

How to Exhibit Successfully – 10 Steps to Certain Success at a Trade Fair

Daniel Gundelach

ToyKnowHow

Spielwarenmesse eG

...connecting the toy world



How to Exhibit Successfully – 10 Steps to Certain Success at a Trade Fair

Exhibiting at trade fairs is one of the most complex marketing tools of all. Because it involves multi-dimensional communication, there are many points at which adjustments can be made that will have a decisive influence on the factors determining success.

In practice, preparing to attend a trade fair is often not a major priority, especially in small and medium size companies, because no specific resources have been allocated to it. In consequence, we see that at least some of the potential of the trade fair as a platform for communication and acquiring new customers remains unexploited by exhibiting companies.

In the following, we present ten success factors for exhibiting at trade fairs and we give practical tips on how exhibiting firms can manage these factors to their benefit.

Success factor 1: Clear definition of the aims of exhibiting

If you do not set yourself specific aims, you will not achieve them. There is a lot of truth in what seems like a platitude. The goals of a company at a trade fair are often perceived quite differently by different people in the company. The sales department pursues different aims from marketing, and the perception of aims by product development is not what the management has in mind. At first, this may not be surprising and is perfectly legitimate, although looking at trade fair attendance from these various angles not infrequently results in conflicting aims. To avoid these conflicts and to decide a unified approach by everyone involved in the fair, we recommend holding a kick-off meeting attended by all departments in the company. The function of this meeting is to establish aims and objectives, because how they are defined determines the planning of the company's presence at a fair – from how the stand is laid out, its functionality and design and the choice of products on display to deciding on visitor invitations and dealing with guests on the stand.

What tools can help to define the aims at a trade fair?

The practical and free online "Trade Fair Benefit Check" produced by AUMA* gives companies a detailed breakdown of the most important goals when taking part in a trade fair. The lists do not claim to be complete, but they are at least a good overview, and they group the aims in several different categories. The method used by the "Trade Fair Benefit Check" is very helpful: as well as listing possible aims, it shows which success factors influence each aim and how to measure the extent to which an aim has been achieved. More information is available at www.auma.de.

How can exhibiting aims become the core aspects of planning?

At an early stage, all parts of the company directly involved in attending a fair should contribute to planning. Working out and coordinating the aims is conducive to more willing acceptance by all concerned.

What are the advantages of having aims for a fair?

If you have aims, they provide a basis for consistent communication at a fair, and they create a thread running through all activities to which everyone must adhere. The aims are also used for the basic measurement of success when the fair comes to an end. The clearer the definition of aims the better the prospects of success.

Practical tips:

- The definition of aims should take account of the company's corporate and marketing aims.
- Aims should be realistic and precisely quantified, i.e. they must be measurable.
- It should be stated how, when and by whom the achievement of each aim will be assessed.
- All the people involved in the fair should be informed about the aims in a written document.

Success factor 2: Budget planning

Studies of actual practice have revealed that fewer than 50 % of all exhibitors have a fixed budget for trade fairs. Even if the people in the company who are responsible for attending a trade fair are not required to produce a report on the necessary finance, clear budget planning and control nevertheless represent an added value. In this way, planners are clear about the cost structure of taking part. If financial planning is continued over several years, budget benchmarking becomes possible. You can see at a glance how individual cost items have developed, and you can extrapolate the budget requirements for attendance at trade fairs in the years ahead.

The realistic calculation of a budget creates a solid financial basis for a company's participation in a fair. Rough estimates, guesstimates or picking a number out of the air often lead to compromise solutions that can put the aims in danger. That's why it is crucial from the outset to have a reliable overview of the costs that will accrue.

What cost items should be included in a budget calculation?

AUMA's "Trade Fair Benefit Check" (www.auma.de) provides an overview not only of goals but also of cost items involved in attending a fair.

How can you keep the budget for exhibiting at a fair as low as possible?

