



60 Exhibiting at conferences

What are the potential benefits?

Exhibiting at conferences, business to business shows and exhibitions can be a great way to make direct contact with the key decision makers, buyers, owners, managers and directors of the organisations you want to influence. The people that are attracted to these events are information-hungry and time-poor and can often be difficult to reach via normal marketing channels. You will need to choose events that attract your target customer.

If you can speak and have a stand at a conference it will double your exposure and give you the best chance of generating leads, meeting customers face to face and ultimately developing new business.

Having a stand at an exhibition that targets the right market for you can be a great way for you to both launch and demonstrate new products and services. You will be able to show off your products and attract interest with live demonstrations and interactive presentations.

You will be able to network with both visitors and other exhibitors. You get the opportunity to talk to people, find out about their needs and interests. You can qualify your leads.

Many conferences and exhibitions offer a significant amount of market and media exposure prior to the event. They work hard to generate the audience for you. There will be opportunities for you to promote your business in advance of the event. There will be a dedicated conference or exhibition magazine, email updates and a special website.

Many exhibitions and conferences offer exhibitors and speakers the chance to publish their special conference offers and promotions in a voucher booklet designed to encourage visitors to seek them out at the event.

Your challenge

Your first challenge will be to find an opportunity to exhibit at a conference that is most likely to target the audience you want to reach. Having found that opportunity and made the decision to have a stand, you will need to plan to make the most of it. It can be expensive if you do not take the necessary action to ensure

you get a good return on your investment. You will need to be proactive in both your pre-conference activity, at the event itself and with your follow-up activities. Just being there will not be enough to get you the results you will need to make this a worthwhile marketing activity. There is a lot to think about to make a success of it.

How to make a success of it

- Have a before, during and after plan.
- Organise a pre-conference promotion of your own to attract some of the key decision makers you have on your hot prospect list.
- If you are speaking at the conference use the opportunity to drive people to your stand with a promise of receiving something of value.
- Consider how you can ensure your stand makes an impact.
- Make sure that you have a good set of exhibition signs, display banners and posters that communicate clearly what you have to offer your visitors.
- Make sure that you are communicating your brand and that everything co-ordinates and reflects your image positively.
- Use pictures of people using and enjoying your products or service.
- Consider ways in which you can attract potential customers' contact details – you may run a competition, business card draw for an attractive prize, offer a free consultation or demonstration that requires entry via the person's contact details.
- Offer some attractive refreshments at your stand – everyone offers sweets, could you offer something different?
- If your business lends itself well to a short talk, presentation or demonstration run this at set times of the day and use it to attract a crowd.
- Engage your audiences' senses – sight, sound and touch – consider how you could give them an experience of your product or service.
- Make sure that you have a number of good giveaways that promote your service well.
- When information-gathering visitors ask for brochures, make sure that you identify their interest by asking some questions and get their contact details.
- Make sure you have a good brochure and enough business cards to give away on demand.

- Give your visitors a chance to browse and make your contact with them natural. The people who visit your stand often don't want to be pounced on the minute they arrive.
- Make sure whoever is working your stand enjoys communicating with people.
- Dress smartly.
- Have fun.
- Follow up your leads within a week of the conference.

THINKING ABOUT EXHIBITING – SPECIAL RESPONSE CHECKLIST

- ▶ What are you hoping to achieve by attending this conference?
- ▶ Why is the conference you have chosen likely to be good for your business?
- ▶ What kind of return on your investment will you need for this to have been a success?
- ▶ How can you attract some of your own key customers to your stand?
- ▶ Step into a typical visitor's shoes – what might their interests be in your product or service? What could be attractive to them?
- ▶ Who is going to manage the stand and what is your strategy?
- ▶ How are you going to generate leads?
- ▶ How are you going to follow up?

How to use this information

If you are new to exhibiting and, having read this section, are considering doing so, you will need to do your research. Find out about some conferences and exhibitions that target the kind of people you want to reach. Attend yourself as a visitor and check it out. Find out if any similar businesses to yours are going to be there. Have a chat with them about their experiences and find out how productive they have found the event.

If you are already a seasoned exhibitor there may be some ways that you could improve your approach in order to maximise the return you get from it.

Think exhibit and make a stand for yourself