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TRADE SHOW PLANNING: A MODEL AND TOOLS FOR MAXIMIZING EFFECTIVENESS

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ABSTRACT

The "shallow pockets" of the typical small business manager require that marketing strategies be designed and implemented on a shoestring budget. Trade shows offer very attractive investment-payoff ratios for scarce marketing dollars. To reap these attractive, cost-effective benefits, however, requires that the small business manager plans effectively for trade shows. This paper discusses how to set selling and non-selling goals, how to select the right trade shows, how to prepare for the show itself, how to participate well and wisely, how to follow-up on the trade show, and how to assess the impact of trade show participation.

INTRODUCTION

Since most small businesses have limited resources to dedicate to growth, the small business owner or manager needs marketing opportunities that have very favorable cost-benefit trade-offs. The "shallow pockets" of most small businesses means that marketing strategies must be designed on a shoestring budget (Weinrauch, 1987). Every dollar has to count. Trade shows provide the small business owner a chance to reach a pre-screened customer base quickly and efficiently. Members of trade show audiences often come prepared to make buying decisions and to buy. Data from the Trade Show Bureau indicate that most trade show attendees have buying influence, and 90 percent generally buy within the 12-month period after the show (Lorimer, 1991; Trade Show Bureau, 1986). The cost per trade show contact has remained less than half the cost of a personal sales call (Bonoma, 1983; Chapman, 1987).

Time-constrained small business owners, though, often participate in trade shows more as an afterthought than as part of an overall business development strategy. As a result, small businesses often consider trade shows an expense rather than an investment in market development. Further, as many managers discover, favorable payoff-investment ratios for exhibiting at

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trade shows do not happen by accident. Without good planning, managers often fall victim to any or all of the following common trade show problems: high participation costs, unknown effectiveness, efficiency that cannot be measured, and the feeling that the shows are a waste of time, a perk for managers or customers, or an expense required to maintain the company image (Bonoma, 1983). Choosing the right trade show with the right audience and returning from the show with both leads and sales takes detailed planning. This paper provides the small business manager a detailed, but simplified planning model and methodology that can enhance the probability of trade show success, a worksheet for developing sales goals, a typical small business trade show budget for a short, local show, and a suggested schedule for planning participation in a trade show. Using these tools can help the small business manager improve the return on his or her firm's investment in trade shows.