Early planning means saving cash. Nothing causes more costs than short-term changes or last-minute orders. You should also check how and where you can get your hands on existing materials, for example for equipping the stand or for marketing. Regular coordination with the whole team ensures you will keep to the budget.

Practical tips:

- A budget checklist helps you to keep a record of all cost items connected with a fair.
- The budget for a fair should be based on facts and not on rough estimates. You can usually find out actual prices online in, for example, the online shop of the organizer and the service partners of the trade fair.
- Calculating expenditure after the fair has been held gives a clear indication of whether you have deviated from the budget and provides the basis for budget negotiations in respect of future participation in fairs.

Success factor 3: Exhibition stand concept

Convince people with the right idea! An impressive stand attracts visitors, and they look with interest at the company and the products on display. The crucial issue here is not just the stand budget and the size of the stand but also a coherent stand concept that is derived from the goals the exhibitor sets out to achieve at a fair.

What are the characteristics of a good stand concept?

The optimal stand concept is first and foremost in line with the defined goals of attending the fair.

If an exhibitor would like to improve the public's recognition of his products, for example, the stand concept ensures that the priority is the display of products. On the other hand, if the most important goal is contacting new customers, the focus is on making the stand conspicuous at a distance and on features that catch the eye. In all cases, the stand concept should incorporate a clearly formulated message, so that at a glance the public is made aware of the exhibitor's core activity.

Professional visitors often prepare their visit to a fair by looking at the homepage of an exhibitor. In this context, when designing their stand companies should make sure there is a fit between the way they present themselves on the Internet (and other marketing channels) and their presence at the fair.

Trade fairs live by direct communication. So it is important to plan areas where discussions can be held in a congenial atmosphere. Another important part of the overall vision of the stand is planning the details. Exhibitors should ensure there is an optimal selection of products on display and pay attention to the targeted use of graphics, light, colour and materials.

What should be considered when laying out the stand?

Eye-catching features should be placed on the perimeter of the stand. In this area visitors often have the opportunity to engage interactively – via touch screens, for example – with selected themes.

Information counters as the first point of contact should be clearly visible, which helps to break down the communication barriers that exist between an exhibitor and a visitor who does not have detailed knowledge of the firm on the stand. Prominently placed signs should indicate clearly the separate areas of the stand, and there should be no barriers to impede access. The exhibitor must ensure that there is sufficient space for exhibits and for the media being used for their presentation, with enough space round the exhibits themselves. The firm must also include in its planning enough space for facilities like storage and cloakroom, and above all for catering and hospitality for the guests.

What information does a stand construction company need to develop a stand concept?

The more background information the partner constructing the stand has the more the stand concept will be geared to achieving the client's goals at the fair. Specific information about the stand's position at the fair, its size and type of surface is important. It helps the stand construction partner if the exhibiting firm can supply photos of attendance at previous fairs or examples of stands whose design can be used as a model. The stand constructors also need precise information about the planned activities on the stand (for example presentations, demonstrations, events, etc.) and a rough idea of the budget allocated to it.

Practical tips:

- The exhibition stand should reflect the company's Corporate Identity.
- Visitors should be "glued" to the stand in all senses and be able to recognise at a glance the world in which the company operates.
- When calling for tenders, not more than 3 or 4 stand construction companies should be approached.

Success factor 4: Visitor marketing

At a trade fair, nothing is more inefficient than relying on chance and hope. With targeted visitor marketing, exhibiting firms ensure that the right visitors are welcomed on their stand.

Trade fair companies invest a large slice of their budget in advertising trade fairs, and they ensure that large numbers of professional visitors attend them. However, this does not automatically mean that these visitors make contact with all the exhibitors relevant to them. Precisely in the case of large-scale fairs it is, therefore, essential that exhibitors are involved in marketing their own presence at the fair and that they draw the attention of potential visitors to their presence well in advance and encourage them to visit their stand.

Why are visitor invitations so important?

