

Published: *Rain Today*

Bright Lights, Booth Babes, or Swag: How to Create the Best Conference Exhibit

Part 1 of 2

By Sharon Berman

Demonstrating expertise and industry knowledge by speaking at conferences and trade shows has long been an effective marketing tactic for professionals. Now, savvy professional services firms are recognizing that exhibiting at these events—with or without a speaking engagement—can be a worthwhile marketing tactic in and of itself. However, to be successful, "exhibiting" has to mean more than just putting out firm brochures on a table.

Exhibiting at conferences and trade shows still meets with resistance in quite a few firms, which think of it as unprofessional. But, as with most marketing activities, it's not the tactic that is either professional or unprofessional; it's how it is executed that determines whether it's classy or tacky and, more important, whether the effort brings rewards.

This article is the first in a two-part series of dos and don'ts for exhibiting at conferences and trade shows. It focuses on the initial research to make your investment worthwhile. The second article will delve into setting up a booth with signage, materials, and manpower; "working" the conference; following up on leads; and other marketing strategies.

Why Exhibit?

Exhibiting at a conference or trade show involves an investment of both time and money, with time being the most expensive aspect. So, why bother? A primary reason is the lead generation potential. There are still relatively few professional services firms that host booths, even at events for their target industries. Taking a second look at



these shows presents a valuable opportunity because in today's world it's difficult to find venues not yet infiltrated and saturated by lawyers, CPAs, and other professionals. Even when firms sponsor conferences or provide speakers at these events, their display booths, if any, are often just an afterthought and not leveraged to their full potential.

Look Before You Leap

With today's proliferation of conferences, seminars, and shows, it's important to do your research so you can invest your time and marketing dollars judiciously. A number of key factors come into play as you evaluate venues and prepare for an intelligently targeted exhibit.

Geography: Depending on your firm's target geographic market, it may make sense to limit your exhibiting to regional shows. If you're considering a national conference that may be taking place close to home, research the audience first to avoid marketing to prospects who come from other parts of the country and don't fit your demographic.

Attendees: Find out if the attendees match up with your target client profile. The show may be in the right industry, but are the attendees really the decision makers or influencers you need to reach? What is their managerial level? Are they hands-on technical people, such as engineers, or are they business developers, other professionals, owners, or members of the C-suite?

As part of your research, it may be helpful to ask your clients in target markets about the key shows in their industries. Which ones do they attend? Do they go to the same conferences each year? If they venture out to only one or two conferences a year, what are the not-to-miss events? Also, ask the members of your firm which conferences and trade shows they have attended or presented at and which ones would be worthwhile exhibit venues.

Presenting Organization: Who is the sponsoring organization? Annual trade shows and conferences staged by industry organizations can have a different atmosphere, level of credibility, and attendee population than an event organized by a for-profit conference organizer.

Past Exhibitors: Once you've identified a prospective venue, obtain the exhibitor information package, which can usually be

(continued on back)



Sharon Berman is principal of Berbay Corp., a marketing consulting firm specializing in working with law firms. She can be reached at berman@berbay.com.

How to Create the Best Conference Exhibit *(continued)*

found online. If it contains a list of past years' exhibitors, check what kinds of professional service firms, if any, had booths. What size booths did they select? What about placement within the exhibit hall or room? Inquire with the event organizers if you can talk with past exhibitors about their experience, or at least find out for how many consecutive years they have exhibited.

Location, Location, Location: It's critical to find out how the event organizers drive visitors to the booths. Is the booth area open only at certain times? Are the booths located in an area that is separate from the meeting rooms? If so, is there a reason for the attendees to make the trek to the exhibit area? Do the meetings and presentations continue on all day and evening with no breaks for people to visit exhibits? Although you can devise clever ways to encourage conference attendees to stop by your booth, your effort may be fruitless if the event planners have put the booths in the boonies.

What Makes a Magnetic Booth?

To make the most of your up-front investment, your booth should be designed to showcase your firm's knowledge and expertise in a classy and attention-getting way. If you're not launching your exhibiting program immediately, take some time to attend conferences so you can gather ideas on how others display their wares. When you create your graphics and message, you'll be able to provide better direction if you have paid attention to specifics, such as:

Displays that attract attention. It may not be the booths with the flashing lights that turn your head, but the selective use of color or an attention-grabbing graphic.

The clarity of the message. Can you immediately understand what the exhibitor's firm

does? You may have found yourself standing in front of some expensive-looking booths where it took an effort to realize what they were actually selling. Pay attention to booths that make their services immediately understandable and how they do it.

Factors that attract people to one booth over another. Is it the giveaways, the location, or an intriguing display?

It's All In the Details

Let's say you've talked with clients and others who know your target markets. You've also developed a list of possible conferences and shows that attract the type of client you want. You can now compare different venues on your list by taking a close look at what your exhibit fee buys you. A myriad of details are associated with exhibiting, both in terms of the physical space and the promotional opportunities.

Be aware that the items included in your booth package will vary from one venue to another. Sometimes, your fee simply buys you the exhibit space and a table, and you pay for everything else—from the electrical outlet to the small trashcan, to the carpeting in your booth. If there is a table, find out what size you are entitled to. Does it include a tablecloth? How many chairs are provided? Is an electrical outlet available and included, or does it cost extra? Will your space have carpeting, or is that in addition to the booth rental? How many people are allowed to staff your booth?

Your booth location will impact your results as well as your budget. Booths in the front of a hall or along the main aisles usually cost more than other spaces. Last year's exhibitors often get first pick of location for the following year and, depending on how close you register to the conference date,

your choices may be limited. However, you can still be very successful even if your location is not ideal.

When it comes to promotional opportunities, make sure you take full advantage of listings, ads, and firm descriptions you can place in the program book and any marketing materials the conference organizer distributes to attendees. Upgrade as necessary to increase your visibility, but expect to pay extra. Find out if you will receive conference passes for firm members or to give to clients.

Another consideration is whether the venue is a "union shop." Many large convention centers require union employees do all of the labor necessary to bring in your materials and deliver them back to the loading dock after the show. For example, you may be allowed to carry in only one load of what you can hold in your arms and have to pay extra to have the rest transported by union members. It's important to be aware of such added expenses so you can incorporate them into your budget.

Practice Makes Perfect

If you haven't seriously considered exhibiting before, it may be a tactic to add to your marketing arsenal. Remember that any tactic is most successful when it is seamlessly integrated into a firm's overall marketing strategy and viewed as a long-term investment. Although getting started with exhibiting takes a bit of effort, once it becomes routine for your professionals, the time commitment will decrease and the payoff will multiply. In the next article, we'll explore pre-and-post show marketing, and how to get the most out of your investment. ■