

Exhibition Best Practice

*10 proven steps towards
achieving a ROI*

Exhibitions require a significant investment of both time and money and it is so often the case that they do not deliver the anticipated Return on Investment.

Beginning with decisions you should make before you even commit resource to an exhibition, this Best Practice Guide sets out 10 steps that every event manager should consider to ensure they are taking every opportunity to deliver an event that meets, if not exceeds, expectations.

THE Marketing Lady

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Introduction

The ten steps below are based on years of experience of managing exhibitions for various organisations across different business sectors and with budgets large and small.

The list is by no means exhaustive, as every exhibition will have its own unique set of considerations. However, it will provide you with a useful checklist and takes into account the most important factors to support you as you work towards delivering an exhibition that meets, if not exceeds, your objectives and delivers that crucial ROI.

Step 1: Before you confirm your attendance, ensure the event supports your marketing objectives.

Consider your reasons for wanting to attend. Are they consistent with your overall marketing strategy and objectives, and is the event the most appropriate and cost-effective channel to meet those objectives?

- a) If it's for **thought leadership**, can you get one of your management team on the conference programme? Do the press attend?
- b) If it's to **increase your profile**, what are the sponsorship options available? Can you run a workshop?
- c) If it's to **attract new customers**, what is the visitor profile in terms of job title, industry, geography and purchasing responsibility?
- d) If it's to **meet existing customers**, do your customers typically attend and can you get them complimentary passes?
- e) If it's to **launch a new product**, will your product launch get the attention it deserves?
- f) If it's because you want to **keep up with competitors**, are they going this year? Don't assume that because they attended last year, they'll be there the following year.

Step 2: After you decide to attend the event, but before you commit any resource, prepare an Exhibition Project Plan.

Exhibitions can be a huge drain on resources – both in terms of budgets and the time taken to prepare and attend the actual event. Before you begin committing resource, particularly financial resource as it can be very difficult to cancel your participation at major

For you to make notes:

events without significant financial implications, give careful consideration to your objectives mentioned above and how these can be achieved

Prepare an **Exhibition Project Plan** which includes:

- a) Event objectives
- b) Budget; this will have an impact on:
 - a. Stand size
 - b. Meeting rooms requirements (on or off stand?)
 - c. Sponsorship
 - d. Customer events
 - e. Stand attractions and prize draws
 - f. Number of staff you plan to send (due to travel & hotel costs)
- c) Key messaging
- d) Deadlines and Milestones

Step 3: Once you've prepared your Exhibition Project Plan, you will now be in a position to select the stand size and location.

Your **stand size** will depend on both your budget and what you intend to do on the stand:

- a) Will meetings be held on or off the stand?
- b) Do you plan to run product demos? How many and how much space do they need?
- c) Will you be serving food and/or drinks?
- d) What are your AV requirements?
- e) Do you need storage?

When choosing your **location**, consult with colleagues who have previously attended for areas that have good footfall. If possible, arrange a site visit to the venue.

Key points to consider are:

- a) Where are the main thoroughfares?
- b) Where are the refreshment areas?
- c) Where are your competitors?
- d) Where are the key industry players?
- e) Are there any organised events, such as open seminars and awards, on the show floor?

Step 4: Organise your stand layout and design. Be creative to attract attention, ensure your messaging is clear and graphics are visually appealing.

At this point, **the Exhibition Manual** provided by the organisers will become one of the most important documents to you. Read it as soon as it arrives, noting key deadlines such as discounts available for

For you to make notes:

Early Bird orders. Understand what is provided as part of your package and what you are responsible for organising.

If you plan to **commission a stand designer**, seek competitive quotes from no more than 3 companies; anymore and it becomes a waste of your time and theirs. If you have prepared your Exhibition Project Plan correctly, you should be clear on your objectives and the stand requirements. Give yourself ample time to complete the selection process and subsequent stand build, particularly if your stand is to be a one off, custom build. If possible, leave enough time to see the completed stand at your contractor's premises.

Your **stand graphics and messaging** need to quickly communicate to visitors who you are and what you do. Use strong imagery and short, simple messages which articulate the needs your solution addresses.

A few other points to consider:

- a) Is your logo clearly visible? Can it be placed above the stand so that it can be seen from a distance?
- b) If you meet someone for the first time at this exhibition, would they understand what it is you do? Test messaging before you commit to it and ensure it can be easily seen and read on your stand.
- c) Can you theme your stand layout, graphics and messaging to make your stand very different from surrounding and competing stands? This theme should be consistent across all exhibition collateral, including pre-show promotion and giveaways etc.
- d) How can you make the best use of lighting?