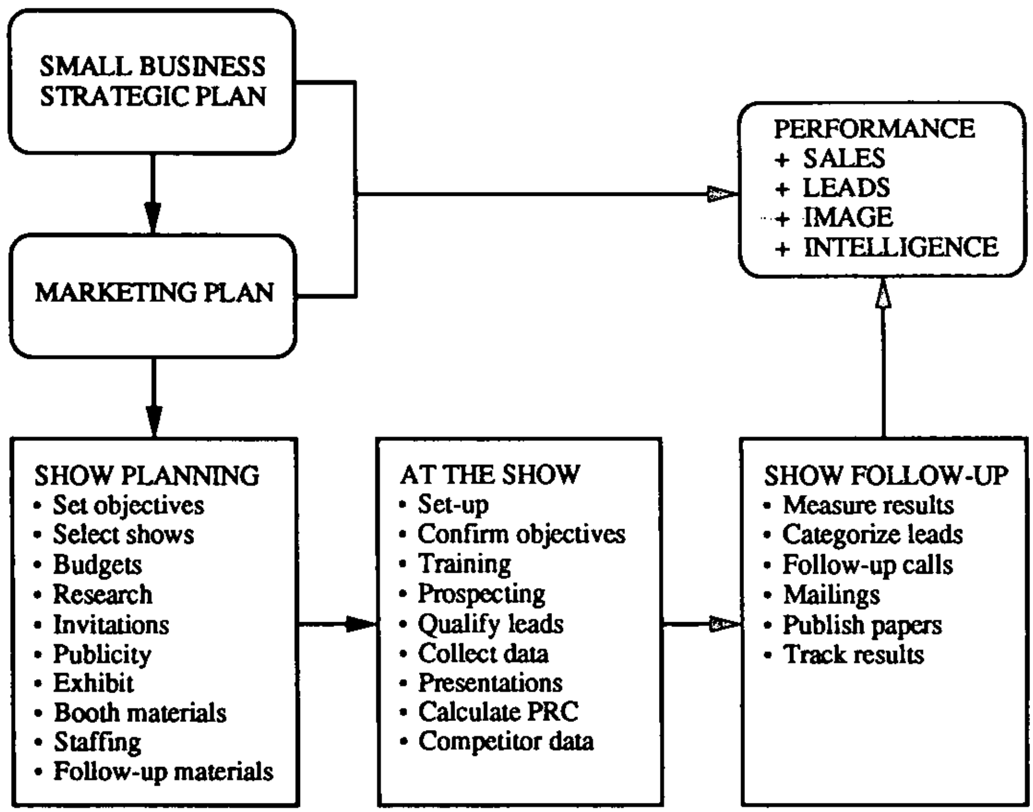
TRADE SHOW PLANNING

Small business financial and market performance is positively related to strategic management and long range planning (Schwenk & Shrader, 1993). For many small businesses, trade shows may present more new qualified sales contacts than any other single event, or perhaps more even than salespeople would see during an entire year. Thus, trade shows are a key element in the overall marketing strategy that can help the firm reach its total sales, growth and market share objectives. Because trade show activity must be integrated with the overall marketing plan, effective use of trade shows depends on good management before, during and after the show. To make the most of their trade show investment, managers need to use an integrated strategic approach to plan all three phases of trade show activity. As shown in Figure 1, managers must know how to set selling and non-selling goals (Bonoma, 1983; Browning & Adams, 1988; Chapman, 1987; Lorimer, 1991; Levinson, 1984; Miller, 1992; O'Conner, 1987), select the right trade shows (Bonoma, 1983; Browning & Adams, 1988; Chapman, 1987; Faria & Dickinson, 1984; Levinson, 1984; Swandby, Cox & Sequeria, 1990; Young, 1986), prepare for the show itself (Alexander, 1989; Browning & Adams, 1988; Chapman, 1987; Cossman, 1984; Grimmer, 1990; Letwin, 1981; Levinson, 1984; McGreevy, 1989; Miller, 1992; Swandby, et al., 1990), participate effectively (Aisle View, 1990; Browning & Adams, 1988; Chapman, 1987; Everett, 1989; Grimmer, 1990; Levinson, 1984; Miller, 1992; O'Conner, 1987), assess the impact of trade show participation (Aisle View, 1990) and conduct post-show follow-up activities (Grimmer, 1990; Lorimer, 1991; Miller, 1992).

SETTING GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

A manager's first task is to define broad goals for trade show participation, then specify measurable (quantified) objectives for each goal (Bonoma, 1983; Chapman, 1987; Miller, 1992; O'Conner, 1987). Generally, trade show planning should include both selling and non-selling goals. To maximize trade show cost-benefit payoffs, the small business owner should emphasize selling goals and make selling the firm's products and services the most important goal (Lorimer, 1991; Levinson, 1984). Other selling goals should include identifying key prospects within the firm's target market, gaining access to decision makers, disseminating information, introducing new products and servicing current accounts. Non-selling goals often focus on enhancing the firm's image, collecting competitor data and evaluating new products (Browning & Adams, 1988). Clearly, the goals for trade show activities must reinforce the firm's overall strategic goals.

Figure 1. *A General Model for Trade Show Planning, Participation and Follow-up*



Translating the broad, open-ended goals into specific, measurable and focused objectives to be achieved within a specified time frame is essential in any planning process. These quantified, period-specific objectives provide the standards by which to judge the show's initial potential and its ultimate effectiveness (Chapman, 1987; Miller, 1992). It is difficult to provide typical targets since each objective is highly dependent on a firm's average order size, price per unit, purchase frequency, selling efficiency, etc. However, the objectives for a trade show must reinforce the firm's mission and long-term strategic plan. Some examples of quantified selling objectives include:

- sales dollars per exhibit hour,
- the number of leads generated per exhibit hour,
- dollar volume of sales in the 12 months following the show.

