

Visitor Marketing at the Fair – Promotion Campaigns on the Exhibition Stand

Trade fairs are a major communication challenge for companies. Similar to the way they allocated their budget, (almost 40% of the trade fair budget is spent on the trade fair stand)* exhibitors often invest most of their time in the design and realization of the exhibition stand – forgetting that while the exhibition stand is indeed a key element of trade fair communications, it cannot guarantee the success of the exhibition participation.

Rather, the exhibition stand provides the stage for communicating with the target groups at the trade fair. At the end of an event, however, the exhibitor takes away specifically one thing: the leads, i.e. the conversation contacts he generated at his booth. This is largely what determines the success of a trade fair participation. Only if the company communicates face-to-face with a large number of people from its target group right at the event, will it also consider participation in the trade fair as a success, because the combination of quality and quantity of the discussion partners can be used to determine the potential business generated.

So, assuming the goal for most exhibitors is that they want to communicate directly with a high number of relevant business contacts, then the next step should be to consider how the company can best accomplish this.

In order to get in contact with and reach their target groups, many exhibitors rely on the organizer. The notion that the organizer is responsible for bringing visitors to the booth is understandable. Of course, trade fair organizers run extensive marketing activities to bring relevant visitors to the exhibition grounds. The specific target groups of the individual exhibitors however are best known to the exhibitor himself. It is therefore important that also the companies make a targeted approach of visitors before and during the event.

Before the fair, many companies are actively involved in visitor marketing. With print and e-mail campaigns, mostly existing but also potential business partners are invited to the trade fair booth. Inviting potential customers is a much greater challenge of course, as they are usually not recorded in the company database but are often distributed as an intangible mass across the respective business sectors. Contact data therefore must first be researched and retrieved before the trade show to be able to operate visitor marketing at all. But frequently, both time and budget for this are lacking.

However, companies can expect that many potential customers will come to the fair as visitors, especially if it is a key trade fair in their industry sector. In this context, exhibitors are faced with the difficulty of filtering out the visitors of relevance to them from the large number of overall show attendees, and of getting them interested in their own trade fair appearance. In practice, this seemingly trivial task poses a great challenge.

What can be done at the show to guide the right visitors to your stand?

What needs to be observed – for example concerning promotion campaigns on the exhibition stand – and how can the success of such activities be evaluated? Which basic considerations should be taken into account in the planning?

Strategic planning and goal-oriented implementation of promotion campaigns on the exhibition stand

Objective

Promotion campaigns on the exhibition stand to attract trade fair visitors should be prepared strategically. First of all, concrete answers should be defined to the question as to what exactly the objectives of the activity are. These may vary quite a bit. Thus, it is conceivable that for one exhibitor, it is important to get in touch with a maximum number of visitors, because he is a new player in the market and increasing awareness of his company is a priority. For a long-established company, the focus could be on other objectives. For example, an event on the stand could be used to convey image values such as "innovative", "likeable", "traditional" etc. The strategic planning of action campaigns on the stand therefore requires that the exhibitor be clear about the target direction of the intended campaign.

Entertainment vs. providing information

Another important aspect of strategic planning in this context is the ratio between entertainment and information value of a planned activity. The higher the entertainment value, the more visitors tend to show interest in the booth activity. However, there will also be many visitors following the action, who do not fit into the company's target group. The advantages of promotion campaigns that focus on sharing information are obvious. It addresses the target group and less relevant visitors will hardly be interested in the information offered. But then activities of this kind run the risk of appearing rather dry and somewhat boring. As a result, it often doesn't reach the relevant target group either. Ideally, an exhibition stand activity should always combine both elements. The decision on the right mixture should be oriented on both the target group to be addressed, and on the company's self-image, and often represents the fine line between a successful and less successful campaign.

Content design

Designing the content of a promotion campaign on the stand is increasingly oriented on the finding that it is very difficult to win new customers in saturated product markets purely with information. Crucial for the initiation of a customer relationship are often quite different, namely soft factors, such as trust, appeal, commitment, etc.

Incorporating a **testimonial/brand ambassador** game in a stand activity for example can help to subtly convey such values. Obviously, there should be a fit between the reputation of the testimonial//brand ambassador and the company's self-image.

The playful instinct and curiosity of trade fair visitors literally play into your hands when attempting to grab their attention. As soon as visitors can push buttons, slide controls or compete against other visitors or a brand ambassador, they will usually do it with quite a bit of enthusiasm, especially if enhanced by an additional incentive, like a raffle or similar.

