



TALENT LAB

Exhibitions Handbook



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Introduction

Exhibitions can be an effective way of reaching a keen audience of potential targets. Often, an exhibition is the one chance in a year to meet prospective new clients in one place, all there ready to talk to new suppliers.

Yet, as marketing budgets have shrunk and exhibiting costs have risen, the returns made on what are sizeable investments for any company have shrunk to a point where many businesses are considering whether they should be exhibiting at all.

Other companies have always had scepticism toward exhibitions and exhibiting. They look at their annual budgets and decide to take only a token presence at whichever exhibitions are offered to their sector.

A third type of company has thrown good money in the direction of exhibition organisers and never really seen the point of it all. This category of company are usually brand leaders in a sector and take ever greater square footages of space each year, swearing 'never again' – until enticed back by offers of even more space at reduced rates that yield exactly the same poor rate of return.

The last category is companies that are looking for new ways of finding markets and which are interested in exhibiting somewhere, only to discover the Finance Director having a coronary when faced with the cost estimate.

This Exhibitions Handbook is meant to help any company which recognise itself in the above descriptions. It should be used to start and inform discussions between all those departments responsible for making your company's exhibitions a success, especially those unwilling bedfellows, the marketing and finance departments. In its few pages, it should help shape an approach to exhibitions to suit both those new to the medium and those more experienced hands who want to refresh their approach.

Strategy & Objectives

No marketing project should ever be embarked upon without a clear strategy. And exhibitions are marketing projects, with a huge list of elements which all go together to bring about a successful conclusion. You cannot have a successful conclusion without a set of objectives – how else can you judge if it worked or not? And to put ticks against

any list of objectives, you need a point-by-point strategy that addresses the issues and subsequent implications that arise from each one.

KISS

Not a rubbish group of Americans in platform boots with long tongues, but **Keep It Simple Stupid**. The overall aim of your stand should be described in one easily quotable phrase: 'introduce product "x"', 'raising brand awareness', 'increasing sales', 'find new clients', 'take customers from a competitor', 're-position company in the market place' are all good; 'tearing up money' is not.

Your exhibition objectives should tie in with your company's marketing plans over the whole year, because success at an exhibition can bring as vast a list of problems as failure (production, capacity, personnel, cash-flow etc).

Once you have your main objective, you can decide on other secondary objectives. The stronger, more defined, durable, and memorable the main objective, the easier to keep your team on board during the planning and implementation stages. The decision about your main objective will also affect at which shows you actually exhibit.

Your final list of main and secondary objectives should be short, focussed and achievable. Sometimes it will become clear that the list of main and secondary objectives will be mutually supportive. Rarely, it becomes clear that some objectives are in opposition.

Usually, the weaker the objective, the harder it is to justify the expenditure in time and money needed to run the project. 'Raising brand awareness' is usually the defensive play of the brand/ad agency unable to really show how their exhibition portfolio has helped its clients. Let your bottom line be the judge – and involve your FD here. Perhaps brand awareness can be a secondary objective for a stand that aims to launch and test new products? The finance department will then love the figures you supply them on who tasted what and what they felt.

SMART

Once your objectives have been developed, they should be put to the SMART test. Are they: **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, **R**ealistic & **T**ime-realistic? By measuring stand ambitions against the KISS and SMART tests, you will be helping to reach your audience with a message that is easy to understand, quick to encourage a reaction and has an effect that is easy to measure.

But SMART leaves out an important factor: Price. This is especially true in exhibitions. Planning is cheap. Designing is expensive. Re-building due to an unforeseen change in direction is horribly expensive. Getting buy-in at the planning stage means less buying later on. Get agreement on your objectives. And signatures on paper.

Once you have an agreed list – and it should really contain about the same number of fingers as one of Liza Minnelli's hands, not items on her wedding list – a strategy for each objective should be worked on. In reality, this list of strategies will be the menu for how the stand operates and what it will cost.

As each company's objectives and their accompanying strategy will be different, let's look at a brief example:

A food company has the objective of launching its new falafel. It wants people to sample them, get tasters to mark the experience and attract buyers. Straightforward, you would think.

