

## Trade Show Trade Secrets

You see it all the time at trade shows – two booths for two manufactures whose product lines, quality, target market and price points are similar. Yet Company A's booth experiences a steady stream of current customers, hot prospects and members of the media, while Company B's booth gets mainly well-wishers from other exhibitors and lookey-loos.

What makes the difference? Company A did effective advance work through preshow marketing, while Company B simply did what it's always done – whatever that may be. The secret to trade show success lies in launching a well-planned campaign prior to the show to ensure that you'll not only generate more traffic, but better business prospects.

To begin, build a database consisting of the previous year's attendees and the show's pre-registered attendees list, which is typically available on the official event website as an Excel file. Some attendees on the pre-registered list will be more pertinent to your business than others – identify them and refine the list to consist of those who will have a positive impact by visiting your booth.

About 30 or 45 days before the show, mail a personalized invitation to each attendee on your list. Offer an incentive to visit your booth, such as a premium level giveaway or the chance to enter a drawing or contest. Include a way for invitees to respond, such as a fax-back appointment form. The invitation should also highlight any new product/product line you plan to launch – or at least hint at its introduction, if you don't want to give competitors a heads-up. The important message to convey through this direct mailing is that invitees will receive something special that will not be available to other show attendees.

Putting your website to work will also generate interest. Post an announcement of your presence at the show. Include booth number and the venue floor plan, with any other relevant information. Allow those you invited by direct mail – as well as all other qualified parties – to register online.

Follow up by fax or e-mail two weeks after the initial mailing with a brief, "we look forward to seeing you at our booth" message. Restate the incentive you offered in the invitation. The week before the show, make phone calls to personally confirm appointments or ask why there was no response to the invitation or follow-up. Once those on your list realize the value you place upon their visit, they're more likely to already feel like a V.I.P. and put your booth on their "A" list.

