The HIDDEN POWER of your Tradeshow Exhibit: Part II

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Q: I understand the value of tradeshow staff training, but apart from show-floor etiquette, what will this type of training accomplish?

A: Tradeshow Staff Training does more than equip your staff with the tools and tactics they need to succeed … it also strengthens your brand.

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In our March 30, 2016 Ignite article, we discussed the importance of Tradeshow Staff Training, as well as the difference between a pre-show staff meeting and actual training.

In this article, we'll continue that exploration by discussing how a targeted Staff Training program can support the show goals by helping participants stay on message, generate qualified leads, and speak in the universal language of stories and benefits.

For a deeper dive, please check out our White Paper, Tradeshow Staff Training: How to Create a Lead-Generation Machine

Unifying the Message. One sign of a well-trained staff, and an aligned company, is the uniformity of the message they communicate to visitors. An elevator statement is a prepared overview that briefly sums up a company's brand, purpose, value proposition, brag points, and/or other unique characteristics. It can also be a teaser, designed to leave a little mystery. Effective elevator statements are no more than a few sentences and can be spoken within about 20 seconds. They are followed by an open-ended question to determine the listener's area(s) of interest.

An elevator statement we've used successfully for our company goes like this:

> *"We create interactive experiences for tradeshows and events that bring together the message, media, and audience. Our specialty is bringing more of your target audience into the booth and keeping them there longer. So, what big shows or events does your company sponsor?"*

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Although an elevator statement ensures a unified message, one that is merely recited verbatim can sound canned or robotic. There is a better alternative to rote memorization of executive-issued statements (which in most cases are written to be read, not spoken). Having your staff create this unified message is a worthwhile team-building exercise that increases their ownership of the message.

Drawing from a list of suggested key words or ideas, staff members come up with an elevator statement that hits the right points and is easy to remember and say. An authentic, comfortable delivery matters to the staff, and to the prospects who will hear it.

In some cases, a single elevator statement may not be enough. A multinational health care company created a separate elevator statement for three of its core areas of expertise: *Clinical Integration and Collaboration, Patient Focus,* and *Improved Economic Value*. For the healthcare company's annual Staff Training, GetSynchronicity taught staffers a process by which they could quickly discover their prospects' needs and then deliver the appropriate elevator statement to take the conversation farther. As the staff became conversant in all three message tracks, their confidence levels increased. Company, customers, and staff benefited from the alignment of message and purpose communicated throughout the exhibit.

Not so long ago, message control at tradeshows was primarily the concern of company representatives designated to speak to the press. Press emissaries are no less important today, but with one critical difference: social media has turned every booth visitor into a potential reporter capable of influencing public perception. Conversations now travel far beyond the booth in seconds, which is all the more reason to ensure that the message is both compelling and consistent.

Identifying the Target Customer. Most preshow meeting organizers take time to identify the various job titles and industries that are the company's target customer at the show. However, the discussion should not end there. The staff also needs to understand:

- What are the typical responsibilities of each target customer profile?
- What are likely to be their most pressing needs or concerns?
- What products or services—and related benefits—could therefore be of greatest interest to them?
- Which company examples or success stories would the various target customers find most relevant? Would the same case study selected for a VP Operations be as persuasive for a VP Human Resources?
- How could the demo be altered to be most relevant to the respective target customers?
- Which target customers should be introduced to others on the team?

A more accurate and detailed picture of each target customer will emerge naturally, of course, during the qualifying process.

Qualifying. Relationships begin the moment a staffer makes eye contact with an attendee and starts a conversation. A training module that focuses on engaging openers and icebreakers is time well spent. The more options staffers have to initiate conversations, the greater the chances that each person will find one he or she is comfortable with—and use it to transition into the qualifying process.

Qualifying, the pathway to new business, should be the centerpiece of a Staff Training program. Qualifying is a natural corrective to the inexperienced staffer's tendency to talk more than listen.

If the staffer is merely entering data rather than connecting with the prospect, a major opportunity for relationship building is lost.

The first thing a qualifying module should stress is that tradeshows are not about showing how much one knows but about discovering how much one can learn. And that entails asking targeted open-ended questions and listening carefully to the responses.

Customized paper and electronic lead-capture systems already include the qualifying questions deemed most important for the company. All the staffer has to do is enter the prospect's responses where indicated. No matter how simple the process is, however, a bit of training is needed here.

If the staffer is merely entering data rather than connecting with the prospect, a major opportunity for relationship building is lost. (Option: Hiring professional brand ambassadors or concierge staffers to prequalify visitors can help staff focus exclusively on building the relationship.)

