Time's wasting: Follow up fast after trade show

In the last two articles we went through the preparation and execution of a major international trade show. We now come to the most crucial part, the follow-up. Too many companies spend time and money on having a successful trade show and then drop the ball on the follow-up.

At the end of the trade show, if it was worked properly, everyone involved is experiencing a mix of feelings – exhaustion, exhilaration, satisfaction and/or frustration. The last thing we want to do is get back to the routine.

But the routine is calling.

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Following up on contacts should be pre-planned, pre-budgeted

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You have been out of the office for a week or so. What has happened? The work you are normally there to do has been piling up. There are emergencies to take care of. Personal obligations are also demanding attention. You are inundated with work.

So what happens to the follow-up of the trade show?

It is put off until you have a chance to catch up. And after two or three weeks of catching up, the memories have faded and the timeliness of a contact has passed. You have wasted much of the trade show effort.

As a salesperson or sales manager you have to have a plan before the trade show begins on how you will execute the follow up.

You must allocate time immediately after the trade show to follow-up with the contacts you made. Hopefully, you have categorized them into priorities so you can take care of the hottest and best leads first.

If need be, get some help.

There are probably chores such as database entry and mailings that can be done by someone else. You might have to hire a temp or bring in a student intern to help with the follow-up chores. Build these extras into the cost of the trade show. This follow-up is crucial to its success.

After the trade show, you should make contact with the best leads right away.

Continue interviewing and qualifying them in a more detailed way than you could during the hustle and bustle of the trade show floor. Get quotations out if they were requested. Set up meetings if this is practical, or involve your local agent or distributor in the process.

The door is open now for developing a business relationship, but it closes more each day that the contact is put off.

For the leads that were qualified at the trade show, but which do not warrant a call or visit right away, get something in the mail or by email to them right away. Move while the memory is still fresh. If you have local agents or distributors, alert them to these leads.

The trade show "tourists" that you disqualified can now be discarded. You do not have time for these. Spend your time on real-live prospects.

If you had a gimmick like a business-card raffle, now is the time to make use of it. This method is one of the most used and most effective methods of gaining new prospects at a trade show. Basically, you draw people into the booth by offering a prize for a business card that will be drawn at random from a receptacle used to collect the cards. The best is some sort of a fish bowl that allows the cards to be seen.

Once again, the people manning the booth have to be trained in how to use this gimmick to the best advantage.

The time when the prospect comes into the booth to deposit the card into the fish bowl is the only chance you may have to qualify or disqualify. The personnel must be trained and should attempt to qualify every card that is deposited.

The best method to do this is to make some notes on the back of the card before it is thrown in. Another method is to get a second card to be retained and put notes on it.

The prize should be something desirable, but not too expensive. It should be something that can be delivered by hand. If possible, it should be a product you produce or distribute, or something pertinent to your business.

I worked with a computer manufacturer once in preparing for a trade show and we settled on a good quality video board. This fits all of the above prerequisites.

In the global marketplace, we also have to think about shipping costs, importation problems and such that could restrict our ability to deliver the prize. Perhaps the prize would have to be delivered by a distributor or agent, or on your next trip.

Now comes the question of who gets the prize.

Unfortunately, a random drawing is, by definition, random. I have known some companies who pick a well-qualified prospect to win the prize. You have to have a very low ethics threshold in your company if you resort to this, but many companies are not concerned with ethical issues.

I find this to be unfortunate. A lack of ethics will usually come back to haunt you eventually.

If you follow the guidelines of the perfect prize - good quality, desirable, not too expensive, pertinent and portable - then you have a good alternative.

Build your budget for more than one prize. You can then draw a winner randomly, fulfilling your ethical obligation, and then select other "winners" to receive the prize, also. Some of you may find this also to be unethical. If so, do not use this tactic. Everyone's ethical threshold is different.

Now, with prizes in hand, you have a good reason for getting a face-to-face meeting with the prospect - to deliver his prize. If his or her gatekeeper tries to block you, you have a good retort.

The winner has to receive and sign for the prize personally. The winner has to sign a receipt stating that the gift is a prize from a raffle and in no way incurs any obligation for future business.

Explain that this is an ethics requirement of your company. (Are we close to anyone's threshold, here?)

The follow-up to the trade show must be pre-planned and budgeted. Do not get sidetracked by the work that has built up in you absence. Have a plan in place on how to take care of this. Do not waste the time and money spent on the trade show by not having a good follow-up plan.

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