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15 Ways to "Connect" at Trade Shows

- Here's a great list of tips to keep in mind as you plan your trade show strategy.
- Expand your goals from simple brand awareness toward partner education. What can you do to let contacts know more not just about your company, but your industry? Your products and services?
- Play the numbers game when you're setting other goals. How many contacts constitute a success?
- Find your inner librarian— in other words, do your research. Make sure the show or shows you've chosen are going to connect to your ideal audience. Contact the organizers to find out everything you can about the event's history and audience.
- Location, location, location. When you plan your booth, make sure you know where it is on the floor, who your neighbors are, whether electrical outlets are available, and the general building environment.
- Good visuals can take you far: consider display boards hung at eye-level, fabric cloths on tables and counters, and of course, several signs with your company name and logo are a must.
- Then again, don't overdo it. Catch your contacts' eye with a big, bold logo, but remember: your display isn't there to sell your company. You are.
- Display racks look much better than flat stacks when it comes to displaying flyers, offers and brochures.
- Let there be light. Setting up little spotlights on your company logo sign is a great way to make your booth stand out in a fluorescent-lit showroom.
- Does your staff have t-shirts or button-downs bearing the company logo? It's a nice way to present yourselves as a unified team and reinforce your brand.
- Never underestimate the power of snacks— the yummiest, the better. They'll get people to hang around and chat a while.
- Other great ways to rope 'em in: computer games, good old-fashioned trivia teasers or contests of every sort. Think of your challenge at the trade show in terms of making small talk at an awkward cocktail party. It's all about starting a conversation, making people smile and putting them at ease.
- Giveaways, including business cards, brochures, pens, magnets or special discounts, work even better when you make people earn them. Make it fun: "Step right up, sir, and answer a funny work-related question or share your best advice in order to win this fabulous notepad!" Again, think of making conversation as your No. 1 goal. If people just grab the goodies from your table without stopping to make eye contact, what have you accomplished?

- Speaking of business cards, don't forget to bring a big stack. As old-fashioned as they may seem, those little pieces of card stock are still a great, collectible way for people to find you when they need you.
- Discounts and coupons for 10 to 20 percent off your services are a great way to collect new customers.
- Become a friend of the media. Find the press booth for your industry magazines and make contacts there. Trade show publications can spread the word about your company, and industry reporters can be an invaluable resource. They'll listen to your brilliant story ideas, share what and who they know, and maybe even teach you the basics of how to write a great press release.