



## Tradeshow Giveaways: Cost Center or Strategic Engagement Tool?

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**Q:** We make a significant investment in tradeshow giveaways, but why don't I see any tangible ROI?

**A:** This means you are not leveraging their true potential in a well-defined engagement strategy.

Most companies overlook the true potential of giveaways in their exhibits.

When it comes to choosing promotional items, companies are generally concerned with three things: 1) Will attendees want it; 2) Will regulatory allow it; 3) Will it fit our budget?

However, once you've found an item that checks all the boxes, they are often mis- or under-utilized, and their full potential is not realized. Yes, branded giveaways can support brand recognition or reinforcement, but consider your personal experience; when was the last time you grabbed a branded bag from the back seat of your car—that nice big one with the sturdy handles you received at last year's tradeshow—and while carrying home your groceries, gave any thought to the company whose name was carefully (and often expensively) embroidered on its side? And IF you notice the brand name, did you think to yourself, *"Hmmm. I should give Acme Widgets a call."*

Exactly.

This isn't to say that branded promotional items do not promote brand recognition ... they do. But most companies overlook their **true** potential; specifically, the role they play in achieving larger tradeshow marketing goals, including traffic management, lead gathering, and measurement.

The process of choosing the promotional item best suited to your company is best left to another conversation; that's a subjective decision, influenced heavily by your vertical market, your regulatory situation, your target audience profile, your budget, etc. This article, however,

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will explore the **role** promotional items can play in your marketing mix, and how you can use them to drive traffic, gather quality leads, and generate valuable metrics.

**Distribution.** Here are a few general tactics to keep in mind:

- **Make them work for it:** Attendees should never receive something for nothing. If you position your booth staff on the aisles of your exhibit for the sole purpose of greeting passers-by and handing them a promotional item, you may as well put a stack of \$5 bills on your Reg Desk with a sign, “Take One.” Once an attendee has received their item, they have little (to no) reason to interact with you or your brand; they’ve gotten what they wanted. The better idea is that to receive a giveaway, attendees need to do something, learn something, or share something in return.
- **Pied Piper:** If your company has a large exhibit, with several solution areas, your giveaway can be used to guide (read: lure) attendees to relevant areas of the exhibit and connect them with reps, or to drive them from one solution area to the next.
- **Measure, measure, measure:** A promotional giveaway strategy enables you to gather a great deal of valuable metrics. This refers to more than a head-count.

**Hi-Tech vs. Low-Tech.** Giveaways fall into two broad categories: low-tech (bags, hats, T-shirts, stress balls, etc.) and Hi-Tech (Multi-USB ports, Emergency Phone Chargers, Flash Drives, etc.) The lines get blurred when talking about blinky things, but for now, we’ll stick with these two categories.

Later in this article, we’ll review how hi-tech items can be used to gather quality metrics and communicate brand messaging. However, not everyone can afford these. Yes, their cost has been dropping in recent years, yet they remain slightly out of reach for many companies. And frankly, they may not be appropriate for your target audience.

So what CAN you do if you’re giving away a bag, T-shirt, or cap, apart from ... giving them away?

Imagine this scenario:

- You have implemented a sales-enabling activity in your exhibit. Of course, it’s always a good idea to consult professionals when doing this. You have dedicated booth staff focused on gathering an audience, and as attendees approach your exhibit, these staffers hand them your giveaway while asking them if they’d like to hear about your newest solution.
- The attendee demurs, and walks away with your promotional gift.

This happens all the time on the show floor, and if you’re honest, you’ve seen this happen in your exhibit, and done it yourself in someone else’s exhibit.

Now imagine this scenario.

- As attendees approach your exhibit, they are greeted and invited to participate in a sales-enabling activity, e.g. interactive media, demo, speed briefing, etc.

- As an incentive, you promise them a nice Thank You gift at its conclusion.
- When the activity is done, and after you've gathered their lead information via tablet, smartphone, etc. you reward them with a gift.

This is better. At least you made them do something; they listened to your messaging and provided their lead information. Let's kick it up one more notch:

- Same situation. Same giveaway promise.
- However, when the demo or briefing is done, attendees are informed that in order to receive their gift, they must visit the solution area of the exhibit that interests them the most and speak with a rep.
- At the kiosk, your reps meet and greet attendees, gather lead information (via tablet, phone, etc.), continue the sales conversation, answer specific questions, and offer appropriate demos. The reps then use the giveaway as a graceful way to close the interaction.

Giveaways  
generate  
conversion rates,  
which enable  
marketers to prove  
ROI

Now we're on to something. You're getting higher quality leads and reserving your giveaways for qualified leads.

