

# Tips for Trade Show Visitors: How to Gain Greater Results from an Exposition

**A**s manager of Canada's first and largest computer trade show, I have watched hundreds of thousands of people - from junior to top executives - walk through a range of expositions. They all have their own browsing styles, their own negotiating techniques and their own reasons for attending. Regardless, they do have one thing in common: a desire to get something out of the show.

There are a number of proven ways to ensure benefit from and make the most of a trade show. By following a few guidelines, visitors can better manage their time, double their productivity and yield maximum return from any exposition they attend.

**1. Do your homework well in advance.** Up to three months before the show, start jotting down needs, questions or problems you identify in the workplace that could relate to the show. Ask your co-workers for their input as well. This will allow you to set tangible objectives which will make your show visit more manageable and successful. The next step is to do preliminary research into the products and services you believe may help you and into the companies that provide them. An effective and time-efficient way to gather this information is through the show industry's major trade publications, which can refer you to current articles on topics matching your questions. Many shows also produce a pre-show guide - usually published one month in advance - which is key in your research. This pre-show homework will help you make more informed decisions at the show. It is particularly important for more technical trade shows, such as computer and high-technology shows, where products and systems are continually changing.

**2. Set objectives.** Identify what you aim to accomplish at the show. Setting objectives will not only assist in plotting a precise strategy, but it will also keep you motivated and enthusiastic throughout the course of the day. If

you keep your show goals in mind at all times, you will avoid being distracted and wasting time and will be successful in accomplishing what you set out to do.

**3. Develop your route the day before.** Without a physical picture in your mind of the route you're going to take, you will undoubtedly just wander through the exposition and therefore lose effectiveness. A precise plan will enable you to organize your time before the show so that you can maximize your time at the show. The

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day before, study the pre-show guide and highlight products or programs of interest to you, along with the booth number. Determine who you want to talk to and the questions you want to ask. Then refer to the floor plan and map out a route for yourself that makes the most geographic sense, plotting specific times of where you want to be when. And be realistic; if you have a major project that should take two days to research, don't allot yourself only four hours.

**4. Start by scanning.** Rather than rushing through the trade show doors to delve into your plan, get oriented with the show first. Take the time to scan the booths - without talking to the exhibitors - and see what's there from

afar. This will confirm that what you're looking for is available and might even add to your original "wish list", which ultimately will save you time later on. As well, you can use this time to study show guide systems on site. For example, the Canadian Computer Show colour-codes the carpeting to match the show guide floor plan and has electronic show guides on-site which allow visitors to key in what they're looking for and receive a listing or where to find it.

**5. Review plan just before making your rounds.** Once you have scanned the exposition, take time to review your plan and the questions you want to ask. Revise them if necessary and ensure your strategy is realistic. Visiting too many booths may leave you confused and unfocused, which inevitably will lessen the impact of your plan.

**6. Ask questions, be upfront.** To avoid wasting your time (and the time of the exhibitors) and to get honest answers, be straightforward with your questions. Tell the exhibitor pointedly what your problem is, and ask how it can be solved and how that particular company handles it. Make it very clear, very quickly. Don't be afraid to probe and ask the same question more than once, rewording it to fit the situation. This will encourage expanded answers and will give you more detailed information, flushing out the facts needed to make a decision to buy. If desired, get second opinions: ask to speak to the product specialist or technical manager. And be prepared to discuss your financial parameters.

**7. Don't overload on handout material.** Remember to keep your goal in mind at all times and weigh the worth of every brochure, business card or give-away you are offered. Overloading on hand-outs will cause you to get off track. Ask yourself: "Do I have a need for this information?" "Will it help me achieve my goal?" and "What will I most likely do with it after the

show?" If your answers are not positive, chances are you're better off and less burdened without the material. It is not rude to say "no" and it doesn't make sense to say "yes" without reason. If you're not sure, take a business card; you can always call for the information later.

**8. Take notes.** To make the most of the hand-out material you do select, write brief notes on the products or services and some of the key points the representatives make. Note-taking is important because you will visit so many exhibits during the course of the day that you probably won't remember all of them or what was said, especially if you don't review the materials until days or weeks later. Useful tools for note-taking are paper clips and small note paper or "post-it notes" with an adhesive strip, which you can attach directly onto the material. Notes will also help you discuss key items with co-workers following the show.

**9. Turn nerves into positive stress.** Trade shows - with their characteristic crowds and commotion - can be nerve-racking, leaving you stressed and uptight. To avoid falling victim to the hectic demands of a show and maintain enthusiasm and strength, have your objectives in mind at all times and use your stress positively to keep you motivated. Take 15-minute breaks every now and then to absorb the information you have gathered. Establish priorities. And promise yourself that if you accomplish what needs to be done, you will reward yourself with something that is more enjoyable to do.

**10. Provide feedback.** Providing feedback to show organizers and exhibitors ultimately benefits you, the attendee. However informal, feedback assists those managing and participating in the trade show to better meet visitors' needs by helping to structure the next show. Show managers and exhibitors are generally open to and welcome comments; after all, it's for the visitors that they're organizing or participating in the exposition and, like you, they too want you to get something out of the show.

*Robert Grainger is a Group Show Manager of the Canadian Computer Show and Conference, Canada's largest and North America's oldest computer show, managed and produced by Industrial Trade & Consumer Shows Inc. The show runs this year from October 21 to 24, 10:00 am to 6:00 pm daily, at the International Centre in Mississauga. Δ*