Table 1 illustrates how small business managers can use a worksheet to develop sales goals as described by Chapman (1987). By using some trade show industry ratios, this worksheet enables a manager to estimate the expected firm sales that result from the trade show from only two key independent variables, the firm's average sale amount and the projected trade show attendance.

Table 1

Developing a Sales Objective: An Example and Worksheet

Total number of attendees	(a)	6000
Total interested attendees	(b)	960
Decision makers	(c)	480
Total contacts	(d)	640
Contacts converted to leads	(e)	128
Leads converted to sales	(f)	64
Average Sale:	(g)	$1,000
Sales Objective ($ 1,000 average sale multiplied by 64)	(h)	$ 6,400

Note. Table developed from an example by Tim Deaton,
Third Wave Technologies, Inc. Huntsville, AL

Worksheet for Developing Sales Goals

Projected number of total attendees	*(a)* ____________
Interested attendees (Total attendees from line (a) x .16)	*(b)* ____________
Decision makers (Interested attendees from line (b) x .50)	*(c)* ____________
Total contacts (Add 1/3 for waste from unsuccessful contacts) (line (c)/3) + line(c)	*(d)* ____________
Total leads (Total contacts (d) x .20 contact-to-lead ratio)	*(e)* ____________
Total number of sales (Total leads from line (e) x .50 lead-to-sales ratio)	*(f)* ____________
Average Sale:	*(g)* $ ____________
(Average sale amount on line (g) x total sales from line (f)	*(h)* $ ____________

To begin the estimation process, managers must first obtain the projected attendance from the trade show organizer, and enter this projected attendance on line (a) of the worksheet. Next, to estimate the portion of trade show attendees who will have an interest in a particular product (on line (b)), multiply the total number of attendees (line a) by the average level of interest (16%) for the trade show industry. In the next step, only about half of the interested attendees will have buying influence, so multiply the number interested on line (b) by 0.5. To determine the total number of contacts on line (d), managers must account for a waste factor in the total number of contacts at the booth by using another industry rule of thumb. Of every 3 conversations with prospects, one will not be useful; therefore, on line (d) managers should add one-third of line (c) to the total interested prospects shown on line (c) to take care of this waste factor. To reduce the total number of contacts to the number of sales leads on line (e), managers should multiply line (d) by the average contact-to-lead ratio of 20%. On line (f), the number of leads that will actually buy can be calculated by estimating that 50% of the leads will place an order. Finally, to obtain a dollar objective for sales on line (h), multiply the estimated number of sales by the average sale amount for the small business. Some may find it necessary to consider more than one average sale dollar amount. In this situation, high dollar sales, which may occur infrequently, should be added to smaller sales, which may constitute the majority of the firm's revenues. Note that the ratios cited are exhibition industry averages; a given small business may need to use its own historical ratios or the more relevant and specific ratios from the industry in which it operates.

To quantify the number of contacts necessary per hour to reach the stated objectives, managers should estimate the actual selling time that will be available during the show. The total available hours minus any time lost during slow periods, lunch, and special events should approximate the actual net selling time in hours. By dividing the sales objective by the net selling hours, managers can project daily leads and sales objectives. (These should be reviewed after each show day and adjusted accordingly (Chapman, 1987)). Once show-level goals and objectives are set for sales and other outcomes, managers should select those trade shows where these goals and objectives are attainable. Selecting the right trade show opportunity is a function of choosing the right type of trade show, analyzing the quality of the audience, and estimating the cost of exhibiting at the show.

SELECTING THE TRADE SHOW

Small business managers must select a trade show that will maximize company exposure and gain access to prospective customers in the firm's target market segment. Prior to the show, it is helpful to have knowledge of who will be attending the show, the type of show (industrial or consumer), how attendees will be invited, the type and amount of advertising prior to the show, the profile of other exhibitors and the position of the firm's booth in relation to traffic attractions, competitors and distractions.

