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5 pointers on unearthing gold at trade shows

Every person your company sends to a trade show costs your business at least \$2,000 out of pocket — for registration fees, air fares, hotel room rent, meal tabs, taxi fares, and that old devil, miscellaneous expenses — writes Eugene Winther, boss of Expon Exhibits of Sacramento.

And that does not include the lost productivity that always occurs when someone is away from the workplace. It all adds up. So cost-conscious companies are seeking ways to maximize their return on trade-show investments.

Fortunately, Winther writes in a recent issue of Potentials magazine, most businesses can profit from trade shows by systematic planning. He offers these five tips on how to go about it:

■ **Set your goals ahead of time**

Exactly what does your company want to accomplish by attending a given show? Unless you define your goals, the people you send to the exhibition probably will wander aimlessly through what may be a 300,000-square-foot hall packed with a dizzying array of 500 glitzy booths. A huge waste of time and money.

■ **Study the show's promotional materials**

Your company almost undoubtedly can determine the relatively small number of booths its attendees must visit at a show by reading the exhibition's advertising ahead of time.

"Especially in this age of the Internet and e-mail, a trade show might be one of the only venues where buyers and sellers actually do business face to face."

—Eugene Winther

It can begin the winnowing process three months ahead of the show date, Winther says. At 30 days out, it probably has an exhibitor list and a map of the show floor. Right up to show time, it can bring its "must-see" list to date by visiting the show's Web site.

■ **Write scripts for your attendees**

Equip your show team with sets of talking points. That way, they can control the flow of conversation at the booths they visit. Otherwise, they must let booth staffers enjoy the initiative — a waste of attendees' time and your money.

■ **Encourage your people to attend seminars and networking sessions**

"One of the compelling reasons to attend a trade show in the first place is not just to see, but to understand," Winther writes. So make your attendees budget time to sit in on educational and other meetings.

■ **Follow up**

Never assume that a company whose products interest you will remember to communicate with you after the show. Be proactive — make a mailing to your show contacts to remind them of your needs. And stress that you expect to hear from them.

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