

ULTIMATE GUIDE TO TRADE SHOW PLANNING

THINKING AHEAD TO SAVE BIG



For a small business owner, attending a trade show as an exhibitor can be an invaluable experience. You can show off your product to hundreds of new potential clients (and potentially sell to them), learn about other current trends in your industry, see what your competitors are doing, and strengthen the business connections that you already have.

However, this exposure does come at a price; from booth space to shipping, trade show expenses can really rack up if you're not careful. The good news is, like any major type of event, planning and foresight can help business owners save a significant amount of money on trade show costs. The longer that you have to plan and prepare for a trade show, the better the chances that you'll be able to save money in the process.

With that in mind, it's important to give yourself as much advance time as possible to plan a budget, take advantage of early bird discounts, and allow yourself some extra padding for costs that may spring up unannounced. The goal is always to give your business the best chance to be profitable while ensuring the trade show is a marketing success. While the cost of trade shows can be somewhat high, there are ways to be economical.

Instead of viewing a trade show as a seemingly never-ending series of one-off costs, look at it as an investment- an investment in yourself, your small business, and your product. This investment will pay off in the long run, if you spend wisely.

This guide will help you prepare for a successful trade show on a budget by outlining how to plan and budget for the trade show (including shipping logistics); how to utilize social media before, during, and after the trade show; and how to get people to your booth with exciting giveaways that won't break your bank.

Ready? Let's begin.

PART ONE: PLANNING YOUR BUDGET

Successfully participating in an industry trade show can take months of planning. When you first start to think about budget, the multitude of expenses can seem overwhelming- but don't panic. As long as you plan ahead of time, it's completely possible to exhibit on a budget.

Early planning can have a multitude of benefits beyond just the registration for the event. It pays to reserve booth space, airline tickets, lodging, and other costs long before the big event. If you wait until the last possible minute for planning, these items will probably be more expensive- costs that could have easily been lowered with a little bit of planning.

Similarly, if you plan far in advance, you have more flexibility in negotiating costs. Some trade shows offer early bird discounts for registering your booth far in advance; even if they don't, you may be able to negotiate a lower rate per square foot of space. Even a few dollars a square foot can end up making a difference as the budget adds up, and you can put that saved money towards other parts of your trade show budget (like giveaways and interactive elements, which we'll discuss in Part Three).

YOUR EARLY BIRD TRADE SHOW CHECKLIST

Getting an early start is
the key to serious savings



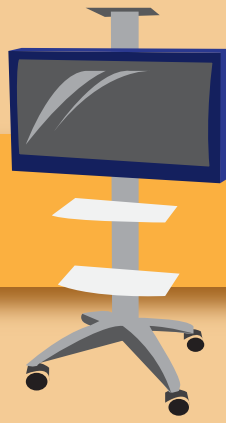
BOOKING



Check for early bird discounts on booth space

Negotiate your rate

Book travel and lodging early



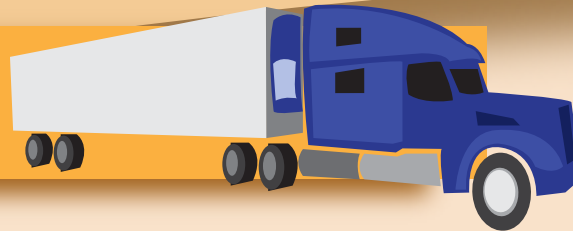
MARKETING

Look for bulk-ordering discounts

Repurpose blog or social media posts

Get multiple A/V quotes and book early

LOGISTICS



Use a lightweight display to save on shipping & drayage

Ship to an advanced warehouse

Factor in utilities like carpet, electrical and Wi-Fi

SET YOUR BUDGET

At its most basic, your trade show budget should include the following: booth space, drayage and material handling, electric, lead retrieval machine, shipping, carpet, marketing (handouts, etc.), air tickets, lodging, and meal and entertainment costs. Add in a little extra padding for unforeseen costs.

MARKETING EXPENSES

One of the first things you should decide is what you want to give away at the trade show. Trade shows are a great place for promotional product giveaways that add value to your business and brand. To attract attention to your booth, have something that will help your business stand out and that will be useful to your potential customer. We'll go into more detail on this during Part Three.

TIP



When you order promotional products, look for discounts for ordering in bulk.

When it comes to your business's written marketing materials, you may not need to have something written from scratch. If you are looking to produce a brochure, you could take your most popular Facebook posts or Tweets, and repurpose them for your trade show customers. Or, you can go completely digital to save costs on printing and shipping materials, an option which also allows you to "go green." This strategy may also make your materials easier for your attendees to hold on to for reference. Trade show attendees may lose your brochure, but they'll always be able to access your documents online.

If you are looking to distribute something with a little more detail and depth, you can create flyers with repurposed blog posts. This gives previously published marketing materials a second life and a fresh audience. This strategy also has the added benefit of saving the time you would have spent writing new copy for the brochures & flyers, or the money to hire a professional copywriter.