The abundance of trade shows and conventions gives the small business owner a wide choice in selecting the best shows to attend. The annual *Tradeshow Week Databook*, published by *Tradeshow Week*, lists shows by name, geographic location, size, industrial classification, number of attendees from the previous year, number of exhibits and square footage. New shows are listed separately. Industry trade magazines and newsletters also list trade show opportunities.

To narrow the number of shows to be considered, managers should understand the categories of shows. Audience and exhibitor characteristics help segment the industry into two basic types: vertical and horizontal shows. Vertical shows showcase exhibitors specializing in products or services for an individual market, job function or industry. Horizontal shows have broader appeal in terms of both exhibitors and target audience. As shown in Figure 2, further distinctions can be made on the basis of a matrix defined by target audience and range of exhibitors. The examples are drawn from the market for electronic image processing.

Figure 2. *Examples of Each Type of Trade Show*

		TARGET AUDIENCE	
		Vertical	Horizontal
EXHIBITORS	Vertical	American Newspaper Publishing Association (ANPA)	Electronic Imaging East (EIS)
	Horizontal	Special Interest Group for Graphics (SIGGRAPH)	COMDEX Regional IEEE shows

Horizontal-horizontal shows appeal to sellers and buyers from disparate industries, functions and markets such as a broad business interest show for a particular city (Chapman, 1987). The annual COMDEX show is the largest consumer electronics show in the world, so it attracts the widest possible audience, range of exhibitors, and media coverage of any show. At the other extreme, vertical-vertical shows attract attendees who are just as specialized as the sellers. For example, the annual American Newspaper Publishing Association (ANPA) show attracts publishing or printing supply specialists, and a rather narrow slice of the publishing market, the large daily and weekly newspapers and periodicals. Products exhibited are mature, proven technologies that are production oriented. Vertical-horizontal shows present specialized products to groups from diverse job functions or industries. The Electronic Imaging East Show (EIS) showcases hardware and software vendors who specialize in high-level, numerical processing for graphics. These vendors use this opportunity to reach a wide variety of market segments like geographic information systems, military applications, medical imaging and high quality printing and publishing. EIS products are generally state-of-the-art based on emerging technologies for innovative customers who do not need a proven product for their application. Horizontal-vertical shows present diverse products to an individual market, job function or industry. SIGGRAPH attracts vendors in all types of computer graphics and customers from many industries, but the target customers all use the product for the same narrow job function, display, and output of graphics. These graphics specialists are attracted to the wide variety of products at SIGGRAPH.

After determining the preferred type of show, managers must assess audience quality, which is consistently ranked as the most important criterion for selecting a trade show (Browning & Adams, 1988; Faria & Dickinson, 1984; Swandby, et al., 1990). Definitions of audience quality differ, but the proportion of decision makers at the show is very important (Bonoma, 1983) as are other buying or demographic characteristics of the projected audience (Young, 1986). Managers can determine the quality of the audience by using indicators such as:

- Audience Interest Factor (AIF) - the percentage of attendees expressing an interest in buying;
- Net Buying Influence (NBI) - the percentage of attendees with final say in purchasing;
- Total Buying Plans - intention to purchase one or more displayed products within 12 months; and
- Average Traffic Density - the number of visitors per 100 square feet of exhibit space. Densities of three or more are indicative of an active show (Swandby, et al., 1990).

Beyond these quantitative measures of audience quality, the small business owner can, with a little homework, make a qualitative assessment of the quality of the target show's audience. Prior show attendance and talks with past exhibitors can also provide a sense of audience quality. The show management company can usually provide useful qualitative and quantitative information regarding the previous year's attendees. Reviewing the job titles and functions of the show visitors and the number of attendees also provides some information on audience quality.

Before deciding to attend a trade show, managers should also know the characteristics of the firm's target market, both current and potential customers. Managers should determine and understand the similarities in customers' needs, buying behavior or usage situation that place them in the target market. Given an understanding of what customers want and why they buy, managers must then demographically describe the typical customer in the segment. For instance, for industrial buyers, what job titles or functions represent the typical buyer?