Step 5: Well in advance of the exhibition, tell all your key stakeholders that you plan to attend and what your plans are.

- a) **Senior Management:** Encourage key members of the management team to attend – this is the perfect opportunity to get them in front of customers.
- b) **Employees:** It is vital that you brief all staff who come into contact with customers and prospects about your plans; they should be encouraged to promote the event at every appropriate opportunity. Add the exhibition to all staff auto-signatures with an email link to arrange a meeting or claim a VIP discount.

For you to make notes:

- c) **Customers:** As mentioned above, exhibitions are a great way to get customers and senior management together – and far more cost effective than individual flights. Add the exhibition details to invoices. And don't forget your website!
- d) **Prospects:** New customers will undoubtedly be one of the reasons you are attending, so tell your prospects a number of times in the lead up to the exhibition that you will be there. If possible, offer discounted or free passes. Endeavour to get meetings scheduled in advance – set your sales team an objective to do so. Exhibition organisers will often email the conference brochure and telemarket your wish-list on your behalf.
- e) **Exhibition Delegates:** If possible, (e)mail the delegate list and invite them to join you on your stand; tell them about key activities you are planning and encourage them to pre-schedule a meeting with you.
- f) **Partners:** Invite them to join you; provide them with access to your hospitality room for customer demos and meetings; encourage them to forward on your pre-event promotional material to their database
- g) **Press:** Find out which journalists are attending the exhibition and which are the media partners; ensure you tell them early of any press activity you are planning – under embargo, of course!

Step 6: Make the most of every opportunity at the exhibition to create a positive and lasting impression on everyone that you meet.

- a) **Literature:** Where are you placing it on your stand and how much do you plan to take? Can you prepare CDs or memory sticks for your most important contacts? Unfortunately most literature is thrown away so don't take too much as this can be a waste of money.
- b) **Prize draws:** These are a useful way to collect business cards – just be aware that the cards will not be qualified. Consider a lower value prize per day or larger value prize over the duration of the event; tie-in to any stand theme. Ask the stand organisers if you can announce the winner at one of the main refreshment times. Get a photo with the winner for post-event PR purposes.
- c) **Branded give-aways:** These always attract visitors to your stand – but not always for the right reasons! You will need to balance cost with quality – but be aware of the impact that a poor manufactured item can have on your brand.

For you to make notes:

Ensure at the very least your logo and web address are printed on the item.

- d) **Bags:** These are again another way to increase the visibility of your brand. The bag will probably not make it back to your stand visitors office however (unless it is canvas), but whilst the visitor is at the exhibition, they are a walking advert for your company.
- e) **Stand attractions:** A key objective of any stand attraction should be to keep visitors entertained on your stand for long enough for your staff to engage in conversation with them. Examples of effective stand attractions I have witnessed or organised include card magicians, jugglers, F1 simulators, video games, caricature artists, shoe shiners and pretty girls!!
- f) **Customer dinner:** Whilst you have a number of customers in the one place and your management team too, take the opportunity to organise a special customer event. Remember, repeat business is an important way to increase sales.

Step 7: Prepare a stand rota, organise training and briefings for all stand staff so they know exactly what is planned and what is expected of them.

Having done all the hard work, you don't want to be let down at the exhibition by untrained or ill-prepared stand staff. Prepare a **stand rota** in advance of the exhibition ensuring you have adequate coverage for busy periods and take into account other engagements staff may have, such as attending competitor conference sessions, customer meetings and of course refreshment breaks.

Choose staff who understand your offerings thoroughly and who are professional, confident and enthusiastic in front of customers. Remember, these people are representing the company and creating potentially revenue-generating first impressions. Train staff in how to approach visitors, to ask the right questions to quickly ascertain their need and purchasing responsibility. Set objectives to keep staff motivated!

As a must, prepare an **Exhibition Briefing Document**, circulate and present either in a meeting or by conference call the week before the event.

The Exhibition Briefing Document should include:

- a) Event location and your position on the show floor.

For you to make notes:

- b) Show opening times and break times, as this is when the exhibition will become particularly busy
- c) Event objectives and key messages
- d) Key activities planned internally (i.e. product launches, speaking engagements, customer dinners etc) and externally (i.e. networking events arranged by third parties)
- e) Roles and responsibilities
- f) Meeting schedule and stand rota
- g) The lead capture and follow-up process
- h) **Exhibition Dos and Don'ts**, for example:
 - a. No standing in huddles with backs to the aisles
 - b. No taking phone calls on the stand
 - c. No use of laptops on the stand
 - d. No eating or drinking on the stand
 - e. No reading newspapers
 - f. Keep the stand tidy
 - g. Tell you stand manager of your whereabouts
 - h. Never leave the stand unattended
 - i. Don't hide behind demo equipment
- i) Dress code
- j) Hotel details (don't forget to organise accommodation and flights early in your planning process!)

