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Tips for Making the Most of Trade Shows

Trade shows can provide great opportunities to market your products or services to large numbers of potential buyers, network with current and prospective customers, and find out what is happening in your industry. But attending conferences and conventions can also be a waste of time and money unless you choose the right events and prepare for the shows well in advance.

Rather than accepting or rejecting trade show invitations as they arrive—or simply attending the same shows every year out of habit—investigate all the relevant events taking place in the course of a given year, and select the shows that make the most sense for your business. There are many factors to consider, including cost of attendance, proximity, size, and the potential for making valuable contacts. If you are considering participating in a show you have never attended before, try to get some feedback on the show from others in the industry who have participated in the event in the past.

If you are researching a conference or convention online, start with the show's official website, but also check out blogs and industry news websites that mention the show. Looking at lists of attendees from past shows can give you some idea about the scale of the event and the types of contacts you can hope to make by participating. Check out the topics of the seminars and informational presentations at each trade show, as well as any formal evening events that might provide additional chances to network.

The next step is to choose your level of participation for each show. Create a budget for trade show attendance, and craft a strategy for allocating the funds across all the shows you plan to attend. Depending upon your company's resources, you may want to invest in a high-quality display that can be used to exhibit at a number of conventions, or develop special themes for each show your company attends.

Remember, however, that the largest booths and most expensive displays are not necessarily the most effective. Instead of devoting a large proportion of your company's resources to creating big signs with flashy graphics, you may, for example, choose to take along additional staff members who can spend time talking to clients, demonstrating products, and distributing sales

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Educating Employees about Your 401(k) Plan

In unpredictable economic times when the dollar needs to be stretched even more, workers may need to be reminded that failure to save for retirement through their employer-sponsored plans could lead to greater financial insecurity in the future.

Despite the 401(k) plan's record as a sound retirement saving vehicle, many employees may pass up the opportunity to participate in company plans due to a lack of knowledge about how the plan may help them to save for retirement. To engage the interest of your employees and to educate them about the potential benefits of your plan, prepare the information sessions carefully. With a little effort, you can increase the effectiveness of these presentations and boost participation in your company's 401(k) plan. Here are some steps to help improve employee engagement:

Prepare employees *before* the presentation. Assuming that some of your employees may lack in money management experience, treat them as you would prospective customers. When announcing the information session, explain *what* they will learn and *why* the information is important to them. Emphasize how they will benefit from attending the session.

Keep the tone light. A little humor goes a long way in holding an audience's attention. Encourage presenters to use clear, simple language, avoiding "legalese," jargon, and complicated charts and graphs. Money management tips and worksheets can be helpful. Remember to leave plenty of time for questions and answers.

Sit in on the session. Doing so will allow you to ensure that the information presented is fair, accurate,



and easy to understand. It also demonstrates to your employees the value you place on the retirement plan.

Target the material to the audience. Avoid the "one size fits all" presentation. Gear the material to the audience's level of knowledge. New 401(k) enrollees may be overwhelmed with too much information, while experienced contributors may become bored listening to the basics. If your workforce includes both new *and* experienced participants, consider offering *two* presentations and allowing your employees to choose which is most appropriate for their needs.

Demonstrate how 401(k) plans help save for retirement. Many employees who are strapped financially may think that they are unable to afford contributions to a retirement plan. A skilled presenter can address this concern by emphasizing the potential tax benefits of a 401(k) plan.

Encourage employees to make contributions they are comfortable with. Avoid overemphasizing the need to contribute the *maximum* amount allowable if that exceeds an employee's financial ability. Point out that even a small contribution is better than none, especially if the company is *matching* all, or a portion, of it. Emphasize that it is far better for employees to start small now and increase their contributions later, when they can afford to do so.

A well-crafted 401(k) plan presentation can go a long way toward boosting participation rates in your company's retirement plan. By tailoring the information session to your employees' needs, you can help them make the most of their retirement plan option. Scheduling informational sessions on a regular basis can help make the plan accessible to new employees who join the company, as well as provide an opportunity for current 401(k) participants to raise their contributions. ■

tips for making the most of trade shows

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and informational materials. Alternatively, you may wish to participate in some trade shows as an attendee only, forgoing the costs of buying and staffing exhibition space, while still taking advantage of the networking opportunities these events offer.

Many trade show exhibitors try to attract visitors to their booths by offering special promotions or giveaways of products or promotional items. If you decide to distribute small gifts, choose items that prominently display your company name and contact details, and that people are likely to keep in their offices, such as pens, note pads, mouse pads, or stress balls. You may also want to reserve some premium gifts for large customers. Any contests or giveaways should be designed to draw attention to your company's products and brand, not just to create a spectacle.