Having assessed the quality of the trade show audience and defined the firm's target market, managers must determine the fit between the trade show and the firm's strategy. Each potential trade show can be classified according to the objectives the small business considers most important. The analysis should match the opportunities presented at the show with the firm's selling and non-selling goals. Do the attendees match the profile of the firm's target customer? Having identified the target, managers should also do enough research to understand the potential decision-maker's buying behavior. Does the target firm have a single decision-maker or use group buying? An awareness of how and when budgets are developed in the customer's business is also key to qualifying potential attendees as good prospects.

The cost of exhibiting is another important criteria in choosing a trade show. If an exhibiting firm does not earn significant revenue over the next year attributable to attendance, no reason exists to participate in the show again. Booth costs typically represent only about 20 percent of the total outlay for the show (Chapman, 1987). The trade show budget should include most, if not all, of the following items: space rental, display booth, transportation/set-up/tear-down, display maintenance, marketing materials, hospitality and personnel. Table 2 illustrates a typical trade show budget. The small business owner may be able to share a booth (Levinson, 1984) as well as personnel with another vendor of similar products to cut costs and permit more frequent attendance at trade shows and more extensive geographical coverage.

Table 2

Typical Expense Budget for a Two-Day, Local Trade Show

EXPENSE	COST
Exhibit Space	$ 475.00
Booth Furnishings	75.00
Advertising	225.00
Marketing Language	300.00
Giveaways	30.00
Signage	100.00
Staffing	250.00
Miscellaneous	10.00
TOTAL	$1,465.00

Note. Table developed from an example by Tim Deaton,
Third Wave Technologies, Inc. Huntsville, AL

SHOW PREPARATION

Show preparation should begin three to five months before the show date. This insures that pre-show tasks, such as creating marketing materials, sending customer invitations, and finalizing arrangements with the promoter will be completed on time. A firm's pre-show schedule depends on the arrival of the exhibitor's kit from the show management and the number of employees that can be devoted to the preparation effort.

Incorporating publicity in pre-show activities helps generate interest among the potential audience. According to the Trade Show Bureau, 45 percent of attendees are drawn to a company's exhibit because of its personal invitations, trade journal publicity, and advertising (Miller, 1992). Direct mail pieces sent a few months in advance are typical vehicles for announcing attendance, promoting new product introductions or mentioning guest speaker or panelist participation (Chapman, 1987; Grimmer, 1990; McGreevy, 1989). Managers should help employees become familiar with the key media contacts who are expected to attend the exhibition. Publishing an article in a trade magazine close to the show date can help increase name recognition at the show (McGreevy, 1989). Sending a news release to the local newspaper in the show city a few weeks beforehand may also prompt more prospects to stop at the booth (Cossman, 1984; McGreevy, 1989). A good method for encouraging clients and prospects to stop at the booth is to extend invitations with free tickets (provided by the show promoter).

Pre-show preparation includes physical exhibit considerations. The actual exhibit is in reality a three-dimensional advertisement; therefore, booth design is a direct reflection of the company (Alexander, 1989). Every exhibitor must develop an attractive, yet cost-efficient, design. The promoter usually provides some tables, chairs, and drapery; but the exhibit staff must customize the booth to create a unique exhibit that will attract attention and communicate the company image (Alexander, 1989; Browning & Adams, 1988; Grimmer, 1990; Levinson, 1984; Miller, 1992; Swandby, et al., 1990). The *Directory of Exhibit Systems*, published by *Exhibitor Magazine*, and the *National Tradeshow Services Directory*, produced by *Tradeshow Weekly* list exhibit booth dealers and designers. Most big-city yellow page directories also list "Display Designers and Producers."

