

How to get more from your exhibit

Jess Wolodkowicz from The Exhibit Company shares her foolproof guide to getting the most out of your exhibit stand.



Jess Wolodkowicz

Do you want to get more out of exhibitions but have no idea where to start? Strap yourselves in and read this article. Let's dive into the nitty gritty that you need to be doing to get more cut through at each stage of a show.

Part 1: Pre-show

We have all heard that exhibitions are an important channel because they facilitate handshakes and give customers the opportunity to engage with your brand. I agree with this whole-heartedly as the type of interactions that take place on the show floor are rarely possible through any other marketing means.

What does make me sad, and frankly a little annoyed, is when I see some exhibitors with a great message to share decide that they just don't work because they haven't experienced great results themselves. There is plenty that people can do to shake things up; they just need to forget 'the done way'.

So what does the modern visitor look for?

As the digital world evolves around us, we are changing the way that we do business. Visitor expectations have also adapted to meet these changes and, unless exhibitors make a conscious effort to keep up, they will experience what I call the wallflower effect and join the others whinging that 'exhibitions aren't what they used to be'. They certainly aren't and that's a good thing.

Gone are the days where a visitor would dedicate the whole day at the show to stop at every booth and listen to every offer. The modern visitor is time poor and will pick their destination stands in the lead up to the show

Most won't allocate more than a couple of hours to walk the halls so after their 'must see' stands they will continue along at 5km/hr looking left and right

to see what's new. This is a make or break moment for most and without something stopping them in their tracks, you guessed it – they keep on walking.

With the onslaught of handheld devices and personalised marketing, it's easier than ever for us to get answers. Instantly. What you may be surprised to know is that Deloitte report 'two-thirds of customers use a digital device before their shopping trip'. Results in the B2B markets are similar. According to Sirius Decisions, '67 per cent of the buyer's journey is complete before a buyer even reaches out to a salesperson'.

Every business expects solid returns in exchange for any investment, but unless they have a sound exhibit strategy to combat the changing expectations of visitors, they won't reap the rewards.

So, what to do?

Don't rely on the organisers to drum up a crowd – take matters into your own hands and pull people to your booth by sharing show offers, benefits, show floorplan and why it's imperative they make it to the show.

Create a pre-show, during and post show strategy designed to engage your audience and ensure it is aligned with your key objective for the show.

So what does it all mean?

Showing up isn't good enough anymore. You have to create a real exhibition strategy to partner with your event calendar. Setting goals and targets is the only way you will be able to milk each show for all it's worth. The Info Salons planning commenced in November for a February show and was highly focused on the visitor experience.

I'm not for one moment suggesting exhibitions will stop working, only that the people attending shows and conferences aren't necessarily seeing you for the first time and if they are, you need to create a compelling reason for them to stop.

Part 2: During

The stand is complete and you're ready to roll. What's left to do now the doors of the show have opened? Heaps! Read on.

It's true that the majority of any exhibitor's strategy will take place prior to the show even starting, but there is still a lot you can do on show day to make sure you get the best response. Staffing is a biggie. Bigger than big – it's the single most memorable thing in the eyes of the visitor.

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The heart of any campaign we work on with our clients is the outcome they aspire/want to achieve. Our system works, but you still need the vision to make sure you are driving in the right direction.

You need to know what you want or you will miss out.

A new business or product may set their sights on spreading their message to as many people as humanly as possible. An exhibition is the perfect place for this but the strategy needs to match and obstacles such as people who stop to have a chat might impede your capacity.

In this instance, where brand awareness is high on the agenda, the exhibit needs to be simplified with a single key message and a call to action that is fairly straight-forward and obvious to all who are passing. The aim of the game is to get someone to acknowledge your brand, interact with it, capture their details and then move them along. (Sorry, but this doesn't include a fish bowl for business cards).

