

How to Get the Most out of Your Exhibit Staff

What Price Professionalism?

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Memorability. It's what all exhibitors want when the show's over and the aisle carpet is rolled up. We want the attendees to remember us...our brand, our message, and our product. Our exhibit looked great, our signage was top-notch, and our staff was...well, our staff. Same folks, different show -- and the same bad habits of talking on their cell phone, hanging in groups talking about last night's party and spending too much time with non-qualified prospects.

As exhibit managers, we often don't control the selection of our exhibit staff.

So what can we do to improve our staff's performance? Simple answer: train them.

Since the memorability of your exhibit is directly tied to attendees' face-to-face contact with our staff, shouldn't we be concentrating, or at least putting as much budget and effort into our staff's performance, as we do our exhibit design or new show signage? Sadly, this doesn't usually happen and the visitor is the one who pays the ultimate price – a less than favorable experience with our staff.

Somehow show logistics hog our time and resources, and when it comes to staff training, it gets buried in a pile of undone "to-do's". But *nothing* pays off as well as a well-trained staff!

Does your staff really need exhibit staff training? The problem with staffing an exhibit is that none of us do this every day and we get rusty at even the most basic "boothmanship". Our staff needs to understand why selling on the trade show floor is different than an office sales call. They need to be comfortable quickly greeting, engaging and qualifying your visitors; giving a demo; cross-selling; gathering lead information and thanking and dismissing visitors. Depending on their experience as exhibit staff, they need at least a review if not a full-blown session to cover these unconventional and demanding skills.

How do you get them to attend the staff training? Having management's strong support behind staff training, an executive opening the staff training meeting, and lots of good food always help. Give out pre-packaged "survival kits" -- breath mints, foam insoles, granola bars – that your staff can use at a show. Doing advance PR on the new skills they'll learn and giving lots of advance notice of the exact timeframe of the training helps to get your staff there, too. And, if all else fails, hold out on distributing their show shirts and badges until the pre-show exhibit staff meeting!

Who will train your exhibit staff? If you're known as your company's "Booth Nazi" who's constantly harping, threatening and giving ultimatums to your staff, they're automatically going to tune out just about everything you say. Based on their perceived level of credibility of

your expertise in staff training, and your level of comfort in speaking to groups, you might not want to tackle it alone.

There are a number of seasoned industry veterans who specialize in exhibit staff training. Interview them, find out about their style of training (all-business, humorous, or flexible based on your staff and corporate culture), what services they offer (basic exhibit staff training, sales training, booth etiquette, role playing exercises, presenter training, at-show in-booth coaching), how much they are willing to customize to your staff's needs, the length of training time, handout materials, and what fees they charge for training.

Don't let a \$5,000 fee stop your training efforts. Consider it a long-term investment in corporate branding and goodwill, as your staff will look much more polished to your visitors and will engage more prospects efficiently in a shorter period of time. It's hard to put a price on professionalism, but compared to travel costs, the hourly cost per staff person to attend, or the value of the additional leads garnered and sales made, staff training is a great value. And if you don't have the budget this year, allocate money in future budgets if you want to hire a pro.

What do you need to cover in an exhibit staff training session? As the exhibit manager, you'll need to start with a show-specific orientation to your exhibit, its layout, strategy, goals and objectives, key messages, product review, promotions, presentations and demos, and housekeeping details. The actual exhibit staff training, whether you present it or hire a professional trainer, should cover:

- **What makes trade show interaction different?** With the sensory overload at a trade show, interaction with the fluctuating flow of attendees presents many challenges to rookie staff members. With time as your biggest competitor, conversations need to be brief and concise – no more than 5 minutes. To increase your staff's performance exponentially, teach them group dynamics to interface with groups of attendees at the same time.

- **Their "host" role.** Review your staff's individual roles in the booth. Let them know that attendees' positive memory of their exhibit experience hinges *most* on staff interaction. Let them know that they're being "graded" by show attendees on a number of criteria: enthusiasm, friendliness, company and product knowledge, listening and consultative selling skills and overall professionalism. Remind your staff that their role of company ambassador is a 24-hour-a-day job while at the show.

- **Prepare them to put your company's best foot forward with a great elevator speech.** Many attendees won't have any knowledge of your company and services. Help your staff by composing a 30-second elevator speech that states some irrefutable facts about your company, mentions some well-known clients, lists a few of the best features/benefits of working with your organization, and ends with a question or call to action for the visitor to respond about their needs.

- **Help your staff with consistent answers to tough questions.** If your organization or industry has had any recent "skeletons in the closet" that attendees may bring up, have your PR people prepare standard answers with a positive spin.

- **Handling the press, industry analysts, VIP's, international prospects, key accounts and satisfied current clients.** Be sure everyone working your booth knows who on your staff will handle inquiries by different types of visitors and can recognize their color-coded badges.

- **Teach them how to dismiss or relocate angry customers, competitors, unqualified prospects, and booth beggars.** Be sure to touch on your company's policy for handling less positive situations. For most exhibit staff, it isn't inherently comfortable to ask attendees to "go away" when they've determined that potential prospect is just a suspect or to handle irate customers. Set a policy on handling snooping competitors.

- **Train your staff to consistently structure each 3- 5 minute attendee interaction.** Each engagement with an attendee is comprised of the following:
Greeting and engaging. It starts with eye contact, a handshake, and an ice breaking statement
Elevator speech. If the visitor doesn't know about your company, offer your 30-second elevator speech.
Qualifying questions. Have 3-4 open-ended qualifying questions to probe for the attendees' needs, problems, role in the purchasing process, timeframe to purchase and budget.
Brief, focused presentations. Make sure your staff is prepared to demonstrate your product, or knows which demo staff are available.
Completion of lead information. Regardless of the system you use to gather data on your prospects, make sure your exhibit staff understands the process and record accurate, complete information in writing.

Candace Adams, CTSM, CME, CEM, CMM, CMP, (a.k.a. "The Booth Mom") is passionate about helping corporate exhibitors increase their show results while cutting exhibiting costs. She is an independent exhibit management consultant, "Rent-A-Booth-Mom", exhibit staff trainer, trade show manager, industry speaker and writer. Candy was recently named by Tradeshow Week as one of the "Top 25 Most Influential Women to Know". Reach her for more information at CandyAdams@BoothMom.com or www.BoothMom.com.