LAST MINUTE SHIPPING EXPENSES

Sure, it can be tempting to make last minute additions as you plan your trade show. However, keep in mind that the extra promotional products and brochures can make a difference in the shipping estimate and the actual shipping cost. Overnight or expedited shipping can also have a significant impact on the cost. Make sure to leave plenty of time in order to ship your trade show displays without the added charge.

INSTALLATION AND DISMANTLING EXPENSES

Installation and dismantling is another one of those hidden costs that can eventually sneak up on your budget. It is an important factor that should be well-researched. Going with the more affordable installation cost can impact the way that your trade show display is seen by attendees. Sometimes these services can be bundled, but make sure that you use a reputable company. It is important that businesses trust any third party handling their trade show display.

Although budgeting for a trade show can be stressful, by planning ahead, you'll have plenty of time to find the best deals and strategies for your small business.

Trade shows are a significant investment of both time and money. It's important to understand what kind of marketing is needed in order to build momentum, so that you can improve the impact of your trade show. And luckily, some of the best marketing promotions you can use at trade shows come at absolutely no cost. We're talking, of course, about social media. Our next section will help you leverage this free form of advertising before, during, and after the trade show.

PART TWO: SOCIAL MEDIA

No matter what industry you're in, chances are your customers are probably already spending time on social media. Your business should already have a social media presence, so take advantage of that to generate interest without paying for marketing or PR materials.

YOUR GUIDE TO SOCIAL MEDIA SUCCESS AT TRADE SHOWS



BEFORE THE SHOW: LISTEN, SHARE, AND PARTICIPATE



1. Create Google alerts for the trade show



2. Share tradeshow info on your social platforms



3. Engage with customers and influencers

DURING THE SHOW: LEVERAGE YOUR SOCIAL PLATFORMS

4. Create a custom hashtag for the trade show



5. Use giveaways to encourage conversation



6. Put social handles on your print collateral



BEFORE THE EVENT

Create a Google alert for the trade show, and monitor any blogs or news that come out regarding your upcoming event. Whenever you see something that would be of interest to your customers, make sure and share it across your social platforms. Actively participate in any comments and conversation taking place online regarding the event. This is a great way to place your business in front of a larger, more public audience.

But don't stop there! You can also promote the trade show before the event begins. For example, on Facebook, you can create an Event for the trade show, including date, time, and location, and invite people who like your Facebook page to attend the event. The more you spread the word before the event, the bigger your crowds will be on the day of.

Social media is also a powerful networking tool. Through these Google alerts, you should start to learn who the bloggers and journalists are that write for the industry publications that you (and your potential clients) read. Once you've identified these people, you can reach out and see if any intend to cover your next trade show or corporate event. This is a chance to kill two birds with one stone: gain more online media coverage AND, as a result, have something great to post on your social media channels.

As you unfold your social media strategy for promoting your trade show, make sure you're including YouTube in your planning. It's the world's second largest search engine, and people are searching for just about anything. Are you a video newbie? No problem! You don't need to spend thousands of dollars on a professional advertising video. A 30-second clip shot with your smart phone or tablet telling prospective attendees what they can expect when they stop by your booth will do just fine.

DURING THE EVENT

Your business's Facebook, Twitter, Google+, and LinkedIn profiles are the perfect places to start the process of getting the word out about the show, generating interest, and gauging what your audience is interested in seeing from your business at the trade show.

Businesses can use Twitter and Facebook to establish a hashtag for the trade show. The hashtag allows your customers to have a conversation about your business and the trade show, multiplying the reach your booth has. Use a hashtag activation to encourage visitors to tweet about your booth experience. If there is a general trade show hashtag already in place, tweet with that hashtag as well as your business's specific hashtag to reach an even wider audience. You can also take photos during the event of your booth and guests, and tag those in the picture using their handles and your hashtag to increase visibility.

You can further encourage activity through contests, giveaways, and discounts, offering incentive to customers who tweet about your brand. If you collect your attendees' social media information, you can also give them a simple 'thank you' for visiting your booth through a personalized tweet or Facebook post. This can be a great way to continue the conversation after they have left your booth and possibly generate a bit more exposure for your company at the same time.

TIP



Make sure to include your social media handles and blog name on all promotional materials so that interested customers can become followers after the trade show.

AFTER THE TRADE SHOW

You may think your work is over once the trade show ends and the last bit of your display is packed up and ready to ship- but that's not the case. With social media, it's easier than ever to follow up with potential leads and turn them into clients.

Facebook and Twitter offer great ways to stay in touch with trade show attendees and make your presence known at the show without spending anything in your advertising budget. The only investment is time. You can "follow" those who used your hashtag on Twitter and Facebook in order to stay in touch. You can also use your hashtags to identify people who stopped by your booth and follow up with them. Ask questions like, "What was your favorite part of the trade show?" to gauge what resonated with the audience and help you plan for the future.

Also, if you collected business cards at your booth, make sure to connect with these people on LinkedIn. Once you're connected, you can research them as leads and find ways your product could benefit them as conversation starters. Using social media after a trade show is smart way to stay in touch with potential leads, rather than letting them slip away.