This type of approach works so well because it's a clear, obvious path for the visitor. You need to make it really easy for them because there are so many other things going on. The single biggest mistake we see on the show floor is businesses

Examples of pre-and during show collateral



The 5 things you need to consider

1. Why are you attending the show? Brand awareness, leads, sell product, new to market? Get clear on this because it will impact everything you do from design, staff training, interactives – everything!
2. Think of each event like a product launch. How can you create a campaign out of your attendance? Generate excitement in the lead up to the show and if possible allow for multiple touch points setting the expectation with a call to action so your visitor adds you to their 'must see' list.
3. Get the team on board. You need to be dedicated to the whole process, not just show day.
4. What's your key message? Even if you're brand is a household name that will bring in crowds regardless, the quality of your visitor will greatly improve if your key product offering, feature or benefit speaks directly to your audience. For smaller businesses this is the most important bit of advice I can give you. If you can't contact people in the lead up to the show because you're new to the market, what would you say to a new client? This is what you have to represent visually so they can see it walking by.
5. Pre-show marketing: Make this a must. Start at least two months before the show so you can get in front of your market a few times. Most people have the best intentions of showing up, but life gets in the way. Make your theme/brand recognisable because it's human nature to look for patterns so it will start to look familiar.



An example of pre-show collateral

trying to be all things to all people. They want to display everything and their message gets diluted. It becomes too hard for the visitor to digest, so they walk on by.

Gone are the days where people would spend a whole day at a show, stopping at every booth and listening to every offer. This thing called the Internet showed up and quickly became the vehicle we turn to for answers. By simply reaching into our pockets, Google delivers us instant answers. The process has eliminated the need to make a note for later.

This change has impacted our expectations (along with our patience). Brand engagement software, Marketo, point out that 'in a society where people see about 3000 messages every day, consumers are learning to tune them out. Of the 3000, a person will remember — by the end of the day — an average of four'. With this in mind, the challenge is to be one of those four.

It's natural for a visitor at a show to skim the aisles to see what speaks to them or connects with them. That's why engagement is such a hot topic in marketing today. The more automated everything becomes, the more personalisation we crave. The sad fact is that you might have a brilliant product with a delivery that just doesn't meet those expectations. We are all now trained to sideline it into the 'too hard basket' if we can't quickly determine its benefit to us.

The terms User Experience (UX) and Brand Engagement are trending for good reason.

Sophisticated marketers understand that personalising communications helps people relate to a brand as an individual. It's one of the most effective ways to connect with people and why exhibitions can work so well. Funnily, it's also why some think they don't work — they don't make it an experience the visitor values enough so the exercise is a flop.

When asked what they remembered most about a show, visitors said it was the people (not the gimmicks, the designs or the giveaways). This only further confirms the need we have to be treated like individuals not numbers or leads.

So how do you get on a visitor's 'memorable four' list?

It's essential that the interactives and brand engagement strategies you select for a show relate to your brand and help with achieving your objectives. We've all seen the games and food giveaways, but for real impact you need something that moves you towards a clear goal. For most this will be customer profiling or more leads/sales, but never underestimate the power of a staffing game plan.

Themes can be difficult in any business, let alone big corporates with strict guidelines, but there is a lot to gain from pushing the envelope. Doing what's expected is, well, expected. Exhibitors are faced with a huge challenge to stand out and without alarming people, a theme or experience is a great way to pique interest and hold the attention of a visitor. ■

Stand rules

The engagement factor is a huge part in the success of your show, but the second biggest opportunity lies with your staff:

Team strengths – Play to their strengths. Put chatty people up the front and product experts at the back for detailed discussions.

Game plan – Make sure everyone has a role and takes responsibility for it.

Make it snappy – Given the ratio of visitors to your staff, you need to ensure your team isn't talking to people they already know for an excessive amount of time (easily done if they aren't comfortable with their role). If they talk to each person for 20 minutes, they are maxed out at three per hour.

Stand rules – We all know the basics (don't eat on the stand, don't answer the phone, etc.) but it's worthwhile to gain clarity around your own stand rules. I recommend creating a roster so staff get breaks for personal time as well as checking emails/calls or seeing the show themselves) so they are 100 per cent focused when manning the stand.

Sales training – While obvious for some, many people struggle with reading body language or telltale signs that show someone is keen to talk further. At the very least bringing this to the attention of your team makes it top of mind for show day and ensures visitors feel serviced.