

# Bang for your buck: Getting the most from trade shows

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Throughout the United States, there are 10,000 trade shows a year attended by 120 million people who spend \$90 billion. So what's the trick to making them work for you?

Susan Ratliff, president of Exhibit Experts, a nationally recognized authority on trade show selling, says big companies have been capitalizing on trade show sales for years, but today smaller companies can compete effectively and benefit from this sales medium.

"Success starts with the correct show selection," she says. "Research local newspapers, trade magazines, chambers of commerce and the Internet, then only select events that will attract your target audience."

Underscoring the importance of the

"wow" factor, Ratliff says, "You only have six to seven seconds to capture a prospect's attention, so it is critical to use large images with minimal text. Always remember, your booth and materials reflect your company image. If you claim to be 'the best' you need to look it."

Ratliff also emphasizes using your giveaway items as a reward for something in return — completing a survey, listening to a demonstration, viewing a product portfolio or providing a business card.

Apple iPods are what Phoenix software company Mission3 plans to use to bring trade show attendees to its booth. Vice President of Sales Chris Brassington says he expects to hold a raffle for the popular product, which should provide solid leads, build excitement and increase awareness of his new company. Many businesses collect leads from the names and contact information provided when people enter a drawing.

"We've only attended two trade shows since we opened about a year ago, and the leads have been excellent. Visibility at trade shows is an important branding issue. In our industry, you really have to be there or you will create a negative buzz. We have used Fast Signs on Central for our booth materials and they have been very effective."

Booth display costs vary, so it is important to consider the options and select the one that best suits your individual design and budgetary requirements.

Scott Koehler, owner of Fast Signs on Central, sells display packages that include a basic table-top with pricing starting at \$800, accompanied by four-color graphics that run between \$5,000 and \$6,000. He



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Exhibit Experts President Susan Ratliff works on one of her company's product display examples.

recommends digital printing on Lexan, a thin, durable plastic product that is easily rolled and transported.

Another option offered by Exhibit Ex-

perts are Featherlite Exhibit Products, which Ratliff says works well because they are commercial grade, easy to ship, accommodate varied booth sizes and provide easy set-up and take down.

While your display is key to grabbing the prospect, training your sales staff is critical.

"Eighty percent of trade show attendees base their opinion of your company on your employees' actions at the booth," she says. "You'd be surprised at the *Fortune* 500 companies who spend thousands of dollars on exhibit real estate and materials but don't script their sales force."

Ratliff offers the following suggestions.

- Limit the number of sales staff to two people per 10-foot-by-10-foot space to avoid intimidation.
- "Trade shows 101" — No sitting. Sales professionals need to be up meeting people.
- Don't spend too much time with each person or you will miss opportunities.
- Assign someone specifically to "protect" the leads and take them back to the office.

Another factor to consider is Internet accessibility. Trade shows can charge anywhere from \$100 to \$1,000 for Internet service for a two- to four-day event. Mobile Internet service is a cost-effective alternative, experts say.

## GET CONNECTED

**Center for Exhibition Industry**

**Research:** [www.ceir.org](http://www.ceir.org)

**Exhibit Experts:**

[www.exhibitexpertsaz.com](http://www.exhibitexpertsaz.com)

**Fastsigns On Central:**

[www.fastsigns.com/128](http://www.fastsigns.com/128)

## TRADE SHOW TIPS

### Top 10 ways to make your trade show booth a success:

- Plan ahead
- Set objectives
- Design a dynamic display
- Reinforce your marketing message
- Train your staff
- Develop a sales strategy
- Exude enthusiasm
- Factor in some fun
- Follow up effectively

Source: "How to be an Exhibit Expert."