Creativity can often draw attention and lower cost by using the company's own materials and resources. A key to demonstrating creativity is the effective use of color to set the booth apart while reinforcing the desired image. The 'header' banner should quickly convey the benefit to the customer of purchasing the product (Chapman, 1987; Letwin, 1981). An ideal height for this message is above six feet to assure clear, long-distance visibility (*Aisle View*, 1990). If demonstrations are planned, the space should be arranged to facilitate viewing by as many prospects as possible while avoiding traffic problems.

Initial planning for the first trade show may take as long as three months. Table 3 presents a sample schedule using a three month time frame which can be adapted for longer or shorter schedules. The amount of follow-up work generated at the show is clearly dependent on the amount and quality of the work done before the show.

Table 3

Sample Trade Show Planning Schedule and Checklist

Three months before
- Set objectives
- Analyze audience
- Prepare budget
- Meet with key personnel to assign tasks
- Begin creation of marketing materials

Two months before
- Send in show program listing
- Make hotel and travel arrangements
- Reserve hospitality suite
- Check on display and graphics
- Finalize direct mailing, invitations

One month before
- Send customer invitations
- Mail orders for show service
- Forward press releases
- Ship booth to show
- Gather pertinent show documents, promotional materials

Pre-show operations
- Confirm work orders
- Watch set-up
- Communicate goals to show staff

Note. Adapted from Chapman, 1987, pp. 130-33

SHOW PARTICIPATION

After setting up the exhibit, one of the first steps at the show is to confirm the selling and non-selling goals/objectives with the booth staff. Since a small business generally uses company employees, gaining commitment to these goals is achievable. Although not recommended, some firms use temporary employees for more routine show tasks such as assembly and dismantling of the booth (Grimmer, 1990; O'Conner, 1987). Assessing goals and progress toward goal attainment on a nightly basis after the close of the day's show will make correcting a relatively simple problem, such as traffic flow, more manageable (Everett, 1989).

The main purpose of most exhibitors at a trade show is to sell the firm's products. This means that materials and forms to take orders need to be at the exhibit, and that the booth staff must be dedicated to selling (Levinson, 1984). Since the average trade show encounter lasts only 13 minutes, the sales staff must be trained to take advantage of each opportunity (Miller, 1992). Success at a trade show hinges on the performance of the booth personnel. Clearly, good prospecting techniques are essential to positive trade show outcomes.

Rather than using untrained, inexperienced smiling faces to generate the largest number of contacts possible, managers should insist on generating qualified leads. This will make the follow-up work after the show more efficient and effective. Qualification of leads is feasible at the show since most small business owners help staff the exhibit. Asking open-ended questions and recording as many requests and responses as possible helps qualify leads quickly and are essential prospecting techniques (Browning & Adams, 1988; Chapman, 1987). Trained personnel are critically important for innovative products and for uninformed or unfamiliar contacts. The booth manager must also devise a cueing system among booth personnel that provides signals to facilitate visitor flow for maximum efficiency (Everett, 1989). Correct body language, such as smiling, unfolded arms, standing at the perimeter, and erect posture help present an inviting image; while eating, drinking, and smoking in the booth should never be allowed (Chapman, 1987; Grimmer, 1990). Calculating the cost per minute of exhibit time may help the staff realize how valuable time is and make it easier to rid the booth of the "waste" factor.

A vendor should also use ancillary activities at each trade show to maximize the value of the firm's attendance. Presenting a speech or a paper, acting as a panelist, or offering short high-impact seminars are ways to increase the benefits of attending (*Aisle View*, 1990; O'Conner, 1987) and to gain extra visibility for the firm by leveraging the available time. Vendor personnel should also take advantage of every opportunity to gather competitor data, build possible partnerships with other vendors, find sales representatives, and solidify relationships with current customers.

