

Case Study: Event Marketing

Event Marketing Highlights:

- Trade shows are an attractive marketing opportunity.
- Conventional approaches often give poor payback.
- The key is to exploit the gathering of customers and prospects in a single location.
- Combine marketing and sales efforts at event.
- Focus on meeting people.
- Execution is critical.

Trade Show Challenge

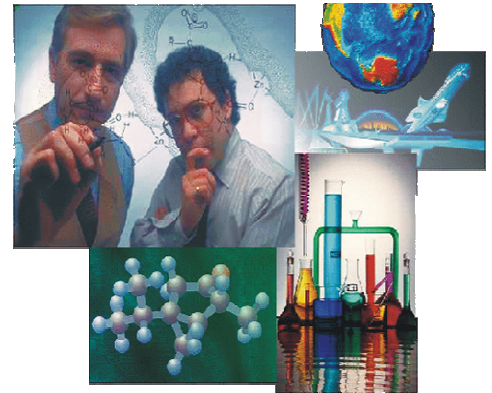
Trade shows and conferences are mainstays of marketing activities for many companies. The process is straightforward: reserve space, set up a booth, put out a stack of brochures, hang some posters, perhaps set up a system or two for demonstrations, and then sit back and wait for people to come to you.

This is perhaps the most common approach to trade show marketing – and certainly the least effective! After years of experience with this approach, I tend to dislike trade shows. As a rule, they require considerable effort, cost a lot of money, and have little

measurable result.

There are, however, sound reasons for participating in trade shows and conferences, namely that several hundred to several thousand (or more) highly qualified prospects and customers have been brought together in one place.

Efforts to make events more productive tend to focus on getting more people into the booth, presenting papers or



participating on panel discussions, or sponsoring activities such as luncheons, hospitality suites, or parties.

We discovered an effective extension to these activities by implementing a major campaign around *customer meetings* at the event.

The Case

This study is based on experiences at the SuperComputing conference, a typical event. It is a yearly conference with 4,000-5,000 people attending, focused on a specific market segment and set of products. It includes several parallel tracks of technical papers and panel discussions, has a large and active exhibits area, and is the largest gathering of both vendors and customers in its market. There are literally thousands of events similar to SuperComputing each year, so this case study is broadly applicable.

Like many vertically focused

trade shows, we had engineers, marketeers, sales people and executives attending — a major cross section of everyone from our company who was involved with this market.

We arranged meetings — typically running an hour — between customers and prospects and the people *they* wanted to meet with; engineers, Vice Presidents, technical experts, even sales and marketing people. Since the prospects were already there, it was easy for them to take an hour out of their schedule for the meeting — especially

to meet with corporate and technical people that were ordinarily difficult to reach.

As a result, at the last SuperComputing conference, we had 150 customer meetings involving over 400 people in four days! These ranged from meetings with existing customers, to receive product updates or perhaps just complain to the proper people, to sales presentations to new prospects we had not met before.

The outcome was the highest payback of any trade show I've ever been involved with.

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The Method

Effectively implementing customer meetings requires upfront work and has to be a tightly integrated part of the overall show plan.

The first step is inviting people to the meetings. Three questions need to be answered: *Who* do you want to attend the meetings? Why would *they* want to attend? What is the *goal* of each meeting?

Flexibility is a major advantage of the meetings – each meeting can be different. We planned:

- Executive meetings with major customers and prospects.
- Engineering meetings with people who had specific questions.
- Product Management meetings with people who needed roadmap presentations or had product issues.

- Sales presentations to new prospects.

We worked closely with the sales force, preparing invitations that they could deliver to their customers and planning meetings to meet specific customer needs. We used mail and email to send out invitations to a broad base of people, including all registered show attendees. We also used the corporate Web site for announcements, details, and online registration.

The most effective meetings occur off the show floor, away from distractions. Our approach was to reserve conference rooms, either at the conference or at a nearby hotel. This needs to be done at the same time booth space is reserved at the show, and may require extra effort and creativity to locate appropriate rooms. In some cases, one or two rooms at the conference facility may be

enough. At SuperComputing, we had eight conference rooms at a nearby hotel and two shuttle buses running continuously throughout the conference.

The logistics planning must ensure that the rooms are adequate, that they are properly set up for meetings and presentations (including projectors), and have refreshments. The location of the rooms must be known, and clear directions for getting to them provided.

By far the most important element was ensuring that the right people were in each meeting. Each meeting had a goal and a set of people needed to achieve this goal. We had anywhere from two to six people participating in each meeting, plus the customers. We tried to make sure that the sales rep was in all meetings involving their customers, along with corporate and technical people.

“Planning and scheduling 150 customer meetings over four days was a nightmare. The answer was to automate the process.”

Logistics Nightmare

Planning and scheduling 150 customer meetings over four days. Eight conference rooms; two to six presenters per meeting (with the same four people requested for every meeting!); agendas and contents to arrange, which were different for each meeting; confirmation of each meeting to send out; 80 people to keep informed of the complete schedule. And numerous last second changes...

If this sounds like a nightmare — it is!

After going through this as a manual process and spending numerous late nights cross-checking six spreadsheets, we decided there had to be a better way.

The answer was to develop a

database driven software package to automate the process. The database captured information on each customer, each request, each presenter, and each conference room. It then allowed scheduling each meeting and provided instant feedback on any conflicts — whether the room was already in use or if one or more of the presenters were already scheduled in other meetings.

The combination of an easy user interface, instant feedback, and no chance for accidental conflicts greatly simplified the task of scheduling all of the meetings. The ability to make changes — in one place — and automatically check for conflicts and update

all data was a revelation. It transformed making changes from a late night nightmare to a mere chore!

In addition, automated tools for confirming the meetings back to the sales people and their customers, clear communication of the goals of each meeting to the presenters, a comprehensive set of reports, and detailed printouts of the latest schedule with all of the latest changes proved invaluable.

This software package was developed for internal use. If there is sufficient interest it might be developed as a commercial package