Once you have settled on a conference schedule, publicize your attendance and let people know where they can find you by posting the information on your website and sending out a mailing. When talking on the phone to long-distance contacts, don't forget to ask if they will be attending a show. Whenever possible, set up appointments to meet with clients well in advance of attendance. Invite particularly important clients to meet you for a meal or cocktails, or at your hotel suite.

If you are launching a new product or making an announcement at a trade show, contact in advance any trade press writers or editors who might be interested in reporting the news or interviewing a representative of your company. The trade show organizers should be able to provide you with a list of media likely to be in

attendance, and how to contact them after the conference has begun. Even if you have no news to announce, find some time during the show to network with members of the media who may be interested in covering your company in the future. Have a press kit available for distribution with information about your firm and pictures that the media can use.

Try to get to shows early to allow plenty of time to set up the exhibit and discuss schedules with staffers for manning the booth and meeting with clients. If the people staffing your booth were hired for the event, make sure they have been properly coached and know what they are expected to say to prospective customers who stop at the booth for information.

While the pace at a trade show can be busy, take some time out from meetings with clients to walk around the exhibition halls and look at the other displays. The booths of your competitors can provide you with information about their products and marketing strategies, and may give you some ideas for your own business.

If you decide to attend a number of trade shows in distant locations,

consider ways to manage your firm's travel costs. When possible, book flights to maximize the number of frequent flyer miles accrued. When reserving rooms, don't restrict yourself to the hotels recommended by the convention organizers. You may be able to negotiate a bulk rate discount with chains that have hotels in locations convenient to several of the trade shows your firm is attending.

Following up on contacts made in the course of a trade show can help you close some additional sales. When you return from a trade show, meet with all staff members who attended to discuss what leads have been generated and how best to follow up with each prospect. Make sure that any business cards and other contact information that were collected in the course of the show are filed or entered into your contact management system. Call up any important clients you met with during the event and thank them for their time, or send them an e-mail or thank you note. These small courtesies increase the likelihood that customers and prospects will be pleased to discuss business with you again at future events. ■



Entrepreneurs: Continuing the Spirit

Entrepreneurs thrive on the challenge of setting up a company and nurturing it through its early years. Once a company is established, however, the daily grind of running it can often lead to executive “burnout.” There are many examples of founders who become disenchanted with their lives, even though they run successful businesses that provide them with large yearly financial rewards.

Having conquered the challenge, the entrepreneur begins to look elsewhere for a new challenge, even though excitement might still be restored with a few changes. Should an owner in this situation sell the company and move on, or attempt to grow within the existing company? If the business were sold, how would that affect the entrepreneur and his or her family financially?

A Case in Point

Consider this hypothetical example: An entrepreneur named Rob Dawson, who is earning several hundred thousand dollars yearly in salary and bonus income, decides to sell his company because he no longer feels the thrill of breaking new ground. He receives a \$10 million offer—much higher than he expected and dwarfing his original \$10,000 investment in the company. It appears to him that “Easy Street” is just around the corner.

Will selling his company for \$10 million provide Rob with the financial resources he needs to maintain his lifestyle, should he choose an early

retirement? Having no loans or investors to pay off, Rob would receive the entire \$10 million in a lump sum. However, Federal taxes could take 40% right off the top, leaving much less than when he started. Even if he invested the remaining sum, when you factor in inflation the balance would still be less than if he continued to work and earn an annual income in salary and bonus.

It would be considerably less than the windfall that Rob was hoping for, and a pittance compared to his current salary of several hundred thousand dollars. Thus, Rob discovers that he is not yet ready to relinquish the financial benefits of ownership.

Consider the Alternatives

An alternative to selling his company is to discover the parts of his job that are still challenging to him. After a thorough review by his

company accountants, Rob could hire someone to run the everyday business operations. The new executive officer's responsibilities might include functions such as pricing, personnel, and dealing with smaller customers and suppliers. He or she could also be responsible for supervising the accounting department, data processing, and keeping the company's bankers up-to-date. Rob would then be free to pursue the challenges he enjoys the most, as well as spend time with key customers and suppliers, and concentrate on a long-term strategy. As part of that strategy, Rob may decide to expand his operations. Rob's decision to keep the company, and restructure, could allow him the opportunity to explore new challenges while retaining his high income.

Experience shows that before rushing out to sell a business, it is crucial to look at *all* the options. You may not have to sell your business to follow your heart's desire. ■



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