ASSESSING IMPACT

To improve booth effectiveness, the small business manager should specify a method of assessing the impact of the booth and a control mechanism to modify the exhibition strategy. The "Personal Reach Count" (PRC) is a measurement process that can immediately appraise the impact of the booth if evaluated against daily objectives. This process starts by counting the number of people in the booth for one minute each hour for several hours and averaging. This figure is multiplied by 60 (minutes per hour) to approximate the average attendance per hour. Similarly, the average length of stay (contact) can be determined by timing three prospects and calculating the average time spent in the booth. The PRC is the product of the average contact time per visitor and the average number of visitors per hour. If this number is lower than expected, more aggressive sales efforts may be the answer. Other measures of impact include the overall number of people carrying the firm's giveaway and the number of visitors indicating they were referred to the booth by a press write-up or other pre-show promotions (*Aisle View*, 1990).

Assessing impact several months after the show is also important. How many orders could be attributed to participation in the show? How many leads were pursued? Did the sales generated from the show justify the costs of the show? Should the firm attend a particular show again? What can be done better at the next show to increase the payoffs from show attendance?

POST-SHOW ACTIVITIES

For most small companies, the primary goal of attending an exhibition is generating sales, but results should be measured over the long-term against all objectives to get a clear picture of the success of the show. Quick follow-up on leads is essential to maintain the momentum of the show. Small businesses nearly always close more sales after the show through follow-up than at the show. The cost of closing a qualified lead from a trade show is about 70 percent less than closing a typical field sales encounter (Lorimer, 1991). Yet, according to the Trade Show Bureau, as many as 83 percent of trade show exhibitors never follow up after a show closes. If no one contacts the leads generated at the show, then the firm should consider using the financial resources devoted to the trade show for other purposes.

To begin the follow-up process, immediately after the show the small business manager and sales staff must classify and prioritize all the leads according to goals and deadlines (Grimmer, 1990). Computerized lead tracking is an option if the firm generates large numbers of leads and if the sales staff accepts the method. Manual and automated systems rely on the lead card, a form used at the show to obtain pertinent personal information from prospects and categorize inquiries. One prioritization system places prospects in "A", "B", and "C" categories to help sales staff focus their efforts on high return opportunities. "A" leads demand immediate attention while "B" leads are surveyed within two weeks to assess buying plans. "C" leads are called within a month to determine interest (Ofstie, no date). Courteous telephone calling by qualified sales personnel is probably the most effective and cost-efficient follow up possible.

Follow-up activities increase the company's chance of success and help it stand out from the other exhibitors. Managers should create and implement their follow-up plan before the show even opens. Non-selling post-show activities, such as general thank-you letters and literature packets, can be prepared before the show and sent out immediately after the show closes (Miller, 1992). Experts suggest that a personal thank-you letter be sent to all visitors. Since the show will create expectations in the qualified lead's mind for quick response by the exhibitor, the small business owner must be prepared to respond quickly. In the best case, if the show was unusually successful, the firm may have to hire more sales or operating personnel. Delaying the response to level the effect of the new business is not usually sound strategy, especially in seasonal markets like swimming pool construction. In the worst case, the small business owner, fearful of rapid growth and over extension, refuses to hire general labor and cannot keep up with the demand created by the follow-up selling effort and so loses the opportunities.

CONCLUSIONS

Trade show attendance continued to grow during the 1980s and is projected to grow at an annual rate of three to four percent during the 1990s (*Wall Street Journal*, 1991). As markets fragment and the exhibition industry matures, trade show participation is shifting away from the large annual national shows. Second-tier cities and private exposition space for consumer shows are projected to be the fastest growing segment of the industry. The smaller, regional and industry-focused or market-specific trade shows give small firms an opportunity to parade their products and thus focus their marketing statements on a more receptive audience (Browning & Adams, 1988; Keenan, 1989). Small businesses may discover that regional shows provide a better vehicle for exhibiting their products and services, although the exposure gained from participation in national shows should not be overlooked. These trends may prove especially advantageous to the small business anxious to develop more cost effective delivery of key media contacts, new sales opportunities, and networking capabilities.

Trade shows can pay off handsomely for the small firm if a firm sets goals, plans appropriately, promotes creatively and pursues leads expediently. As part of the overall marketing strategy, a small business's trade show activity must be focused on clearly defined target markets; carried out by knowledgeable, professional staff; and supported by the other business processes and functions in order to efficiently capture new business.

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