Across industries, it can be observed that activities allowing visitors to **interact** with the exhibition stand are clearly on the rise. At a real estate trade show for example, an exhibitor designed an outer wall of his exhibition stand as a blackboard with a question, and visitors could write their answers with chalk directly on the wall.

At an IT-sector trade fair, visitors had the opportunity to send SMS messages directly to large screens suspended above the exhibition stand.

When offering such options, exhibitors should, however, also be prepared to deal with critical remarks.

Especially at leading international fairs, which also have a high share of foreign visitors, exhibitors should ask themselves very carefully whether the planned activity will attract positive attention also in an intercultural context. If your plans are a little too ambitious, they run the risk of generating reactance among visitors from certain countries. An example here is a bodypainting event, which is certainly not suitable for all cultures, yet is often seen at various international fairs.

Important is that visitor should leave the booth with a positive communication experience. Because if he remembers what he has experienced as enjoyable, he will possibly act as a multiplier by telling others about it.

Marketing

Campaigns on the exhibition stand develop the greatest possible benefit only when a high number of visitors actually notice and participate in them. So they need to be actively marketed. This may occur either at the fair or before the start of the event.

Alerting visitors about the activity on the exhibition stand should include the information when and at what intervals they are planned. This could be done via display panels, info screens, etc. on the exhibition stand, by distributing flyers at special points of interest (e.g. entrances, forums), but also directly by the stand staff in conversation with visitors, and of course by integrating the information in the marketing communications before the fair.

Participation incentives

In the context of marketing such an activity, consideration should be given to creating incentives to participate. Frequently, Trojan incentives are used. In this case, the recipient receives the first half of a promising product in advance via a marketing campaign, and the second – vitally important other half – only when visiting the exhibition stand, by providing a solution or answering a quiz, or when handing over a business card. These Trojan incentives are conceivable in any game variety. Left glove before the trade fair, right glove on the stand; a sachet of sugar before the event, the coffee on the stand; a number combination before the fair, cracking the safe on the exhibition stand. The key to success, however, is not so much the idea itself, but the inventiveness with which it is implemented.

Timing

Activities on the stand should be planned in such a way that towards the end, a maximum of visitors still follow the action. This requires building up a tension that captivates the audience and ties it to the campaign for the planned duration with emotional and informative elements.

In terms of the scheduling, it should be investigated at which times of the day and on which days the activities are best carried out. Especially for times when less public is expected at the exhibition stand, such promotion campaigns might generate additional visitor potential.

Sales bridge

Attracting the attention of visitors is relatively easy. In most cases, however, exhibitors are less concerned with attention in general and more with engaging with target audiences.

A frequently observed shortcoming of activities on the exhibition stand consists in creating a transition to initiate a conversation. This transition can also be described as a sales bridge,

designed to exploit the existing discussion potential to maximum, and requires a targeted approach by the stand staff.

In a briefing before the fair, they should be prepared specifically how to involve interested visitors or the audience in a conversation towards the end of the activity. This also includes signaling obvious willingness to talk, actively addressing activity participants, or encouraging the visitor to initiate the conversation on his own initiative.

Success evaluation of promotion campaigns

An aspect of essential importance for the evaluation of activities on the stand is defining the objectives that are being pursued with the activity.

These can be, among others:

- Generating attention
- Generating new contacts
- Increasing company or product awareness
- Presentation of innovations
- Conveying messages, benefit arguments, etc.
- Transportation / development / cultivation of specific image-building factors
- Emotionalizing visitors

In addition to the mere definition of activity objectives, there should always be a **quantification** of the goals. Each goal is thus associated with a measurable quantity. If an exhibitor's objective is to communicate various product benefits with one campaign, he could, for example, aim to measure participants' recall value of the benefit arguments as a quantitative indicator.

Once the objectives have been quantified, one should think about what specific target values are to be attained to be able to subsequently assess the extent to which the objectives have been achieved. In our example, this could mean that visitors should at least remember three out of four benefit arguments (75%). An evaluation might then show that certain benefit arguments could be communicated to 70%, and others only to 20%.

It is also important to think in advance about the instruments and personnel resources needed to measure the goals, and how the results will be documented.

The results of the evaluation may then be used, e.g. in the context of follow-up meetings during or after the show, to plan and – if necessary – to modify activities for subsequent events so as to render them more effective and achieve the intended objectives even better.

Sources:

- www.auma.de
AUMA – Association of the German Trade Fair Industry

Disclaimer: The author assumes no responsibility for the topicality, accuracy and completeness of the information provided.