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Also in this Issue of CI Magazine:

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[Getting Inside Your Competitor's Head: A Roadmap for Understanding Goals and Assumptions](#)

[Comprehending 'Irrational' Competitor Actions through Futures-based Analysis](#)

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Complimentary Article

Three Easy Steps for Gathering Intelligence at Trade Shows

Anne Barron, *ABCComm, Ltd.*

Most CI professionals understand the importance of using trade shows to gather primary market intelligence on key competitors and to measure and evaluate their company's marketing presence against that of others.

Despite this understanding, these same CI professionals have major concerns that need to be addressed. Specifically:

- How can I convince my company I should regularly attend key industry shows or that, at a minimum, someone at the show should be tasked with being our "eyes and ears"?
- How do I get senior management to read my reports and act on the information I provide?

Convincing evidence that the CI function is vital to any effective exhibit/marketing activity is provided by the Center for Exhibition Industry Research (CEIR), which has been studying trade and consumer shows for over 20 years. Recent CEIR reports at www.ceir.org reveal why trade and consumer shows are ideal for gathering primary data. For example:

- **The majority of exhibitors use trade shows to announce and launch new products, mergers & acquisitions, etc.** Many of these announcements don't get media coverage. By attending, you can get this information immediately instead of waiting months for an article to appear in an industry publication -- if it appears at all.
- **50% of attendees are looking for NEW solutions and suppliers.** Therefore, they tend to be eager to answer questions and take part in surveys if they feel it will help your company come up with a solution that will address their needs.
- **34% of attendees are presidents, owners, or executives who can make decisions and purchases.** These people are usually quite hard to get access to during office hours. You have an excellent opportunity to personally meet them at shows and get their perspective.
- **84% of attendees play a role in decision-making.** Almost everyone you meet at a trade show will be knowledgeable.
- **60% of attendees are there for the first time.** They can provide you with new people/organizations to contact.
- **Media and analysts attend trade shows.** You can develop a face-to-face relationship with the people who keep tabs on your industry.

Ask Management: Key Questions

Not enough? Then ask senior management a few key questions:

- What return on investment are we getting with our trade show program?
- Are you confident our booth staff know how to identify competitors who stop by? If so,
 - How do booth staff currently deal with competitors at the booth?
 - What information do booth staff gather from our competitors when they visit our booth?
 - How do booth staff report and document information they learn from competitors?
- Are you concerned that some of our staff may unwittingly share corporate intelligence with our competitors?
- What steps have been taken to ensure the booth design, layout, and messaging is accessible to prospects, customers, and visitors, yet inaccessible to competitors?

The Three-Step Process

In most cases, the answers to the above questions should raise enough serious consideration that you will be asked to have a larger participation at upcoming shows. But once you've got the green light you'll have to effectively use trade shows in the CI program, and the best way to do that is to follow three key steps of exhibit marketing.

Step 1. Plan a Successful CI Program for Each Trade Show

Often, exhibitors set unrealistic expectations. They try to do too much with very limited resources. I recommend you plan to monitor no more than five key competitors.

You also need to identify up to five key pieces of information you want to gather, how you will gather it, when you will gather it, and who will gather it.

Be sure to check the exhibitor manual or consult with show management for rules and regulations to determine what you can and cannot do.

Step 2. Train Your Staff

CEIR studies indicate that a whopping 85% of exhibitors do not train their booth staff. Most employees don't know what's expected of them. Most don't know who their key competitors are.

Booth staff need to be trained to identify all visitors before positioning and presenting your company's marketing/sales message. Staff need to be trained to ask the right questions and taught how to control the conversation. That way, they'll be listening and, therefore, less likely to share corporate intelligence with competitors.

If you have limited resources, you will also want to train staff attending the convention on what, how, when, where, why, and who should be gathering information. Nothing is more frustrating than to see several people from the same organization attending the same seminar. They should split up to cover as many sessions as possible! They should also be enlightened about ethical practices at trade shows.

Here are a few techniques to use:

- Visit a competitor's booth during busy times if you want to gather passive information.
- Visit a competitor's booth during quiet times (usually towards the end of day, lunchtime, etc.) if you want to ask direct questions.
- Always identify yourself.
- Control the interview by asking questions.
- Attend conference sessions and networking events.
- Stay in the conference hotel and use conference transit, if provided, instead of cabs.

Each day, your team should meet to review what it has gathered, what is left to be gathered, any problems that have been encountered, and any interesting trends or observations.

Step 3. Gather, Analyze, and Share

Data is not knowledge. Data becomes knowledge when you interpret it. So before you arrive at a show, you must establish simple, consistent techniques to gather information. This information must then be documented, analyzed, summarized and reported.

What does the information mean? What strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOTS) does it identify? What recommendations can you make based on the SWOTS?

Once you've analyzed the data, prepare reports tailored to each audience and share the information and your observations in a format that your intended audience can use.

By following these simple practices, trade shows can provide a wealth of opportunities to gather current, primary intelligence. They should be a major component of any CI program.

[Sidebar]

The Benefits of Trade Show CI

You'll be amazed at the information and trends you can unearth at trade shows. Consider the following examples:

Exhibitor A was able to identify that while a key competitor had a major presence in the U.S., its international presence was very poor. It was able to take advantage of this intelligence and gain valuable international market share.

Exhibitor B was able to identify that a key competitor, by putting an aggressive media campaign in place several months prior to the show, reaped impressive results delivered by the campaign.

Exhibitor C was able to identify that a key competitor was getting ready to enter a new market and could be a potential threat to future market share. Result: It had a year to prepare counter-moves.

Exhibitor D's trained booth staff were able to identify that a key competitor sent several people "fishing." When they attempted to "turn" the conversation to gather their own CI, the competitors quickly left and didn't return!

Related Reading

Shaker, Steven M. and George Kardulias (1996) "Scoring at Conferences: The Quarterback Technique for Gathering Intelligence," *Competitive Intelligence Review*, 7(4), Winter, pp 4-10. Online at www.scip.org/news/cireview.asp (vol. 7, no. 4).

Prior, Vernon (1996) "Trade Shows and Exhibitions: The Intelligence Gatherer's Cornucopia," *Competitive Intelligence Review*, 7(4), Winter, pp.77-78. Online at www.scip.org/news/cireview.asp vol. 7, no. 4).

Background

Anne Barron, CME, is president of ABComm Ltd. (www.ab-comm.com), an exhibit management and education firm that provides complete and strategic programs to monitor, analyze, and compare your exhibit marketing program to that of key competitors. Services are provided in English, French, and Spanish. Customized training programs are presented in-house. Ms. Barron spoke at the 1999 SCIP Annual Conference in Montreal and, most recently, to the SCIP Detroit chapter about CI techniques and practices at trade shows. She can be reached by tel: +1 877-403-7056 or e-mail: abarron@ab-comm.com.

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