There are two choices: to hang back and let the visitor approach the booth or to pro-actively approach them.

Some visitors will approach. But as often as not, they resist making contact. Why? Attendees are individuals with their own agenda. Some visitors will scope out the whole show before they commit to looking at specific exhibits. Others may feel awkward and fear the questions they ask might be interpreted as simplistic or uneducated. Sometimes attendees are confused about a display and do not immediately grasp the benefits offered. Still others may view the booth staff as unapproachable. Some attendees are simply shy while others fear they will be pressured into placing unwanted orders. However, waiting for the prospect to approach the exhibitor can result in lost opportunities. A pro-active approach minimizes these losses.

Approaching strangers is not easy. For many it is the number one social fear. The exhibitor must overcome timidity, develop an effective opener, avoid closed questions and focus on business. All the while overcoming the chief objection visitors have about booth staff - they are too pushy.

Being pro-active may be uncomfortable, as it can be unfamiliar territory. The exhibitor may be very comfortable dealing with people one-on-one in their offices or on the showroom floor. At an exhibition

hall the rules of business go out the window. Being pro-active in a situation like this can be terrifying with fears of being rebuffed or appearing pushy or simply not know how to approach gracefully. Think about approaching as a compliment- an attempt to engage visitors that nine times out of ten they will appreciate.

A good opener not only engages the visitor in a meaningful conversation about business; it gives the exhibitor control over the situation. A good approach question creates a smooth transition to the next step of the process: to gather information (*see, SM24 Trade Shows are Not Sales Calls*).

The best openers are questions that the exhibitor crafts to help get the conversation going.

On the next page there are two do's and three don'ts that should be considered when creating your approach questions.

Don't...

Ask a Meaningless Question

Openers like "Enjoying the show?" or "Nice day isn't it?" are timeworn and ineffective because they do not lead anywhere. Visitors can answer with one word and keep on walking. Or worse yet, they can answer at great length and waste the exhibitor's time with irrelevant chitchat.

The worst questions to ask is one that has no meaning. The problem with asking questions about the attendee's health or the weather is that most don't really care about the answer. Openers like this may seem to be a friendly way to start a conversation, yet they translate as boring and insincere.

Ask a Question Without a Use for the Answer

Seasoned sales people have an incredible ability to think quickly on their feet. After years of experience they feel inhibited with pre-scripted lines and prefer to rely on their instincts to deal with the situation at hand. This is a valid statement in normal business situations where there is lots of time, but at an exhibition it is different. The exhibitor should not use his or her show time to be creative; it should be used to meet objectives. The best booth performers have a well thought out approach. By thinking about the questions to be asked ahead of time, a response can also be planned. Remember that there is no guarantee that the attendee will give the expected answer, and the exhibitor does not want to be caught off guard.

Ask a Question that Leads to a Pitch

Show visitors suffer from information overload. The show is simply too much. They attend the seminars, watch demonstrations and walk by booth after booth, inundated with information. Eventually nothing more can sink in. If an exhibitor approaches them with an offer of more information - it may be the last thing they want.

The exhibitor really does not know what kind of information they need or what their perspective might be. This approach is simply throwing information at them hoping some of it is relevant and is tantamount to asking the following questions: "Hi do you mind if I give you a whole bunch of information you may or may not care about?"

Avoid questions like "Do you want to see our new widget?" or, "Would you like to hear the ten reasons why most users run into problems with their servers?" - too much information.

Do...

Ask Open Questions

Effective openers invite the visitor to pause and continue the conversation. For this reason, "closed" questions - questions that can be answered with a simple "yes" or "no" will not serve as well as questions which by their very nature require a lengthier answer. "Open" questions usually begin with words like "how," "what," "when," "where," and "why?"

Focus on Business

An open question is better than a closed question - but not just any open question. Asking about the weather or the local sports team may invite a conversation, but this conversation will not move the exhibitor any closer to the objective. Effective openers waste no time. They get directly into the job of qualifying the visitor. The best way to start is with a question around their needs.

In choosing a theme for your exhibit, the exhibitor will have focussed on a key benefit of the product or service offered. Questioning the visitor's need for this key benefit is the most effective way to launch your conversation.

"How often do you run into problems transferring business information from program to program at your office?"