But are they looking for wholesale buyers, or going direct to consumers? Do they want their name to be launched to food sellers or food buyers? Will hordes of freebie nibblers block that important visit from a supermarket buyer?

So, they decide on their main objective first: Find trade buyers for the wholesale product. And the strategy to support the objective?

- Exhibit at trade-only or trade-biased shows.
- Invites to the stand for trade buyers.
- Do we need to develop packaging? Process, yes; design, no (save money here)
- Best way to sample? Hot
- Can we cook on stand? Machinery? Health & safety? Electrics?

The list goes on....

Objectives and strategy open up all the questions that can prove costly if left to the last minute. The main objective is the key. The best strategy is to plan and then plan again.

Once your Exhibition Plan is settled and agreed, you can start inviting in designers.

Dynamic Stand Design

Having agreed a set of major and minor objectives for a year's exhibition programme can also mean one stand design could fit all events - and that means savings of scale. Using the same basic stand, with some minor amendment, means only one costly build.

This may be a case of grandma's and a huge case of eggs waiting to be sucked, but there are a lot of things that are usually back to front in exhibitions. Like design coming first. Never hand over anything to a designer until you have your set of objectives and a clear idea of what you want to achieve.

Visit any exhibition and you will see stands where the designer has not been given a marketing brief. The results are expensive and glittering, but they don't deliver visitor numbers or effective business leads.

A set of objectives should represent a design menu for your designer. Designers tend to concentrate on creating impressive visuals to draw the attention of visitors. But the stand must work as a 'set design' - a place where the theatre of business can be acted out.

Is your Number One priority just generating large numbers of visitors onto the stand, or arranging intimate meetings with select guests? Quantity or quality? A good corporate stand will have the capacity to take peaks in numbers at busy times, yet has places where private conversations can happen easily.

The best stands are functional, interesting and attractive. And tidy. Storage and keen eyes can keep any stand neat and business-like. Piles of empty cardboard boxes by the third day are an instant turn-off for anyone looking to do business with a new supplier (which is why you don't see them at supermarkets any more!).

Make entrances and exits easy. If possible, keep the stand at carpet level. Cabling may make this impossible, but the act of raising a foot can be a hurdle to encouraging enquirers onto the stand.

A good designer should be able to build something that helps all the marketing/sales/promotional objectives, is eye-catching and, most importantly, fulfils the brand itself. But it will require budget. Too many brands leave unrealistic budgets for build, promotion and management, having spent a fortune on hiring a huge amount of space. For instance, 30 square metres is half the floor space of the average two-bedroom flat. How much would that cost to decorate and furnish?

Try planning ahead: set a *total* budget for the year and then get quotes for stands based on various sizes. Renting can be more expensive than buying (you can spot B&Q stools on even the best stands!). Too many leading brands compete against rivals in terms of space, only to spend a forlorn three days on a bare piece of carpet in front of a dog-eared graphic watching all their prospects talking to their competitors on a smaller, well-designed, functional and appealing stand.

Exhibition stands cost. Staffing a stand costs. Only good planning, good design and good management can turn these costs into an investment that pays dividends to the exhibiting company.

Dynamic Stand Management

Stands do not make sales, people do. Good stands cannot make you money, but bad stands can lose you a lot of money. An exhibition stand's primary function is to allow people to meet people, talk to them, get to know them, and sell to them. It is this interaction that will prove the most decisive factor in delivering the stand's objectives. Having a clear brief document for the stand will help the stand to be run professionally.

The stand brief document should include:

- Objectives
- Schedule
- Management hierarchy
- Contact numbers, including organisers
- Stand map (storage etc)

But the most important factor is to ensure that the stand is dynamic. This means that each member of stand staff understands their role, how they should be portraying the company and its brand, and what they should be doing during each interaction with a visitor.

Any size of stand needs to manage its dynamics. Can people get on and off the stand easily? Do the staff look inviting or are they cold and aloof? Are there pairs of conspiratorial chatters who are more interested in themselves than striking up conversations with visitors? TALENT LAB talks to service brands about the power of consistency, concern and commitment. On a stand it is a question of balancing the natural urge to talk to one another at quiet spells with the need to portray an open, warm attitude to visitors. Training is necessary for every stand member to ensure each person understands how to manage the stand and the relationships that will start on it.

