

Making an exhibition of yourself

Is it worth exhibiting at trade shows now that there are so many high tech ways of communicating with customers? A range of experts tell **Annabelle Ruston** that exhibitions remain a highly effective way of establishing and maintaining relations with customers

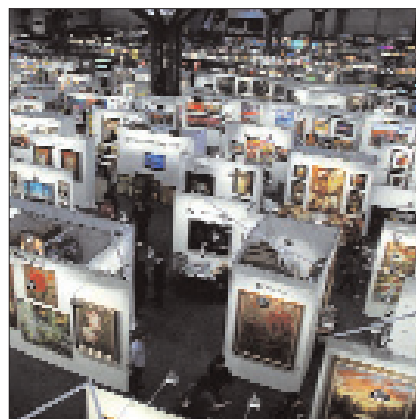
However often you make online contact, trade shows are a powerful way of interacting with customers face-to-face, which is an incredibly valuable way of strengthening relationships. Buyers want to see and touch products, and feel confident in their quality, before placing an order. It can be hard to assess the reliability of a supplier by looking at their website, whereas meeting employees on an exhibition stand can tell you much more.

Show visitors are proactive, rather than passive, recipients of your sales message. The Association of Exhibition Organisers (AEO) reports that exhibitors find 18 per cent of their annual new business at shows. The secret of winning orders is reaching decision makers with your message, which can be a challenge. However, according to the AEO, 74 per cent of visitors to trade shows are key influencers of the buying decision, whereas a third of trade show visitors would apparently not even see sales reps from new suppliers who called to make an appointment.

Show organisers employ marketing professionals with impressive budgets, who do all they can to bring quality buyers to the event.

Buyers at Spring Fair International, for example, have collective buying power of £12billion. Similarly, Artexpo New York expects to see 25,000 buyers. There's no way of tapping into that level of potential business other than exhibiting at a strong show.

Dr Giulio Cesare Alberghini, president of ON Organizzazione Nike who organise the framing and art trade



show Quadrum SACA explains, 'In our digital age, taking part in trade shows is still extremely important. Companies have the opportunity to make contact with key buyers, to answer questions face-to-face and to develop understanding of customers' needs. Direct contact between customer and supplier is still the most powerful way of doing business, an irreplaceable marketing tool. The companies that are riding out the global economic crisis are the ones who have invested in trade shows. Markets need to be reassured so promotional campaigns are more important than ever at the moment; you need to do more advertising, more sponsorship and take part in more trade shows.'

Louise Young, MD of the Spring and Autumn Fairs in Birmingham, agrees. 'Spring and Autumn Fairs provide the biggest and best value opportunities for buyers and sellers to come together at the most critical times in the buying cycle. In these tough economic times it is vital to maintain face-to-face meetings with existing and potential customers. There



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is no substitute for seeing and touching product, and this is of course especially the case for art. Our vision is to bring as many buyers and sellers together as possible to help increase their profits. We want our customers to grow with us and we will do everything in our power to maximise their investment from our shows.'

So why is it that many trade shows are experiencing dwindling exhibitor numbers? There are now so many new ways for businesses to market themselves. The cost of exhibiting is high compared with e-marketing alternatives, particularly staffing costs. Businesses have to take sales people off the road to work at shows, so the financial benefits of exhibiting need to compensate for this loss of revenue, as well as cover more concrete exhibition overheads.

Shows are also time-consuming; once you've set-up and taken down your stand, you have often used up a whole week, and that's without international travel. A lot of time when some of the marketing alternatives start reaping rewards the moment you press the 'send' key. However, exhibition professionals say you can achieve more in four days at a show than you might otherwise manage over several months.

If, after examining the alternatives, you decide that a show would be cost-effective, you have to start with research and preparation. Planning and follow-up can make the difference between a good show and an outstanding one.