According to a current AUMA survey, of all the ways of addressing visitors an invitation to a fair is the most effective. Also, invitations to a fair are an outstanding opportunity to differentiate yourself from the competition at an early stage and to generate interest. The most important point is, however, the fact that visitors' time is limited. More than 80 % of all professional visitors plan their visit to a fair well in advance and arrange important appointments for discussions.

How do you plan an invitation campaign properly?

The most important rule first: early planning pays in the end. Just updating and adding to the address data takes a lot of time – but it is vital. After all, the right approach to visitors is the highest priority.

When you send out invitations, you have to remember that executives and guests who come a long way need more time to plan their appointments. You also have to take account of public holidays and vacations.

The internal organizational processes in particular have to be defined at an early stage: Who do responses go to? Who coordinates the appointments at the fair and how? Have the marketing staff been informed about the invitations that have been sent out, and do they have the right information to respond appropriately when interested visitors approach them?

How can an exhibitor use his invitation to differentiate his company from other exhibitors?

Multi-stage, cross-media invitation campaigns attract the highest level of attention. A proven method is a “Save the Date” email as the first step; the second is the written invitation in letter form, and finally a personal phone call as a reminder shortly before the start of the fair. Incentives such as a lottery, reference to innovations, vouchers, invitations to an event to be held on the stand and special campaigns are all ways of making people more interested in visiting a particular stand. Easily integrated and very popular with visitors are admission vouchers that can be ordered from the organizer of a fair and give visitors free entry.

Practical tips:

- Invitations to the fair should be an integral component in a company’s overall communication about a fair.
- A multi-stage approach to visitors achieves a long-lasting effect.
- In the case of high-potential visitors, an appointment to visit the stand should always be made before the start of the fair.

Success factor 5: Focus on new contacts

Trade fairs are an ideal tool for making new contacts, and many companies taking part in a trade fair focus specifically on this objective. For the marketing staff in a company, this always leads to a conflict of aims. To overstate the point: under normal circumstances, it is much more pleasant to arrange to have a coffee on the stand with existing customers than being on the lookout for new business contacts. You are within your comfort zone, you know who you are talking to and more or less what the conversation will be about. Making new contacts is a different scenario: you do not know the person opposite you, or what the conversation is going to be about, how long it will last, how it will progress and what the outcome will be. “Pain” is always involved when it comes to acquiring new customers, but ultimately, as a rule, it is the new contacts, of course, which move a company forward.

How can an exhibitor reach potential visitors before the start of a trade fair?

If you want to generate new contacts, you have to inform potential visitors about your participation in a fair. Announcing that you will be presenting your firm at a fair should be an integral part of your overall communication. It is also an opportunity to refer to highlights such as lectures by renowned experts or exclusive product premieres. It is particularly important to invite potential new customers. As well as the addresses in your own database, address and mailing list brokers can supply contacts who you can approach before the start of the trade fair. Subscribers to newsletters and community platforms are valuable sources too.

The communication platforms of the trade fair itself offer numerous opportunities to draw people’s attention to you. These platforms include entries in the trade fair catalogue, the database of exhibitors and banner advertising on the fair’s home page.

Also, energetic public relations in advance of the fair may be conducive to editorial reporting about your highlights and innovations at the fair.

How can an exhibitor capture the interest of visitors during the fair?

If you are to capture the interest of a potential new customer at a fair, he must be able to recognise at first glance what the company is offering. Especially eye-catching features or campaigns can increase the attention paid by the visitor. Many trade fairs also offer the opportunity to use advertising space on the exhibition site to direct visitors to your stand. By collaborating with other exhibitors, pointers to your stand can be placed on the stands of partners.

Practical tips:

- Companies should determine what percentage of new customers they want to achieve.
- In advance of the fair, companies should invest time in researching potential new customers, and they should make appointments to meet them at the fair.
- The stand team should be incentivized to make a special effort to recruit new contacts.

