

Customer invitations – an integral part of trade fair communication

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Nothing at a trade fair is more inefficient than chance and hope. However, with a targeted customer invitation exhibiting companies ensure that they can welcome the 'right' visitors on their stand.

Trade fair companies invest a large slice of their budget in advertising the event, and they make every effort to attract a large number of professional visitors to the fair. But this does not automatically mean that these visitors communicate with all the relevant exhibitors. This is why, precisely in the case of large-scale fairs, it is essential for exhibitors to be actively involved in marketing their own presence and drawing the attention of potential visitors in advance to the fact that they will be exhibiting at the fair, thus encouraging them to visit their stand.

Visitor marketing before the trade fair – numerous possibilities

There are various ways you can make existing customers and potential customers aware that you will be exhibiting at the fair. These include:

- Visitor invitations
- Announcing your presence on a website
- Announcing your presence in daily communications (emails, bills, quotations...)
- Personal invitations by field service, customer service, sales partners
- Communicating via the press
- Adverts in specialist media, online media, newsletters or on the trade fair website
- Entry in the database of exhibitors
- Social media

According to a study by AUMA (Association of the German Trade Fair Industry), apart from existing and potential business relations (42 % and 30 %), a good incentive to visit a stand at a trade fair is the exhibitor's customer invitation (24 %).

Why are customer invitations so important?

The visitor's time at a trade fair is limited. More than 80 % of professional visitors plan their visit in advance, and before the fair starts they arrange appointments for important discussions. By sending a targeted invitation, exhibitors can make sure they are on the visitor's radar and are included on his personal list of visits.

How do you plan an invitation campaign properly and when?

The most important rule first: early planning pays off. Updating and adding address details alone are time-consuming – and vital. After all, communicating correctly with visitors is the top priority.

When sending customer invitations you have to bear in mind that top executives and guests travelling a long way need more time to schedule their appointments. You have to take note of public holidays and vacations too.

You must also define at an early stage internal organization procedures: who do the responses go to? Who coordinates the appointments and how? Have the sales staff been informed, and can they respond appropriately if they are approached by interested visitors?

How do you overcome the attention threshold?

The key to success when launching an invitation campaign is overcoming the attention threshold.

The following points help a customer invitation to succeed:

- Multi-stage implementation
- Cross-media implementation
- Approach tailored to specific target groups
- Matching the medium to the target group
- Idea and quality of implementation

The campaign should stimulate the senses and stand out from other letters and emails.

TIP: Send handwritten invitations by post. In recent years, a handwritten letter/envelope has become a rarity, so this is a sure way of catching the eye.

How can an exhibitor stand out among other exhibitors with his invitation?

Multi-stage, cross-media invitation campaigns achieve the highest level of attention. A proven approach involves as the first step a 'Save the Date' email, followed by a written invitation by letter, and the final stage is a personal reminder shortly before the start of the fair.

You can increase a person's interest in a visit to your stand by offering incentives in the form of a lottery, alluding to innovations, invitations to stand events and special promotions.

TIP: Invitation vouchers allowing visitors to attend the fair free of charge are easily integrated and have proved very popular. These vouchers are also available in electronic form and can, therefore, be simply included in emails. At the Spielwarenmesse®, 10 redeemed day tickets are free of charge for every exhibitor – a service that makes financing customer invitations especially attractive.

What belongs in a customer invitation?

Communication by post and online should contain the following elements:

- Addressing the recipient personally
- Contact person with details for enquiries
- Trade fair message
- Place and date of event
- Themes, products, services, innovations
- Benefits for visitors
- Events (product presentations, lectures, etc.)
- Logo of the company and the trade fair
- Incentives (e.g. invitation voucher)
- Ways of replying
- Directions to the stand (site, hall, stand number)

TIP: After or during the fair it is worthwhile rounding off the invitation campaign with a letter of thanks to the visitors. A rapid reaction differentiates you from competitors and will enhance the positive impression you gave during the fair.

What is the key to successful email marketing?

When you send customer invitations by email, the factor of fundamental importance is a well prepared database of addresses. In this respect, exhibitors should make sure the contact details of the target group

- are current and correct (first name, surname, title)
- can be related to a customer in person (info@/contact@ should be avoided) and
- do not occur twice.

Various email marketing tools can be used for sending emails. Examples of well-known tools for creating and sending email campaigns are:

- MailChimp (www.mailchimp.com)
- Sendy (www.sendy.co)
- CleverReach (www.cleverreach.com)

Compared with the usual email programmes such as Outlook, verified tools have a number of advantages:

- Simple address administration
- Possibility of tracking (evaluation of the success of campaigns)
- Easy insertion of variables (dynamic content)
- Dispatch to very large distributors
- Reducing the risk of blacklisting, where the IP address/email is suspected of being spam and therefore unsafe

Emails can be created and designed both with the help of existing models and also programmed in keeping with the company CI (this calls for knowledge of HTML and graphic design).

Selecting the right tools for an email campaign is crucial and can be made with the help of the following criteria:

- Legal certainty of dispatch
- Bounce management (information about undeliverable emails)
- Import and export of address records
- Interfaces with a company's own software such as the CRM system
- Personalising the emails
- Existing templates and designs
- Sending HTML and conventional text emails
- Quality assurance
- Sending test emails and A/B tests (two different emails are sent to two subgroups of the target group in order to evaluate their effectiveness)
- Efficiency of the tools
- Tracking
- Cost of using the tools

TIP: The scope of the tracking offered by email marketing tools varies, very important for the evaluation of all email campaigns are the opening rate, the click-through rate, the unsubscribe emails and the bounced emails.

CONCLUSION: A customer invitation sent by post is a very good way for an exhibitor to offer a target group a tactile experience, to incorporate giveaways or vouchers and to communicate the company CI. These days many people in business are swamped by emails, so a letter makes a nice change. But do not forget that a letter may take a few days to reach its destination.

An email invitation means interactive communication with the customer, since a survey, links to various information, a tool for arranging appointments or vouchers to be redeemed on your stand can all be incorporated. Emails are delivered without delay.

Spam risk when sending email campaigns

(Please note that the following tips and laws apply to Germany only. For sending advertising emails in other countries you should inform yourself about the local laws and regulations.)

When you send advertising emails to customers or interested parties, there is the danger that they may regard them as spam, in other words as unsolicited advertising material. This can result in warnings and legal problems. To protect your email campaign from the accusation of being spam, the following legal requirements must be met:

Opt-out procedure

In the case of existing customers you can send emails without prior permission provided various conditions are fulfilled as described in § 7 Abs. 3 UWG (Act Against Unfair Competition): the address was obtained in connection with sales, only similar own products are being advertised, the customer has not objected to the use of email and has been informed that he can object at any time.

Opt-In and Double Opt-In

In all cases where the precondition for the opt-out procedure has not been fulfilled, it is essential to have the agreement of the recipient, and this has to be obtained through the opt-in procedure. By opting in, the customer actively confirms his declaration of agreement, which constitutes the basis of legal force.

Opt-in alone is not sufficient for sending newsletters and advertising emails: the agreement of the customer is required twice – a double opt-in. After ticking his agreement, the customer receives an email asking him to confirm his agreement. This ensures that only the owner of the email address and not a third person has made it available to the distributor.

It is the duty of the sender to ensure that inappropriate mailings do not occur.

TIP: Further information is given in § 7 UWG (Act Against Unfair Competition) and in TGM (Tele-
services Act)

Sources:

- www.auma.de/en/
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Disclaimer: The author accepts no liability for the information provided being up-to-date, correct and complete.

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