Right approach, right show

Begin by deciding which show is right for you. Ideally, you should visit the show first and check that the other exhibitors' price and product ranges complement your own. You know your target customer, so find out whether this type of business will be at the event. Be wary of



Opposite page:
Top and lower images from Artexpo;
centre image from Quadrum SACA

This page:
Demonstrations and activity on stands help draw people in. Pictured top is a 'highlighter' on the Thomas Kinkade stand at Spring Fair International; below, retailers test out new products at SMAC

new ventures, as these often fold after a year because there was insufficient demand for them. Find out how the organiser will market the show.

Ask other people in the trade about the show and look for feedback on the internet. Find out if the organiser is respected, how long the event has been running and whether it is increasing or diminishing in size. Check that the right trade associations support the show. Your presence at the show must offer potential buyers what they want in a way that makes them feel comfortable and confident to buy. If you understand your target customer, you will know how to grab their attention.

Logistics

Cost has to be your first consideration and forward planning can save money.

Some shows have special 'pavilions' for artists, small businesses or first-time exhibitors, which offer small stands at attractive prices. The Fine Art Trade Guild negotiates UKTI export funding for exhibitors at certain overseas shows (see box).

Take the basic stand cost and add staff expenses, freight, publicity and stand design when working out your show budget. Don't make the mistake of blowing all your budget on stand design, which is easy to do. Remember to allow for pre-show publicity and following up after-show sales leads too.

Don't underestimate the cost of freight, particularly overseas. Use an experienced shipper; a firm who has never shipped to exhibitions in the country in question may quote an enticing price because they don't understand the





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complexities of customs formalities and, for example, trade union rules surrounding unloading at the show venue. Your final bill may be for more than you thought or, the worst scenario, your goods won't arrive in time.

You are also going to have to buy or rent furniture, lighting and display equipment. Check what is included in the standard exhibitor package, as this will vary from show to show. For example, sometimes lighting is included and sometimes it isn't. Some shows offer free storage, while others have none available, either paid-for or free. Read the small print in the exhibitors' manual, check for hidden costs and penalties for late booking. It might be ten or 20 per cent cheaper to rent furniture and order lighting before a certain date.

Check that your plans for the stand conform to the regulations; this information will be in the exhibitor manual. How are you going to display your graphics? Some shows allow you to paint the walls and bang in nails, for example, while others provide Velcro panels and expect you to bring hanging equipment. Exhibition furniture is available that is lightweight and folds compactly into cases on wheels. Exhibition organisers may sell picture hooks and lightbulbs, but it is likely to

INTERNATIONAL ART & FRAMING TRADE SHOWS SPRING 2010

January

17-19 SMAC, Paris/France, www.smacparis.com, Framing and creative arts

17-19 Top Drawer Spring, London/UK, www.topdrawerspring.com, Gifts and homewares

22-26 Maison et Objet, Paris/France, www.maison-objet.com, Gifts and homewares

* 25-27 West Coast Art & Frame Show, Las Vegas/USA, www.wcafshow.com, Framing and published art

30-Feb 2 Paperworld, Frankfurt/Germany, www.paperworld.messefrankfurt.com, Paper and stationery

February

7-11 Spring Fair International, Birmingham/UK, www.springfair.com, Gifts and homewares

12-16 Ambiente, Frankfurt/Germany, www.ambiente.messefrankfurt.com, Consumer goods

* 18-21 Quadrum SACA, Bologna/Italy, www.quadrum.saca.com, Framing and art
21-23 PMA International Convention & Trade Show, Anaheim/USA, www.pmai.org, Image capture and presentation

March

7-10 Focus on Imaging, Birmingham/UK, www.focus-on-imaging.co.uk, Image capture and output

* 25-28 Artexpo, New York/USA, www.artexponewyork.com, Pictures and prints

April

11-13 British Craft Trade Fair, Harrogate/UK, www.bctf.co.uk, Handmade artefacts

** UKTI export funding is available for UK exhibitors at these shows. Contact Louise Hay at the Fine Art Trade Guild for details, louise@fineart.co.uk*

For a full list of 2010 trade shows visit www.fineart.co.uk

be cheaper to buy them yourself.

