

TRADE SHOW TRAUMA (a PG-13 sales tale)

Bill's booth traffic comes and goes

Dallas can be a bit cold in February, so our company came up with a great idea to draw traffic to our show booth. We decided to offer apple cider as a come on for visitors.

We got great traffic to our location!

The first day of the show, attendees rushed up to our booth, begging for something better than coffee – our hot apple cider.

Apple cider is really wonderful and this was a terrific idea for many people. However, cider, especially "hot" cider, can cause some interesting gastrointestinal effects. It seemed the "evidence" settled into the carpet and cloth surfaces of our display - and refused to leave. The stink was, uh, quite distinct.

Our popularity reversed itself during the second and third days of the show. No one would go near our booth, including some of our own sales force!

What we thought was a great idea actually drove away prospects in the end.

DAN'S POSTMORTEM: I love tradeshow! Of course, I collect sales horror stories, and tradeshow are a superb source. The observation of poorly-performing, unprofessional sales reps is great entertainment to me (not you, or your team, of course). I might go so far as to equate a tradeshow visit with a Disneyland trip. Honestly, bad reps show up in droves at these events. They fill exhibit booths (and their heads) with the attitude that customers are finally coming to them, so they get a couple days off from begging for business and can indulge in a little role reversal—the prospects are actually coming to them for a change.

Because of this, an element of laziness seems to accompany tradeshow exhibiting. I've always believed that many of these salespeople were just hoping to get “discovered” by good customers. They leave their selling skills at home and expect the visitors to walk up, introduce themselves, and throw money at them.

So I'm entertained at shows, they are my “happy hunting grounds” for selling blunders.

Unfortunately, “happy hunting grounds” has another meaning—the place where people go when they die. And sales reps die at tradeshow all day long.

Selling in a booth is very different from selling in the field. Actually, it's more about generating leads than about closing sales. Most shows aren't for selling, but for visiting old clients and qualifying new prospects.

Either way, most tradeshows are full of horrible sales practices. I'm tempted to offer proof of my feelings: to reinforce the fact that poor selling is going on, I'd love to take a video recorder and shoot people making these seven most common mistakes:

- 1) They are *sitting* in booths! There's a fine welcome for the prospect. The salesperson grunts as he or she pushes out of the seat, angry at the interruption of their rest and relaxation away from the office. Often some of the sitters are non-salespeople who get wrangled into working the show. The others are probably reps who partied a bit too late the night before (not you, or your team, of course).
- 2) They are standing behind "barriers." Some booths are simply designed wrong. Is selling about building walls, or is it about breaking them down or going around them? If, on an ideal sales call, you want to sit next to a prospect rather than having a desk between you, why would you design a sales environment that sends the wrong message to thousands of tradeshow visitors? One of us must cross over into the other's territory before anything good happens. Remove all barriers. Get out from behind the chair, table, display case, whatever. Just get nose to nose with your potential clients.
- 3) They are acting like carnival barkers: they shout and wave brochures at passersby, hoping that you'll stop and play with them. 'Nuff said, you've been there, seen that. *Bonus safety tip*: never get on a carnival ride where the operator has more than three front teeth missing.
- 4) They ask, "Can I help you?" A basic premise in selling is never to ask a question that can be answered by the word *NO!* This is a rookie mistake in retail stores. You want to ask a unique opening question that puts the visitor at ease, like "What unusual things have you seen at the show that interest you?" Notice that this is an open-ended question that invites conversation. Better yet, ask a question that might qualify the visitor, thereby determining whether you should invest talk time with him or her (see #6 below).
- 5) They shouldn't be working the show, someone else in the company should be. Many booth workers are assistants or administrative people who don't understand the sales process. A few years back, I was setting up a company's sales structure (designing campaigns and hiring manufacturer's reps) for an invention that would be introduced at the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas. This is the biggest tradeshow in the country. Whom did the owners want to have in the booth? Good-looking women (who were, of course, acquaintances, not sales reps). My disgust took the form of sarcasm. "Right, you're going to Las Vegas; good-looking women from Joliet, Illinois will really stand out." A week before the show I got the call to help out. Someone had come to their senses: the women were out and sales pros were in. Put your best people in the booths. Let the rookies spend time observing the pros before they begin to "work" the crowd.

- 6) They don't understand how many show visitors are time wasters. These people have no intention of doing business with you, but they love to chat and they love whatever you're giving away (Snickers bars get lots of traffic, a bowl of shelled peanuts does not). This problem really is a qualifying issue. How quickly can you assess the value of a visitor before investing too much talk time? Back to Las Vegas. When visitors came to our booth, I asked the qualifying question, "Would you see yourself ordering at least a thousand of these?" When the president of the company—an inventor, not a salesperson—heard this, he became extremely upset with me. He felt that I was driving away smaller potential customers. He didn't realize that I was screening out time wasters. The serious small prospects will still want to talk, regardless of minimum order size. That was the president's lesson of the day: *Qualify before presenting*. And isn't that what learning a lesson is about? Often, it means you've experienced something that didn't make sense at first, then the little light bulb went on and you mumbled, "Aha!" This is a very profitable tradeshow lesson to learn: Qualify first, present later. By the way, you might not realize how many time wasters there really are. After years of attending every imaginable show (from both sides of the booth), I was asked to write a book for retirement-aged seniors, describing how to attend tradeshow as a hobby! The book was to identify what shows would be the most fun, tell how to get in, and list all the interesting giveaways one could collect. A percentage of show attendees are there simply for the fun of it. They're out there, and they'll keep you from the visitor who has money for you, but can't get your attention while you chat with Auntie Jane. By the way, I refused to write the book – as fun as it would have been – sales reps across the planet would have had my hide for driving more time wasters into their trade show territory.

- 7) They follow up too late to have an impact, or they never follow up. I just received correspondence from two companies I met *four months earlier* at a show in Chicago. The phone calls were identical. Everyone was surprised and a little hurt that I didn't remember them. After all, we practically became blood brothers when we met (they were getting ready for the happy hunting grounds). If you don't follow up with an immediate mailing, you might as well take your Las Vegas tradeshow money to the gaming tables and skip the investment in an exhibit.

These are seven basic fixable mistakes I see at tradeshow every time I attend. Identifying them is the first step in preventing them. Does your organization spend time and money on the tradeshow circuit? It would be wise to plan for what you want to accomplish and what you want to avoid.

Remember that video recorder I'm bringing to the show to shoot bad salespeople (I like how that sounds)? You're probably wondering what I'm going to do with that tape? I'll be making copies to send to the guy in each company who cut the check for the tradeshow expenses. I hope your CFO isn't on my list.

Good hunting,
Dan