Once at the exhibition, either the night before or at least an hour before the exhibition floor opens on the first day, schedule a **Stand Talk and Walk-through**. This should physically "talk and walk" stand staff around the stand, explaining what is happening on each demo system, where literature is stored, where lead forms can be found and should be left once completed etc.

One final point to note, ensure those responsible for product demos are well-prepared.

Step 8: You are now almost ready to go. Finally, compile an Exhibition Handbook and Supplies Kit to be prepared for almost every eventuality.

Before you leave for the exhibition you should compile an **Exhibition Handbook** which is a reference document for your purposes only that contains the following information:

- a) Supplier information;
- b) Official documentation about anything that has been pre-ordered;
- c) Hotel information and booking confirmations;

For you to make notes:

- d) Travel details and contact numbers for all staff;
- e) Air way bills for all equipment and packages couriered;
- f) Stand rota.

The Supplies Kit should contain:

- a) Stapler and staples;
- b) Scissors;
- c) Packing up tape for the end of the show (always needed);
- d) Pens (lots of them);
- e) Clipboards.

Step 9: With the event not behind you, following-up with everyone that you met must now begin in earnest

If you don't follow-up effectively and fulfil the promises that you made to all the people that you spoke too, you will quickly jeopardise all the great work you put into preparing the exhibition and the many long and tiring hours spent on your feet talking to potential customers will be lost. You should therefore be aware of your **follow-up strategy** before you arrive at the exhibition so that no time is wasted once you are back in the office.

A few tips for follow-up:

- a) As part of the debrief to be explained in Step 10, immediately after the exhibition go through every lead with the stand staff and team responsible for follow-up to prioritise the enquiries according to a pre-determined system (immediate need / longer term prospect / mail list) and ensure everyone is aware of the follow-up procedures.
- b) Ensure all contacts go into the database. Make sure you capture full and correct contact details, products/services of interest and notes that will support follow-up including any anecdotal information.
- c) Assign the lead to the account manager for follow-up either through your CRM or email; if possible also assign a deadline to it. Ideally, all contacts should receive communication from you within 2 – 5 working days after the exhibition.
- d) Don't just follow-up the once; there may not be an immediate need for your solutions therefore it is important that you maintain frequent dialogue with your prospects.

For you to make notes:

Step 10: Finally, evaluate and document your performance.

It will not be immediately possible to ascertain if your objectives have been met – particularly in terms of expected sales. However, it is vitally important that you capture key learning and record initial thoughts on the quality of the event and the enquiries you took.

Also, by the time the event comes around again, it will be 12 months later. Not only will a lot have happened in that time, you unfortunately cannot guarantee that the same personnel who attended will be around to recall if it was a valuable event.

You should organise the debrief as soon after the exhibition as possible – perhaps even in the airport on the way home – and document your evaluation.

Key information to capture in your **Exhibition Evaluation Document**:

- a) Total visitor numbers – the stand organisers will provide this
- b) Total visitors to your stand and their quality. Ensure you have a method to evaluate “quality” and calculate your cost per lead and expected Return On Investment
- c) How many press meetings did you secure? What is the expected editorial coverage as a result?
- d) Was your stand position and design effective? What worked well? What didn't? What would you like to see done differently next time?
- e) What were competitors up to? How did their stands compare? What announcements did they make? What intelligence did you pick up?
- f) What was the total budget for the event? Did you under or over spend? What was money well spent? Where would you cut back in the future?
- g) Finally – make a recommendation. Should the company exhibit at this event next year?

For you to make notes:

About the author: Katrina Dixon

I am a marketing communications specialist with over 13 years experience of planning, budgeting, developing, managing & measuring marketing campaigns.

I offer flexible, timely & cost-effective support to businesses that recognise that success in today's uncertain climate depends on continuing to communicate with their customers, prospects & partners to raise their profile, increase brand awareness & generate quality sales enquiries.

Acting as an extension to your team, I am on call, as and when you need me, to provide project-based marketing support. If you already have a marketing team, I can support you for specific projects in busy periods. If you don't, I can provide you with the marketing expertise you need to enable you to quickly & effectively achieve your communication objectives.

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