You may need to take money at the show, particularly from new customers who don't yet have an account with you. You need to talk to your bank about setting up a merchant services facility to allow you to take payment by debit and credit card at the show (the Fine Art Trade Guild offer members a scheme with excellent terms).

Publicity

Your pre-show publicity campaign should start around four months in advance. The Centre for Exhibition Research says that pre-show promotions increase the likelihood of stand traffic by 33 per cent. They also state that 76 per cent of buyers arrive with a fixed agenda, so make sure that you are on it.

You have a head start if buyers have seen your products before even going to the exhibition. Be sure to take advantage of all pre-show publicity that the organisers offer.

'The most important step an exhibitor can make when committing to a show is to get involved,' says Eric Smith, CEO of Artexpo. 'Send the organiser announcements and press releases; the number one reason buyers visit trade shows is to see new products, so shout about these and your show specials.

Create a special event at the show and have the organiser use it in their marketing campaign. First time exhibitors often fall into the trap of becoming overwhelmed with tasks such as laying out their booth, planning what products to take, shipping, insurance and the operational details of a show. These are important, and should not be overlooked, but don't forget to focus on the reason you're there: to meet new customers. Ask the organiser for last year's attendee list and let them know about your new products.'

Send invitations to customers and prospects and publicise special offers and new products well in advance. The Centre for Exhibition Research states that personal invitations are the greatest influencer in whether buyers attend a show. Find out if the organisers have a list of pre-registered buyers who you can contact by post or email.

Find out whether there's a charge for inclusion in the show catalogue and website and make sure you meet the deadline. Ask the organisers who handles their PR and find out which publications and websites are doing show previews.

Not only is pre-show publicity essential, it is often free. Emailing a few images and product information need only take a few minutes.

Displays and graphics

Graphics should be kept simple and eye-catching; you have between three and five seconds to grab people's attention and visitors won't stand and read lengthy explanations. When designing your graphics, bear in mind that visitors are looking for something different, innovative and inspiring and that your visitor communication starts 20' from your stand.

Make sure that you stand looks different for each show, so people don't walk past thinking 'I saw that last time'. Don't presume that people know what your company does from reading your name; make sure you spell it out in words or pictures.

Your graphics should give the benefits of your products and services, not their main features. Say why people should buy from you, then give them your 'justification' for this claim when you have drawn them onto the stand. Don't give lots of technical detail on your graphics, save that for sales literature.

There are ingenious banners available that fold down into portable suitcases, which keeps freight costs down. These are also self-supporting so are quickly opened out and mean you don't have to think about hanging systems.

Don't overcrowd your stand with products and information, as this confuses the eye and puts people off. Co-ordinated displays achieve better results than products stacked floor to ceiling. Plan where each picture or display is to go in advance; exhibitors have a tendency to take too much stock to shows, which is a waste of time. Unframed images in browsers look neat, save space and allow you to show a wide range.

Promotions and information

Prospective customers need something to take away with them, to encourage them to look at your website and get in touch in future. However, it is important that staff don't thrust sales literature at customers instead of talking, as face-to-face conversation is far more effective and a vast amount of literature that people collect at shows ends up in the bin.

It is better to capture visitors' details, then send the 'hot prospects' a catalogue later; just have a lightweight flier or postcard so that no one leaves your stand empty handed. People should appreciate the offer of a catalogue in the post, as they tend to stagger away from shows

with bags full of paper. Leaving expensive catalogues lying around for anyone to take is a waste of money too.

Firms with big ranges sometimes give CDs to visitors, which have the advantage of being lightweight and containing a lot of information. The down side is that there is a danger that these are not looked at.