While social media can generate buzz around your booth, you still need other ways to ensure that people will want to stop by your booth. Attractive custom displays and enticing giveaways can accomplish this, but costs can be astronomical. Our next section will help you attract people to your booth through displays and giveaways- while keeping your budget intact.

PART THREE: GETTING PEOPLE TO YOUR BOOTH

As you plan your small business's trade show appearance, it's important to keep in mind that like any other type of marketing, there needs to be a return on investment to make the whole process worthwhile. So, as you determine your business's trade show needs, keep in mind that in the end, you need to turn a profit. This helps focus your trade show strategy as more than just the bells and whistles of your display- there needs to be a firm strategy in place for attracting people to the booth and hooking them as customers.

The social media aspect discussed in Part Three of the series is a good start to hooking new customers, but there are other aspects that can help draw attendees to your booth as well. Make sure your trade show booth offers attendees an entire experience that will stand out.

PLANNING AHEAD

You're not the only one planning ahead for your trade show. Many attendees are scoping out lists of booths that they plan to hit up before they even walk through the doors. Sounds old-fashioned, but it may still be worth it to send out snail mail postcards (or e-mails) to your contact list, making them aware of the show and offering a sneak peek at what wonders await them, should they decide to attend.

Try taking this strategy one step further- maybe you can have them place that card in a box at your booth for the chance to win something valuable. This gives them an incentive to visit and later check back with your booth. You could also have a special gift for the people who show up with that postcard in hand. You want your potential customers to see the benefits of working with you, and what better way to generate goodwill than by offering them a gift and then following through?

FIRST IMPRESSIONS COUNT

For many people, stopping by your booth will be their first impression of your business. Keep your booth uncluttered and simple so that your signage and products stand out. Your signage should give people an idea of the benefit that your business offers and what they can gain from using your services.

MAKE YOUR BOOTH INTERACTIVE

Like moths to a flame, trade show attendees are drawn to the brightest and shiniest booths. Maybe not completely literally (there aren't any studies regarding whether booths using metallic or matte signage perform better- yet), but an eye catching portable trade show display will naturally draw more foot traffic. If you can give people a unique insight into your business in an entertaining way, you'll have a leg up on the other trade show participants. Remember, the whole goal is to stand out.

Bells, whistles, and air horns aren't completely necessary to achieve this goal; creating that distinct, memorable experience in a crowd can be as simple as conducting product demos with a little personality. Showing people your product and the problem it solves can go a long way in creating a memorable experience for your trade show attendees. Make sure to focus on the product's benefits and how it makes people's lives easier.

Interactive contests can also help generate interest in your booth. For example, you could have people guess the answer to a product-related question, and give the answer at the end of a product demo. This has the benefit of creating anticipation through the product demo phase AND keeping people at your booth for an extended period of time. Make sure that the incentives are strong enough; your business's contests need to keep people hanging around.

As far as technology goes, it's tempting to use the latest and greatest equipment to show how cutting-edge and "hip" your product is. However, before you invest a significant portion of your budget in buying Google Glass for your booth, think long and hard about what your audience will want. Not everybody is up on the latest gadget; if your ideal customer just isn't that into the latest mobile computing craze, it may be a good idea to include hard copies of your literature or a way to participate and engage with your brand without all the gadgets. Remember, communicating with people in a form that they are familiar and comfortable with is important. Keep the focus on what your audience will respond to.

HOST VALUABLE GIVEAWAYS

In this case, "valuable" doesn't necessarily mean "worth a lot of money." A giveaway can be valuable to your audience if it fills a specific need or has a benefit besides being expensive. Get inside your audience's head and consider what would fill a need in their everyday lives or business. Try to choose an original product that will have value to your potential customers and stand out in a unique and exciting way.

The value of promotional items can also be judged on how often a potential customer uses them. Think of all the pens, t-shirts, and bags you've probably held on to over the years. These everyday items may seem a little boring, but if someone keeps your company's pen on his or her desk and uses it every day, the number of people who see that pen (and thus, your company's logo) increases exponentially. These types of promotional items are great as "thank you" tokens, to show your appreciation for customers visiting your booth.

Giveaways and interactive elements will attract people to your trade show booth space, but once they get there, it's your job to sell them on why and how your product will improve their lives. Use promotional methods as a way to start the conversation about your product- and then use facts and benefits to sell it to your customer.

CONCLUSION

At first thought, trade shows can be overwhelming. Planning tricky logistics and spending large amounts of money- is it really worth it for a small business owner?

Without a doubt, yes. The exposure and the opportunity to show off your product to a large audience give trade shows their value. And, with proper planning, you can minimize costs and be prepared for any difficulties that may arise as you set up for the trade show.

And as the saying goes, practice makes perfect. The more often you attend industry trade shows, the better you'll get at budgeting and planning for the events. As you continue to hone your trade show prowess, you'll be able to increase your customer base and your bottom line, making the investments of time and money you put into these trade shows well worth it.

Start making that investment today by identifying the trade shows that would be ideal for your company to attend, and then get cracking with planning! Soon enough, your investment will be returning profits for years to come.

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