

By Jim Puhalla

**T**rade shows can be a welcome break from the daily grind — a chance to step away from the demands of the office, get some new ideas, and think about the big picture. If we go about it right, we come back refreshed and rejuvenated, ready to bring new life to our work. But if we fail to think through the process, we come back tired and discouraged, wondering why we wasted all that precious time.

Let's look at some of the habits that can make attending a trade show an exciting and useful enterprise. While we're at it, let's consider some ways to get the most out of the seminars and presentations that are a part of most trade shows these days.



Trade shows provide a welcome break from the daily grind and a chance to learn new ideas and think about the big picture.

## Making the Most of Trade Shows and Seminars

### Trade Show Tips

**Establish Objectives.** A good place to start is by thinking about what you hope to accomplish at the trade show. What new products do you want to learn more about? What problems in your work could find solutions at the show? Whom would you like to see at the event?

Take time to make up a list of goals you want to accomplish, and put them in order, just as you might (and should!) list the things you have to do on a typical work day. That way, you can make sure you accomplish your high-priority items. Without planning, you can easily fritter away the time looking at interesting (but useless) new stuff.

**Go Early.** Most trade shows have light crowds first thing in the morning and last thing at night. Those are the times you can get the attention of exhibitor staff people with less competition. Of course, at the end of the day you'll be talking to tired people who are thinking about getting to the hotel bar. Instead, aim to be there when the doors open, and see your most important exhibits first thing.

**Plan for Bringing Back Information.** Before you can use any great discoveries you make or exploit the great contacts you establish at a show, you must transport information about them back to your office. That takes some planning, too.

Probably the most common method for taking information home is to gather up lots of exhibitor literature and put it into a plastic bag. Of course, this is also the least efficient method. Many people get back from the show with a bulging bag of literature, put it in a corner of their office until they can get to it, and don't touch it again until they throw it out six months later.

It makes much more sense to carry a little notebook and write down the key items you learn, along with names and addresses of industry contacts, and so on. Little tape recorders are also very useful, because you can easily and quickly record lots of information, then go through it later and make note of the really important stuff. Some exhibitors will even let you record their pitch — just make sure to identify yourself and ask permission first.

You might feel a little silly standing

there talking into a tape recorder, but take a minute to look around. You can probably see people dressed up like cartoon characters, booths with cheerleaders performing sales pitch cheers, and sales reps blathering on like carnival pitch men. A person recording notes looks pretty "normal" by comparison.

The new generation of electronic pocket notebooks can also be handy at a trade show. These devices have miniature keyboards to let you type in your information. If you decide to try one of these, make sure you'll be able to operate it in the aisle of the show without finding a table to put it on.

**Take Business Cards.** Next to lugging around too much literature, forgetting to take enough business cards is probably the most common trade show mistake. If you have an adequate supply, you can give them to exhibitors and ask them to send you literature after the show. That lets you avoid lugging their brochures around.

When you give people a card, ask for one of theirs, and write on the back what you expect them to do — call, send information, etc. That way, if they don't get back to you in a reasonable

amount of time, you know whom to call.

**Schedule Time for Spontaneous Nosing Around.** Scheduling time to be spontaneous seems like a contradiction in terms, but it's really not. You will definitely get more from the show if you plan your time, but it's also important to leave a couple of hours to wander around and see what's new.

One strategy is to arrive at the show early, make your key contacts and booth visits early in the day, and set aside the last hour or two to wander around. Since booth traffic usually dies off at the end, you'll be able to get close to some exhibits that were packed earlier in the day.

**Plan for Networking.** Before you go to a show, think about other attendees you'd like to meet. They could include prospective clients, specialists you'd like to hire, or even an expert whose brain you'd like to pick. Consider calling before the show to make an appointment, or just to find out where you might run into the person you'd like to see.

Trade shows bring together the brain trust of an industry. If you're going to be there, you might as well get the benefits of networking while you're looking at the exhibits.

**Get Off Your Feet Sometimes.** Vince Lombardi used to tell his players, "Fatigue makes cowards of us all." In other words, when we're tired, we tend to think more about our fatigue than about the real work at hand. If you're a football player, that means you're less willing to take chances to make the big play. If you're a trade show attendee, it means you miss something you should see.

So plan to get off your feet after you've been at the show awhile. If you go early, take an early lunch break. Your feet will probably be tired by then, and you'll miss the bulk of the lunchtime crowd, which can be brutal at a trade show. And make a point to sit down to eat, you'll be able to focus better when you return to the show floor.

#### Attending Seminars

At many trade shows, one of the most important and useful parts of the gathering is the slate of seminars and presentations sponsored by the organizers. Surprisingly, many professionals never take time to attend these seminars, and many of those who do attend don't get the full benefit of the presenter's knowledge. Here are a few

tips for making these presentations a productive part of your trade show experience.

**Get a Good Seat.** Arrive early enough to get a good seat (15 minutes in advance is usually enough). If the presenter has audio-visual equipment like an overhead or slide projector, choose your seat to make sure you can see. Generally, you need to be closer to

the screen when overheads are used than you do with slides.

**Stay Close to the Speaker.** Lots of us still have an elementary-school tendency to sit in the back row when we can. But if you're in the back when questions are being asked, you likely won't hear the questions or the answers.

John Madden tells about attending



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a coaching seminar the first year he was a head coach and sitting down in the last row, then seeing one of the NFL's most respected coaches march right to the front row, where he took copious notes and asked lots of questions. Madden learned a lesson from that, and we can too. That brings us to the next point.

**Ask Questions.** Lots of us are shy about asking questions. We don't want to sound stupid. But there's an old saying that the only dumb question is the one you don't ask. You're paying to be there — either through registration fees or through dues in an organization — so get your money's worth. If there's something you want to know more about, ask. You'll be surprised how often people will come up to you later and say, "I'm glad you asked that."

**Ask About Handouts.** Before the seminar starts, ask the speaker what



**If possible, devote a couple of hours to wandering around a show to see what's new.**

information will be handed out at the end. It's silly to scribble notes the whole time, then have someone hand you a nicely printed booklet containing the same information.

**Fill Out Feedback Forms.** Lots of people hurry from the room after a presentation without filling out the response form. That's a mistake. It only takes a few minutes to fill out the

form, and it's a big help to the presenter and the organizers in planning good seminars in the future. It's especially helpful to write down things you hoped to learn about, but didn't.

My final word of advice is one any experienced trade show veteran already knows: wear comfortable shoes. Aside from that, a little planning and forethought will help to make the trade show experience a productive and rewarding investment of your time — one that pays rich dividends for years to come. □

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