Special show offers work, especially when publicised in advance. Offers entice people to part with their money there and then. Free gifts can work, and are more likely to be kept than sales literature. These don't need to be samples of product, so long as they reflect your values and are useful, such as memory

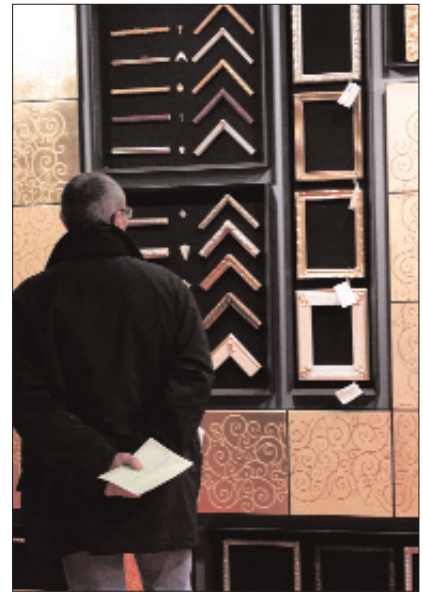


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Top: Artists can be the best salespeople for their own work; here Nadeem interacts with buyers on the Washington Green stand
Below: A customer examines products on the LION Picture Framing Supplies stand
Both images from Spring Fair International





Left:
A salesperson on the Designline Systems stand at Spring Fair International discusses digital printing with a customer
Right:
Examining frame finishes at Quadrum SACA

→ sticks or tape measures. Whatever you choose, make sure that it is clearly branded and includes your web address.

Demonstrations encourage people to stop and look and can be more effective than a sales spiel or brochure. Artists painting at the easel and practical framing demonstrations all make your stand prominent, but check with the organisers that the type of demonstration you have in mind is allowed at the show. If you haven't got the space or staff for a demonstration, videos and slide shows can stop people in their tracks.

Hospitality is of course a draw, as everyone likes a free drink. The offer of sweets, fruit or cool water can make people feel positively about you, if you haven't got space for anything more lavish.

Staff

Eric Smith, CEO of Artexpo, says that you should start educating your sales people four months before the show. 'They should be involved in your plans for the show and should be chatting it up and creating a buzz.'

It is essential that staff understand your main objectives and priorities. They also need to be able to find everything quickly and operate equipment such as the credit and debit card machine; valuable face-to-face client time will be lost if they dither.

Staff shouldn't pounce on visitors, but they certainly shouldn't be looking bored. Strike a balance. Enthusiasm is infectious...as are doubt, boredom and lack of interest. Try to give the impression that nothing is too much



It takes an average of 3.6 personal sales calls to close a sale, but this diminishes to 1.4 calls after an exhibition. Try to get in touch within a week, or two weeks at the most



trouble. If you are hospitable and friendly it makes it that little bit harder for people to leave without buying.

Try to greet everyone who visits the stand and ask open questions that require more than a yes/no answer. Everyone is flattered to be asked their opinion. It is easier to sell more to existing clients than to cultivate new ones, so encourage staff to make sure that customers feel good.

Artists can be the best salespeople of their own work. They can make a buyer feel special in a way that no one else can. A hand-drawn cartouche in the margin of a print, or a dedication, can clinch a sale. Everyone likes something for nothing, and if you can achieve this by 'the personal touch' it is better for your bottom line than offering a discount.

At busy times you may not be able to take a business card from everyone who visits, though capturing this information is top priority. Encourage people to leave their card by entering them into a prize draw. Leave a visitors' book for people who have run out of cards. Where possible, make notes about people's areas

of interest on the back of their card, to help you target your follow-up contact. Print out 'enquiry forms' that make it easy for staff to record details. Some exhibitors have a grading system for visitors when time is short, so they write 'L' for longshot or 'H' for hot prospect.

Follow-up

Follow up leads as soon as possible, as they start to go 'cold' very quickly. Try to get in touch with potential customers within a week of the show ending, or two weeks at the most. The Centre for Exhibition Research states that it takes an average of 3.6 personal sales calls to close a sale, but that this diminishes to 1.4 calls after an exhibition.

You can't measure the success of a show by the number of orders taken at the event, you have to look at business in the months after the show. And the harder you work at following up your sales leads, the more business you will generate. It is essential that your staff understand that they must prioritise following-up leads after the show.

Should you do the show again next year? Well, exhibition professionals consider that a good show should generate ten times more business revenue than it cost to do. However, you should not expect this level of business immediately and it might take three years to achieve this kind of turnover. ●