This is also a good reason to ensure that your giveaway isn't TOO nice (Callaway Big Bertha Alpha 816 Double Black Driver, anyone?) This will be an "over-attract," and you'll have everyone--down to the show hall maintenance crew--clamoring to your booth.

The giveaway should be just nice enough to make the fence-sitters decide to speak with a rep. In this scenario, by the way, the reps should be adequately prepared to greet each small group as it arrives at his or her kiosk. (Staff Training?) This is yet another topic for another article.

The last bullet generates a valuable metric; a conversion rate: Why is this important? It enables you, the marketer, to demonstrate to your upper management how you not only drew people into your exhibit to listen to your message, but then how many of those people connected with a rep (the conversion rate). This is an important piece of data when justifying your market spend, and you were able to generate this metric through nothing more than some strategic planning.

This process may appear simple--almost obvious--but due to many factors, it is rarely implemented. But when it is, booth giveaways become an attract, a qualifier, a people mover, and a measurement tool.

Of course, this is just one way of guiding attendees through your exhibit, but it should kick-start your thinking.

**I'm All About the Tech.** Several years ago, one of the more popular giveaways on the show floor was the Flash Drive. At first blush, they appeared IDEAL since they could be loaded with colorful pdfs or videos of your literature. The reality, however, was this: once the attendee plugged it into their laptop, the first thing they did was delete all of your literature to make room for their files. Don't deny it ... you've done this, too.

The good news is that technology has evolved (yet again), and one of the newer advances to appear on the show floor is NFC Technology\* (Near Field Communication.) This is the technology that powers Apple Pay, Google Wallet, various gas cards, etc.

For our purposes, an NFC-enabled card (which can also be a flash drive, BTW) enables the user to “tap” it at a station in the exhibit (tablet or phone) to indicate that they want more information about that particular solution. Furthermore, a web-based app installed in the chip remembers this tap and grants instant web access to that information. The best part is, since the app is web-based, it always accesses CURRENT brand information. Furthermore, there are no “documents” on the drive to be deleted. It’s merely a conduit.

Sounds ideal, yes? But how can you use them strategically?

This giveaway strategy enables you to collect valuable metrics about your target audience’s needs, goals, and challenges.

- An attendee is engaged and qualified.
- They receive an NFC-enabled card, and a “tap” at Reg Desk (via tablet or smartphone) activates it and assigns it a unique user ID (linked with their badge scan/lead record).
- Attendees are instructed to visit areas of the booth that interest them. They can be guided by Professional Engagers, your staffers, or make their own way following clearly worded signage.
- At each area, if they wish to learn more about that solution, they “tap” their card (via tablet or smart phone), and the app records the request.
- During this process, reps positioned at each station assist with the “taps,” answer questions, and initiate sales conversations.
- When the attendee plugs their drive into their computer, the embedded web app enables them to access their requested information. Remember, the app links to only current, live data (websites, microsites, etc.). Therefore, the brand information is never outdated.
- Attendees may also be urged to visit a Social Media Station in the exhibit where they tap their card to share their experience via Facebook, LinkedIn, SnapChat, Instagram, etc. in real time.
- When attendees first plug the NFC card into their computers, (in their rooms, at home, etc.), they may be asked a few survey questions (TBD). These answers are relayed back to your company via the web app. This is a one-time occurrence.

There are a few more logistics to the process, but this brief description highlights what the strategy has accomplished:

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- Only qualified attendees are receiving the item.
- The attendee is controlling the interaction, learning only what they want to learn.
- You have a collected valuable metrics about their specific needs, goals, and challenges.
- You can determine which solution areas of the exhibit were the most popular.
- Booth reps have multiple opportunities to open relevant sales conversations.
- Real-time social media opportunities have been created.
- At- and post-event lead follow-up is focused and intelligent.

See the transformation? The attendee did not simply receive a (costly) trinket and then walk away; the giveaway drove the engagement and enabled the attendee to learn EXACTLY what they wanted to learn. (The ideal strategy for Millennials) It also generates a great deal of relevant, actionable lead and brand data.

And at hotel check-out time, when the brochures the attendee collected are left in the room's "circular file," your NFC card will be safely tucked away in their carry-on.

**Conclusion.** The strategies outlined in this article are not exhaustive; specific booths, show floors, vertical markets, and target audience profiles will require specific plans and roadmaps. However, this exploration should enable you to better appreciate the value that a well-defined and executed giveaway strategy can deliver, and that in the final analysis, you will regard tradeshow giveaways not as a cost center, but as the powerful engagement, traffic management, and measurement tools they are.

*\*Near Field Communication is a standard for short-range radio transmission. A pair of NFC transmitters (one in a chip embedded in the card, the other in the Tap station) can communicate at a maximum of just a few centimeters. Some chips are designed so that the only way they send and receive information is if you've touched the device. This is the application detailed in this article.*