Dynamic Data Management

The first day of the exhibition finally arrives. The stand has been designed and built, the management and staff team have been briefed, the doors are unbolted and the refreshment bar is now open for coffee at £4 a cup. Visitors rush forward and all make a beeline to your attractive stand and its attentive staff. Success!

Or is it? All these people may be after freebies when you want to talk to large buyers. Or they could be software users when you are targeting developers. They may be juniors in the finance department when you need to negotiate with Finance Directors.

But you can't afford to turn people away based on appearance alone. Richard Branson dresses like a train spotter. James Dyson never wears a tie. Millionairess Meena Pathak of Patak's Foods wears a sari. You can never judge which conversation is going to lead to an amazing new contract or become a customer delivering lifetime value.

What is needed is a system to gauge quickly, efficiently, and consistently how valuable each contact could be. There are many ways of doing this – verbally, tick cards, handhelds or PCs – but they all involve asking the right questions in the right way.

Once the questions have been asked – and this subject can only be introduced here - information must be collected. It should then be divided into: important, urgent, or both.

Such dynamic communication systems make sure all actions during and post-event are managed efficiently by the exhibiting company and carried out in a suitable way. By having a finely honed system of filtering information and subsequent communication, each contact is afforded the correct level of interaction and action, both on the stand and after their visit.

An example would be a bank. On their stand are bank staff of various seniority and skills, along with a range of brochures and PC screens showing the bank's new website. Initially, a visitor may be asked: Are you a customer? Yes, and they would get a tour of the new website, or asked if they had a problem with a manager. No, and they would be handed a brochure containing an application form.

Using dynamic data management, a series of perhaps three qualifying questions would tell any of the bank's representatives which person on the stand would be best placed to talk to the visitor or which display they may like to view, and then which follow-up channel would be the most suitable to both the potential customer and the bank. This process would actually be quick. It would also enable the bank to know what level of investment each prospect merited. In this way, opportunities rewarding investment in time, communication and spend would be targeted and monitored.

This approach means the visitor is happier because their needs are being listened to and acted upon. The bank also knows what level of commitment they need to make in terms of post-event actions. It is this interaction that says more about a brand than any amount of gimmicks that drive up visitor numbers purely by treating everyone at the same low level of denomination and value.

Post-event Communications

An exhibition is really a catalyst for a marketing project. All elements are brought together on the exhibiting day, but the reaction – introductions, contacts, awareness, sales, marketing relationships etc – usually come afterwards. Sometimes the benefits to the exhibiting company come months or even years later. Just like all the dates you have been on, only one will end in marriage, although, hopefully, the strike rate of marriages to dates at your exhibition will be of Moonie wedding proportions!

The key to developing a relationship is communication. By having a communication plan - complete with post-event action list and timetable - ready before the exhibition itself takes place, leads will be followed up promptly and prospects turned into clients.

It is this focussed activity that is the final key piece of rewarding the initial investment. Collecting lists of names and then not sending them what they have been promised is a waste of money and time. Ditto sending untargeted or inappropriate follow-up information. By working on filtering visitors and data on the stand, there should now be a ready-made set of communication tasks to put into action.

But not all communication is good. Too many companies zap visitor's badges, who arrive back at work to find they have been included on launch databases of products and are now a marketing target. This action is impolite, dishonest and now illegal, but it happens all the time at exhibitions. It also does not lead to sales, just annoyed non-customers.

By collecting data, refining and qualifying it, the post-event work will start to deliver real value back to the exhibiting company. Dynamic stand management defines visitor interaction. Dynamic data management helps find the fitting level of communication that suits each visitor.

It also drives post-exhibition activity. Telephone, mail, email, sms; leaflets, brochures, text offers, viral web games; samples, free vouchers, surveys, post-paid cards; orders, offers, BOGOF promotions, time-limited discounts. Each sector, each company, each objective has its fitting method of communication, each target a suitable 'how and why' relationship-building mechanism. It is at the planning stage that all these various methods are honed down to the best menu of activity, to be carried out on time and seen through to the first sale. The exhibition has then done its job and the relationship passed on to the department that handles existing client relationships.