"How are you keeping up with the rapid changes in technology?"

Three Approaching Scenarios

A good approach does not have to be complicated; in fact it should consist of words that the exhibitor could use comfortably and honestly. Research has proven that up to 93% of a visitor's impression is based on how their questions are answered rather than the actual words used to answer them. When the exhibitor used the same questions to approach a prospect over and over again, his or her non-verbal and para-verbal behavior will reflect this. When the exhibitor asks questions and is genuinely paying attention to the person and the answer, he or she is perceived as a caring, interested person.

In a show situation there are three times when approaching is necessary. A quick look at each will give the exhibitor the necessary background to develop effective openers.

1. When a visitor approaches the booth

When a visitor approaches the booth and appears interested in a product, graphic or anything else in the booth, the exhibitor has a great opportunity to approach. Finding a business-related opener comes from focussing on whatever attracted the prospect in the first place. "What have you heard about our new widget?" or "How do you deal with the challenge of cash management?" If it is unsure where their interest lies, ask, "What caught your eye?" or "What attracted you to my booth?" The booth person should always introduce himself or herself prior to any approach.

"Hi, my name is Barry Siskind. What interested you in my display?"

"What have you heard about this product?"

"What has your experience with this product been like so far?"

2. When conducting a demonstration

The real purpose of the demonstration is to attract lots of people to a display. Once its over, leaving attendees unattended is like watching business stroll in the other direction. Savvy exhibitors understand this and, when the demonstration ends, ensure that the interested attendees are brought into the exhibit for a more in-depth conversation. There are aspects to this scenario: as the exhibitor working the booth while someone else is conducting the demonstration or as the exhibitor conducting the demonstration.

A. As the Exhibitor Working the Booth While Someone Else is Conducting the Demonstration

As the demonstration is drawing to a close this exhibitor's job is to spot one member of the audience who might be interested in additional information. Spotting individuals with an above average amount of interest is easy.

Visitors express interest in a number of ways. Some do it verbally with positive comments and questions. Others do it non-verbally. They nod their head, lean in closer or smile. Experience will be the best teacher when looking for positive interest.

Once the demonstration is over this person is approached and asked, "What part of the demonstration was most applicable to your needs?" or, "How does this product fit into your work needs?"

B. As the Exhibitor Conducting the Demonstration

During the demonstration the exhibitor will notice the participants who express an above average amount of interest. Stopping the demonstration and giving this person undivided atten-

tion would be a mistake. The reality is that the interest level of the remaining participants is unknown. The exhibitor needs to ensure keeping the attention of the interested person while completing the demonstration. The best method of achieving this is to get the interested person involved in the demonstration.

A show is an experience. People attend shows to experience products and services with as many of their senses as possible. By getting the interested person involved in the demonstration this need is satisfied. When the exhibitor initially develops a demonstration the audience's involvement must be kept in mind. Allow people to touch, taste, smell, see, and feel. This may involve holding the product or touching a keyboard. It could be tasting a freshly baked goodie or simply the flipping of a switch. As they get involved, commitment grows. Once the demonstration has ended the exhibitor simply asks this person, "How do you see using this technology in your workplace?"

3. When nobody stops at the booth

When the booth is quiet and visitors are not coming in voluntarily, the exhibitor has the most difficult challenge. This scenario breeds bad habits like slacking off, making phone calls or taking a coffee break. Staying focussed on objectives will help keep each booth person aware that even though the show is slow, their job still goes on.

If visitors are not coming into the booth, move to where they are - the aisle. But not in the aisle- in the booth. Stand at the edge of the booth and look approachable - smile and relax. As people walk by try to catch their eye. As many as 95% of attendees will ignore any exhibitor but once someone does make contact, be prepared with a simple opening question like, "What are you looking for at the show?" or "What's the best thing you have seen at the show so far?"

This third situation may be the most difficult. It is where the fore-mentioned pro-activity is really put to the test. It may be difficult at first, but be patient. It takes time to master the art of approaching visitors who are simply walking by.

CONCLUSION

By now the importance of approaching visitors on the show floor is clear. Start with a simple approach and practice it. Each time it gets more comfortable. Like learning any new skill - practice makes perfect. And at a show you can't be anything but perfect.