

## TRADE SHOWS

# Trade Show Exhibits: Fewer Attendees Mean More Opportunities

By Barbara Wellnitz, APR

When a company wants to cut costs, exhibiting at major industry trade shows is often one of the first budget items that gets the ax. Initially, this would seem to make sense for 2003. Attendance at 2002 shows across all industries was down compared to 2001, making for some discouraging scenes.

Consider SUPERCOMM 2002, the beleaguered telecom industry's leading U.S. convention. According to ABC Expomark, SUPERCOMM's auditing bureau, overall attendance at the 2002 show was 36,993 — 30 percent less than the 52,822 who attended the 2001 show. In 2001, 826 media and analysts prowled the floor, compared to only 440 in 2002.

Robert Pease, senior editor at *Lightwave* magazine, was at SUPERCOMM and says the decline in attendance was noticeable.

"Trade show attendance and budget cuts are directly related. It seems when budgets are cut, marketing, including trade shows, is among the first casualties in most companies," Pease says. "For trade publications, that equates to lower ad sales and, subsequently, diminished magazine space. One of the offshoots of lower ad sales is less money for travel to trade shows."

Budget cuts have reduced crowds at major trade shows across all industries. More than 85,000 people registered to attend the International Manufacturing Technologies Show (IMTS) 2002, held every other year in Chicago — a far cry from the 130,000 who attended IMTS 2000.

Companies used to send large delegations on what was really a working vacation — the show was just one item on the agenda that also included dining out and sightseeing in a new city.

## Trade Shows Now All Business

Now the trips are all business — delegates are not just browsing, they're looking for real solutions to specific problems.

"Exhibitors have told us that, while there may be less booth traffic than last year, there are as many — and sometimes more — decision-makers visiting the booths," says Jack Chalden, SUPERCOMM general manager. "Companies are saving money by only sending key executives."

Fewer attendees can translate

into more opportunities to reach new customers and garner media attention.

Trade shows remain an important resource to the media. Trade magazine editors say lower ad revenues are forcing them to send smaller teams or even eliminate some smaller shows from their budgets altogether. Nonetheless, most say a trade show is still the best means of gathering information for future issues.

"We're probably going to attend about the same number in 2003 as

*So although the crowds at trade shows are diminishing, the advantages of having a presence at major shows are not.*

we did in 2002, which was definitely down from 2001," says Susan O'Keefe, editor, *Telecommunications* magazine. "We're being extremely selective in choosing, seeing who will be there before we commit, sending one editor instead of two. That being said, we are still heavily focused on the three or four major shows that are a dead-on hit for our audience."

So although the crowds at trade shows are diminishing, the advantages of having a presence at major shows are not. It's important to realize that smaller delegations mean less time a potential customer or editor can spend at each booth, so be prepared.

"I realize the booth is for the attendees and potential customers, not editors from trade publications," says Chuck Bates, associate editor, *American Machinist*. "As long as they present information to me in a simple and straightforward manner, I'm happy. Press kits with graphics that I can take with me are a must."

"Be prepared for the press," Bates adds. "Having a marketing or PR specialist on hand enhances the chances of getting a company's valuable information out to prospective customers via the press."

## Pre-Show Preparations

Press kits are just one step in the preparation process that should begin weeks, if not months, in advance of the show. An early step

should be development of a strategic plan for the show, including objectives, audience segmentation, measurement and tactics.

Show organizers offer a wide range of services to exhibitors, including accepting new product announcements and guest opinion pieces for trade show dailies. This requires advance planning, but the payback is worth the effort.

If a company plans to highlight a new product at a trade show, the product launch should occur several months prior to a show, rather than

interviews with reporters, and even editor luncheons or breakfasts scheduled well in advance. Trade shows provide opportunities to solidify media relationships, but only if you have something significant to talk about. Don't waste editors' and reporters' time with a sales pitch.

## Post-Show Follow-Up Is Critical

Post-show follow-up is perhaps the most important part of the plan. After the show is over, promptly fulfill editor requests for a case history, bylined article or more product information on deadline. Having worked for this outcome, do what it takes to realize it.

And, to meet your No. 1 objective for going to a show in the first place, follow up quickly with prospects who want more information or a sales call. We are always amazed when trade show organizers tell us about the shoe boxes of sales leads they find on the floor after exhibitors have packed up their booths and gone home.

Despite the advances in telecommunications technology, nothing takes the place of meeting an editor or customer face-to-face to demonstrate firsthand a new product or discuss a new service. Do not let diminishing attendance figures fool you, the key players are still making the trips.

"Yes, smaller staffs and smaller budgets are issues, but I'm traveling more because we want to provide our readers [with] the best coverage possible," says Paula Bernier, editor, *Xchange* magazine. "I make great contacts and tend to get better stories when I'm on the road."

## Microcosm Of The Marketplace

A trade show remains a microcosm of the marketplace: customers, prospects, media and competitors — they're all there. Rather than arbitrarily crossing all shows off the marketing plan, be selective about the ones you attend — and be strategic about your participation. 📌

at the show. Unless the company is a major player with a major announcement, it doesn't make much sense to schedule a press conference at a trade show. With fewer media attending trade shows, and staying for shorter periods of time, it can be difficult to capture the attention of enough editors to make a press conference worthwhile.

What does make sense is a soft launch, conducted in editors' offices weeks and even months prior to a show. This helps to ensure editorial coverage in show issues — those issues mailed just prior to a trade show, with bonus distribution at the shows themselves. More customers and prospects will come to a booth to discuss a new product if they've already read about it. This results in a third-party endorsement that helps leverage the trade-show investment, and helps to drive traffic to the show booth.

## At-Show Activities

As for at-show activities, some of the most successful can be editorial roundtables, co-hosted by a company and the editor of a top-tier publication, on a topic designed to showcase the sponsor company's product or technology. The people invited to the roundtable are already part of the microcosm attending the show. The resulting post-show editorial coverage reinforces the sponsor company's leadership position.

Other at-show programs that work well are prescheduled in-booth



Barbara Wellnitz, APR, is the president of Foxboro, Mass.-based Ryan Wellnitz & Associates ([www.ryanwellnitz.com](http://www.ryanwellnitz.com)), a business-to-business PR firm. She is also president of PRSA's Boston Chapter.