



Getting value for money from your exhibition & networking investments

When you sign up to attend an exhibition to showcase your business, or attend any networking event there are some key points you can easily implement to ensure that people engage with you. If you are going to spend time and money on the event, you want to get some return on your investment.

Prepare, Prepare, Prepare

Research is key – take some time to review who is attending the event. Are other exhibitors already customers – if so, what have they bought from you recently? By knowing who has a stand, or who is a member of the networking association, you can tailor your message to their interest.

On the day, make sure your team are in place and set up in good time for the start – you'll lose valuable talking time if you are setting up your stand as people walk by. For networking events, arrive in good time to make the most of the mingling sessions before any subsequent talk/breakfast/lunch.

Business cards

For networking events, take plenty and circulate the room. It is easy to stick to talking to just one or two people, but that isn't networking! You won't believe the number of times people say "I left my cards in the car". Not a good impression if you can't remember your marketing material!

Some exhibitors like to collect business cards for future marketing purposes. However, guard against this as it can be a waste of time. If a visitor has deposited a business card for a competition you are running, check they are happy to receive marketing information from you. Otherwise, at the first opportunity they'll unsubscribe and you'll have lost their interest. The fact you've asked them, will mean that usually people will allow you 2 or 3 contacts before they decide to ask to be removed from your lists. By engaging in a conversation, it saves time when inputting information onto your CRM systems if they are just going to ask to be removed the following week.

Networking is another word for selling

Well, it can be and sometimes you'll be fortunate in being in the right place at the right time. However networking is more about making useful long term contacts – undoubtedly they'll be times we all need a plumber, an accountant or a coach. By talking to a range of people – and more importantly genuinely listening, it may be that whilst they don't need anyone at present, they know someone who does. Networking is really about spreading your message through as many mediums as possible and by not doing a "hard sell", you're more likely to be recommended by people you've met.



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Don't avoid eye contact

On your exhibition stand make sure you smile, engage and have a chat. Don't fall into the trap of spending your time on your mobile, or checking emails on your tablet or laptop. You've paid to attend, make the most of the footfall. If you really can't be away from your messages, schedule someone to take over for you every couple of hours and catch up away from your stand.

When networking, whilst it is important to circulate, don't go looking over the shoulder of the person you're talking to in case someone more interesting is passing. Concentrate on what they are saying. Equally don't get distracted by your mobile – nothing worse than trying to talk to someone who is more interested in their mobile device.

Nervous about approaching people?

At networking events remember the human condition – everyone likes to be asked about themselves! Now, you probably want to tell them all about what you do, but the ice-breakers about where they are from, what line are they in, even how successful have they found these events to be, all encourages people to talk. Yes, you need to make sure that you introduce yourself and your business too, but people buy from people, so you are your best advert.

At an exhibition, the open question comes into its own. "Have you thought about home insurance" is likely to get a "no" response as they walk on by. Again, people like talking about themselves so enquiring again where they've come from, the weather, is there a particular area they're looking at, will all get people talking. Most prefer not to be rude and will slow to pass the time of day, if not stop. The majority will progress to "so what do you do"....bingo, the conversation is off and running.

If you have a competition, questionnaire or poll on your stand, you can entice them in by asking they're opinion.

Make your stand standout

Don't clutter your stand with unnecessary paraphernalia. Review your materials – is it obvious what you do? Cakes and giveaways will bring people to your stand, but you HAVE to then engage them. If they want a free cupcake, there should be a decent discussion too!

Use different members of the team for exhibitions

Exhibiting is tiring! If you are able to have a morning and afternoon team, that is great as it refreshes people to share the load. You need someone to cover lunch/coffee/rest breaks.



..but Networking is about seeing the same people to build relationships

Networking on the other hand is about building ongoing relationships so when possible the same people should attend the regular events. This is how best to get to know people and pays dividends when talking to fellow group members.

Refreshments

Take plenty of water and food if necessary. Even on the coldest exhibition sites, dehydration can deplete the reserves of the team. DON'T eat it on the stand. Trying to juggle a tuna sandwich with your marketing material, or having some spinach in the teeth can be off-putting at the best of times!

.....Follow up please

If you've spent a day or more at an exhibition, or have taken time out of the office to attend a networking event, it makes sense to ensure that you work hard to ensure the contacts you've made are worthwhile and beneficial.

- If you've promised to send some details, do it straight away.
- Are they on LinkedIn, or does their business have a twitter account/facebook page? If so, connect to them and follow/like them.
- Add them to your CRM if you have permission to market to them
- It's always good to send an email reminding them of your discussions. Take the time to make these personal so you stand out. We've all had the general emails following exhibitions or networking events to say thanks for attending, but contacts like to feel special.

An easy way to do this is to write something relevant on the back of their business card as a reminder and then tailor your email: -

"Thank you so much for stopping to talk to us yesterday at the xxx event/It was good to meet you at the xxx networking yesterday. It was great to learn more about your business and do contact me if we can help in the future".

"Enjoy your holiday next week in the Canary Islands/daughter's wedding/house move/new car".....

You listened to them and they'll like you for it.