Quantifying Success

Only by having an initial plan, with a list of objectives, can success be measured. The financial department must be realistic in their targets, both in terms of the exhibition's ability to generate additional income and allowing a fair timetable in which to achieve it.

After each exhibition, there should always be time for a full debrief of the team, including those on the stand and those involved in the planning and post-event stages. Lessons can always be learned. A confidential survey always helps. Questions and answers on stand management efficiency, design strengths and weaknesses, information availability, hard to answer questions from visitors, blanks in the marketing story, and other issues, can help build a stronger stand presence for the next event.

Get reaction as soon after the event as possible. Good ideas disappear as soon as feet stop aching. Get stats from organisers to help you show the percentage of show visitors drawn to your stand. By tracking the results through marketing, interaction and lifetime sales, you can show if any exhibition was actually worthwhile or not. However, it will only be over time, and through ongoing monitoring, that will tell you if the first picture painted is the correct one.

Summary

Exhibitions can be a valuable tool in the marketing toolkit, but like all marketing projects, the operation of each one must be targeted, budgeted, analysed, quantified – and planned. Too many companies say that they just have to be at a specific show, don't enjoy the experience, swear they will never do it again, and then sign up for an even bigger space next year because they are offered a discount.

Perhaps you have found it is time for your company to rethink its priorities. If this document helps you in some way towards doing that – and assists in eventually delivering enhanced value at your next exhibition – then it will have been worth at least one person reading this download.

If you want to find out more about our approach to exhibitions, please read on or visit our website. If you have any comments or feedback to make, or success stories to share, please email info@talentlab.co.uk. And if you use any of the above to change the way your company organises its exhibitions, we would love to hear from you!

TALENT LAB & Exhibitions

TALENT LAB is a laboratory of talent and ideas that finds solutions to the communication, branding and marketing challenges of all sizes of companies and brands operating in the service sectors.

This makes our approach to exhibitions unique. We bring our experience, working on projects besides exhibitions – as well as exhibitions themselves – to help clients make their exhibition presence work. From stands that are aimed at raising corporate awareness with government ministers to recruitment for optical engineers, our approach follows TALENT LAB'S Five Rules: Inspire. Surprise. Excite. Encourage. Challenge.

We first produce a clear set of client objectives for each exhibition. We then work with a team of associates to develop the best stand for our clients. From design to video, data capture to post-event follow-up work, every step controlled by TALENT LAB.

By managing and creatively influencing each step of the process, TALENT LAB maintains its own high standards on behalf of the client, whilst allowing specialists in their own field to bring their individual qualities to the mix. We make sure we all have one aim: to achieve the exact objectives outlined at the start of each project.

Suppliers

TALENT LAB LTD

Strategy, communication planning, stand design, graphics, documents, visuals, web design, personnel training, document and script writing, e-communication tools & project management.

DATA MATTERS UK LTD

Database management specialists, information process managers, quantifying, qualification and evaluation experts.

WORTH SOLUTIONS

Technical support, bespoke data and support systems writing, online hosting, interface designer.

BENBEN LTD

Video & film producers, script writing, pre & postproduction experts, all formats, publicity and advertising shorts.

PRAXIS PR LTD

Specialist PR agency, PR strategists, press relations, invite management, post-event publicity.

CAPITAL MODELS LTD

Specialist model makers, including interactive and LED displays.

JOHN F WRIGHT LTD

Specialist furniture makers and designers.

Client List

Alcatel UK Ltd

Cannock Chase Finance

First PLC

FITE IT Ltd

Hitachi

Kith & Kids Charity

Linn Maggs Goldwin Accountants

Lloyds TSB

Royal Mail Media Markets

Shoreditch Business Network

Silverman Sherliker Solicitors

Taylor Wilcox Solicitors

Toshiba

By using this flexible inter-agency approach, we can assemble a dedicated team unique to each project; each individual supplier committed to producing the best work for our clients.

Contact

If you would like to discuss your exhibition needs, whatever size of business, please contact:

Mark Herring
Creative Director
TALENT LAB Ltd
Unit 13
5 Durham Yard
London E2 6QF

Telephone: 0207 613 1226

Email: info@talentlab.co.uk

www.talentlab.co.uk