Success factor 6: Staff briefing

A crucial success factor is how a discussion with a customer on the stand progresses. If stand personnel are to be optimally prepared for customer conversations, comprehensive briefing is essential. Many companies underestimate the necessity of providing employees with a structured explanation of the concept and goals of trade fair participation. In the case of smaller firms this is perhaps not so important, because at least some of the staff on the stand are the same people who have prepared their company's presence at the fair. As soon as the team going to the fair consists of people who were not, or only marginally, involved in preparations, intensive briefing is vital if all those involved are to operate and communicate in line with the goals set by the company.

What information do stand personnel need to be fully prepared?

To engage in discussions with visitors on the stand, it is vital that the representatives have precise knowledge of the defined goals, messages and strategies of their company at the fair. The more exact the knowledge company personnel have about what and who awaits them at the fair the better their preparation for encounters on the stand. Also, companies should not forget to give their stand staff information about invited target groups and the composition of the visitors.

For the duration of a trade fair, a company's presence is represented by its stand. For this reason, company personnel should know precisely what is happening around them – not only their exact position on the exhibition site but also which competitors are also presenting themselves, in what form and with what products and services.

How can I ensure smooth organization of the stand?

It is crucial to have a clear allocation of responsibilities on the stand to ensure that everything runs smoothly. In particular, it has to be decided who in each section is the contact person dealing with press enquiries and who is responsible for organizational issues. Everybody should have a phone list of the most important contact staff on the stand and a breakdown of appointments, events and stand campaigns.

If you are going to make as many new contacts as possible, it is sensible to time-limit discussions. Also, all employees must be familiar with the procedures for documenting discussions – before the start of the fair.

How do I prepare my stand staff optimally?

Early training sessions for attendance at trade fairs are an important means of preparing everyone taking part for actual situations on the stand and agreeing the right way to communicate. You can really help your stand staff by giving them a written briefing that summarizes all the relevant aspects of participating in a trade fair.

The day before the fair opens should be used for a short kick-off meeting to deal with organizational details and any questions still to be answered, as an introduction to the stand and to repeat the most important communication guidelines. Daily meetings are necessary during the fair too. Staff need orientation and, of course, a large measure of praise if they are to start each day fully motivated.

Practical tips:

- The briefing of staff should not be only in written form but also face-to-face.
- Briefing staff should not come to an end when the fair begins.
- People do not listen to a voice within the company – a trainer from outside the company is recommended for the various aspects of communication.

Success factor 7: Trade fair discussions

A significant advantage of trade fairs is the fact that you can engage in live communication with people who show an interest, customers and partners. Trade fairs are forums for communication, and this is why the focal point on the stand is the successful dialogue with customers. All the preparations by the company and the stand concept should be geared to generating lots of high-value discussions with visitors to the fair, because in saturated product markets the best way to differentiate yourself from competitor exhibitors is to exploit the soft factors of direct communication.

How do you conduct a successful trade fair discussion?

Discussions are dialogues. A monologue about your own achievements, products and services does not lead to the desired outcome. You have to give priority to the requirements and needs of your discussion partner. So it is not only a matter of answering questions but rather of you probing for information. When a discussion comes to an end, it should be clear what will happen after the trade fair, i.e. who will contact the visitor, when and in what form.

What is the right way to approach visitors?

When a visitor enters the stand, he should be given a little time to orientate himself. First of all, you make eye contact and then you get into conversation with him with an open – ideally situational – question. And very important: the stand personnel should always know which visitor they are at that moment investing time in. Introductions are initiated by the representative on the stand when the visitor hands over his visiting card and should take place in the first third of the discussion.

How do you monitor the quality of discussions?

If you evaluate a discussion yourself, it is bound to be subjective. Communication with customers and the quality of the treatment they experience can be improved by means of so-called “mystery visits” by objective assessors. You can also get evidence-based feedback from an online survey of visitors that asks about the quality of the way they were handled on the stand. How to improve the next attendance at a trade fair can be based on this feedback, or it can be included in the kick-off meeting the next morning in order to improve the quality of service being offered during the current fair.