Role plays are instructive and fun ways for staffers to practice qualifying. Learners can benefit from feedback from the facilitator and their peers, to become better at:

- Maintaining eye contact during lead capture (very challenging when using an electronic device)
- Keeping the process conversational (especially when asking the same questions hour after hour)
- Asking clarifying questions when necessary
- Summarizing the prospect's needs to demonstrate understanding and empathy

The qualifying module is the most potent opportunity to tie the qualifying process to the staff's chief purpose of finding new business leads. From this point in the program, a natural progression would be a discussion on how to secure follow-up with qualified prospects and how to graciously disengage from prospects and non-prospects. Again, role plays are very useful for getting staffers on their feet and trying out skills in a no-risk environment.

And here's a sobering thought. Without Staff Training, company representatives will use the show to practice these techniques. How many actual prospects might they practice on—and get it wrong—before they get it right?

Presenting the Products and Services. If the engaging opener evolves to an elevator statement … and the elevator statement leads to qualifying … the staffer has uncovered the information needed to further the conversation about products and services most relevant to the prospect. That conversation may take the form of a more in-depth discussion, a product demo, or a handoff to another member of the staff.

A comprehensive Staff Training program should offer staffers presentation guidelines and practice opportunities for the following skills:

Demos. Staffers who focus too much on the mechanics of data capture can lose face-to-face connection with prospects. Demos present similar traps. Demo practice and coaching can help enhance interactivity, spatial relationships, content customization, demo length, summaries, and other professional considerations.

Storytelling. Unless otherwise encouraged, most staffers will not include real-world examples, success stories, or personal experiences in their interactions with prospects. Yet the right story well told creates a compelling "Before and After" for the listener. Almost immediately, the structure of a story invites curiosity. The unspoken question How will it all turn out? engages (and thus influences) the prospect. Good storytelling integrates seamlessly into conversations, as in …

> *"Evelyn, thanks for that snapshot of your situation. Your business challenges sound very similar to some we helped solve for a client of ours. The client was having trouble keeping its sensitive electronic equipment dust-free in containers that were supposedly airtight. They had already replaced two new systems because of the problem, at great expense, and were extremely frustrated. We came in and proposed a solution that … "*

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Benefits. Untrained staffers waste time touting the features of their products and services instead of communicating the benefits. Even seasoned staffers can forget the basic fact that benefits speak to self-interest. How will the item help the prospect save money? Increase revenue? Be more productive? Beat the competition? Reduce stress? Live or work more confidently? Be a hero? Enhance status? Speaking in the language of benefits gets to the very heart of what motivates purchases.

After all, it's not the number of bristles that sells a toothbrush; it's the promise that the toothbrush will help us maintain a sexy smile and avoid the pain of costly dental repairs. That is what staffers need to remember. And adding stories to the value proposition amplifies the Handling Tough Questions

It is important—for all concerned—that staff be able to comfortably navigate through rocky topics.

If there are potentially sensitive or embarrassing questions that visitors might ask, these should be discussed in the preshow meeting or Staff Training.

As with elevator statements, a great deal of time can be saved if the questions and recommended answers are identified in advance and shared at the meeting. Staffers can then pair up and alternate in the roles of questioner and responder. At the show, the tradeshow manager can keep staffers on their toes by randomly "ambushing" them with the targeted questions … and providing feedback on their responses.

Think of it like a sport; would you want your team going out on the playing field without running drills and participating in practice games?

A similar exercise can help staffers effectively address the most basic (noncontroversial) questions about the brand, products, promotional campaign, or the goals of the show. During a consumer home show, a sales VP used some of the slower moments to approach individual staffers and ask questions that had been covered in the training, such as “How many leads per staffer per hour will it take for us to meet our goals?” and “What are two things that differentiate us from the competition?” Impromptu refresher quizzes can help keep staff sharp.

Raising Morale and Ensuring Continuous Improvement. Some employees consider tradeshows like jury duty. They don’t want to go but know they have very little say in the matter. Their opinion on shows is low long before the lanyard is slipped over their necks. They may have heard about long hours, stretches of zero booth traffic, passersby who ignore friendly “hellos,” and the pressure to find leads. If they are show veterans, they will know these and other challenges from personal experience.

Conclusion. There’s no question about it. Working at a tradeshow is hard work. Staffers, both experienced and fresh off-the-boat, can be easily derailed and discouraged due to attendee disinterest, recalcitrance, or just plain rudeness.

Proper training, however, will arm your staff with the powerful tools and mental processes they need to persevere.

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I didn’t think so.