Practical tips:

- Personnel should be prepared for the challenges of communication at a trade fair.
- Personnel should be trained in how to deal in particular with critical situations like complaints.
- The approximate length of a discussion should be defined in advance, so that the stand team is aware that time for communication at a trade fair is a scarce commodity.
- How well qualified a discussion partner is should be established at the start of the discussion.
- A discussion at a trade fair is not about the products of a firm but about the requirements of the visitor and how these can be met by means of the company's products or services.

Success factor 8: Record of contacts/lead management

Companies invest a great deal to be exhibitors at trade fairs. And when the fair is over – alongside the soft factors like image communication and industry presence – you are left with one thing in particular: the contact made by colleagues with visitors. This is the direct return on the exhibitor's commitment that he takes home with him and that represents the business potential arising from his participation in the fair. Against this background, exhibitors should give top priority to the structured recording and digitization of information about contacts and discussions.

What should be done prior to a fair regarding the recording of contacts?

Companies should decide on standardized forms for creating a record of discussions. Discussion forms ensure that all relevant information is sought during the discussion and offer the stand team a guideline for discussions. At the next stage, forms make it easy to process and evaluate the contacts rapidly and ensure that this work is carried out. Before the start of the fair, a thank-you letter can be prepared that will be sent to everyone who visited the stand.

How do you record contacts on the stand?

If the information arising from discussions is to be evaluated, it has to be recorded immediately after the discussion. Notes made during the discussion show the visitor that his concerns are being taken seriously. However, notes should be made openly so that he can see what you are writing to avoid an adverse reaction on the part of the visitor. In all cases, notes of discussions should be accompanied by the contact data or the visiting card of the discussion partner.

How expensive is professional contact data capture?

With the right tools, you save a lot of time and ensure that all the data and discussion forms are digitized while the fair is still going on. Professional lead management systems capture electronically all the contact data and discussion information of visitors to the stand. This method immediately collects all the important contact and discussion data. They are instantly available for processing or, for example, so that information material can be sent out.

Practical tips:

- A standardized discussion protocol should be used, so that all discussions can be documented.
- Stand personnel must be made aware of the importance of collecting contact data and of the processes involved.
- Before the start of the fair, resources should be allocated for digitizing contacts, for example in Excel or CRM.

Success factor 9: Follow-up evaluation of a trade fair

When a fair is over, “harvest time” begins. All the business potential generated at a fair is concentrated in the discussion protocols that were produced during the fair. To ensure that they adhere to any agreements made with visitors to their stand, companies should prepare specifically for coping with this extra work, and they should operate follow-up evaluation procedures in such a way that the leads acquired at a fair can be processed alongside the company’s normal business.

Why is follow-up evaluation of a trade fair really so important?

Visitors have lots of discussions at a fair – not with just one company but also with that company’s competitors. In this context, a study by AUMA established that over 50 % of trade fair visitors were dissatisfied with the follow-up work of exhibitors. So there is an especially big opportunity here to show you are different from the competition.

What are the characteristics of good follow-up work by marketing personnel?

Good follow-up by marketing staff would typically involve reacting quickly and addressing the issues raised by the visitor. The least visitors expect is that promises will be kept – and that, for example, sending them information material and offers is not endlessly delayed. But just keeping a promise is not enough to get a positive reaction from the visitors. Only when the company clearly exceeds the expectations of their discussion partners – for example in terms of speed and the nature of their reaction – will visitors also react in a noticeably positive way.

How does an exhibitor manage to profit from the experiences of all those involved in the trade fair?

As well as the data supplied by the trade fair's own market research, the feedback of all employees and service providers involved in the fair supplies important indicators that are needed to improve the next trade fair project. Feedback meetings, debriefing sessions, etc., should be carried out without delay after the fair comes to an end, so that impressions, ideas, praise and also criticism are not lost. It is not just a question of collecting results – they should be documented in a structured way, so that all the information is available in a single source when you start to plan your next attendance at a fair.

More important than compiling feedback is, of course, the development process that can be set in motion by the information. In all cases, indicating where improvements can be made and recommending where action has to be taken for subsequent projects should round off the results of the follow-up evaluation of the firm's experience of the trade fair.

Practical tips:

- All the processes involved in the follow-up evaluation should be defined clearly before the fair begins.
- Rapid reaction increases the potential for greater turnover after the fair and ensures competitive advantages.
- Promises should in all cases be fulfilled. In an ideal scenario, company personnel influence the expectations of visitors during their discussions in such a way that they are exceeded after the fair has ended.
- After one trade fair is before the next – the accumulated feedback of the whole team at the fair should be documented, and it should lead to recommended action for the next fair.

Success factor 10: Monitoring success

Many companies claim to get better every time they attend a trade fair. The success of their presence at a fair is not left to chance but analyzed with great precision. What goals were achieved and to what extent? A sound analysis of this question helps a company to keep on developing its commitment to trade fairs and to ensure a more successful presence each time they participate.

What tells an exhibitor that a trade fair was a success?

One of the most important sources of information is certainly the evaluation of contacts made at the fair. The discussion documentation is an exact indicator of the number and quality of the discussions.

But passive contacts too should be regarded as success. Which companies were noticed by visitors and how they were noticed can be discovered via visitor surveys. The ratio of total visitors to a fair and your active contacts can be key data for assessing your level of success. The number of contacts per member of stand staff and the number of contacts per target group can also be performance indicators. You naturally have to investigate who among the invited guests actually visited the stand, whether the available time for communication was spent with the right target groups and how high the convergence rate of new contacts is, i.e. from what percentage of new contacts did projects materialize after the fair.

What factors does an exhibitor take into account in evaluating the success of a trade fair?

When measuring success, exhibitors are always guided by the goals they defined before the start of the fair. By documenting the results of participation in a lot of fairs, the exhibitor can filter out reliable information about the success of fairs as a marketing tool and he can benchmark – which is a guide when assessing his performance at a particular fair. The data supplied by the organizer of a trade fair are also figures that help to measure the degree of success.

When quantifying success, you should always remember that trade fairs have a long-term impact and give rise to many benefits, quite apart from generating contacts and turnover. Examples are communicating the corporate image or raising a company's profile.

How can an exhibitor determine his own key data?

Firm parameters should be set at the stage of defining the goals for attendance at a trade fair. This guarantees that at the planning stage you can think about how the key data can be collected and to what extent. Also, market research measures can be implemented during the fair in order to get reliable information about achieving the goals. Visitor questionnaires at the fair or online questionnaires afterwards can establish, for example, the image effect of a company's presence, visitor satisfaction with a discussion and the readiness of the visitor to invest. "Mystery visits" to analyze quality of service and benchmark analyses to check the stand concept – also in comparison with competitors – are further effective tools.

Practical tips:

- The evaluation of success at a fair starts before the beginning of the fair with the definition of goals and decisions about the tools to measure the achievement of those goals.
- The responsibilities, i.e. who is in charge of the measurement and evaluation of particular goals, should be clearly defined in combination with a time horizon.
- The results of the evaluation of performance at a fair should be documented in a written report.
- The evaluation should be an integral part of the trade fair project. Depending on the size of the company presence at a fair, approx. 3 - 5 % of the budget for exhibiting at a trade fair should be allocated to evaluation.

Responsible for Content: Daniel Gundelach



Daniel Gundelach is head of trade fair consulting at the stand construction firm Meplan. He supports companies during the preparation, implementation and follow-up evaluation of attendance at trade fairs.

He concentrates on training and coaching project teams and the people staffing stands at trade fairs. The 36-year-old has worked for over 13 years in live marketing with a focus on trade fairs.

He teaches at the private university Campus M21 and is a guest lecturer on International trade fair management and trade fair, event and congress management at the Munich University of Applied Sciences.

Publisher RedPaper:

Spielwarenmesse eG
Münchener Str. 330
90471 Nürnberg, Germany

Tel. +49 (0) 911/9 98 13-0
Fax +49 (0) 911/86 96 60