Message-Proofing Your Trade Show Strategy

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Here’s a good exercise for anyone involved in trade-show management. Take a stroll through a trade show exhibit hall, preferably one in an industry that you’re not all that familiar with. Check out the booths. Then try to see if you can figure out what the various companies actually do. Better yet, what’s their selling proposition? Can you find a clear message that is strong enough to compel a prospect to actually enter the booth?

If it’s a typical B2B show, chances are you will end up more baffled than educated about the exhibitors’ offerings. The fact of the matter is, the sales message — that clear and distinctive clarion call to action, one that will compel prospects to wake up and take notice — is all too often buried under the “hip” graphics, clever but vague ad themes, and space-age superstructures. All the money spent on pre-mailers, plasma screens, display graphics and other pyrotechnics is money down the drain if the prospect doesn’t get the message.

A good message must be built into the trade show or event strategy from the start. Spending more time on crafting the message upfront—getting total buy-in from top management, marketing and sales, those who will be working the booth, plus all copywriters, designers, agencies and studios involved in strategy implementation—can reap significant rewards come show time.

A good exhibit floor message must answer one question—What (the magic message) do I need to tell you (the prospect) to get you to do (desired behavior) what I want you to do (marketing objective)? It is equally important that the message encourage a behavior on the part of the prospect that is measurable, so that you can quantitatively evaluate your event ROI. Branding is important, but if your display, pre-show marketing, advertising and at-show activities only create fuzzy, warm feelings about your company, they’re not working as hard as they should for you.
The Culprits
Most companies begin the event planning process with all the right intentions (although it is amazing how many companies do not even go to the trouble of preparing a written message platform). Nevertheless, these good intentions often break down during implementation, usually as the result of the pragmatic everyday pressures of the business world resulting in numerous “disconnects” in the execution process. How many times have you shown your “finished” display to management the week before the show? Then you ended up scrambling at the eleventh hour to make last minute changes, with the final product ending up as a sorry compromise. Failure to get management buy-in upfront invariably leads to a botched, inefficient process. Considerable angst can be avoided by getting approval on a written message platform and a few rough sketches early on in the process.

Other culprits that prevent the intended strategy from being realized include emphasizing design over content. “Design by committee” too often results in a water-downed compromised approach, failure to fully brief copywriters, designers, studios and agencies on the precise message to be communicated. This also results in failure to adapt messages to different industries and shows, trying to load too many messages into an event, and—most importantly—an “inward looking” perspective that fails to take into the consideration the customer’s mindset. (Boastful, self-serving clichés, such as “best-in-breed,” “state-of-the art,” “leading-edge technology,” or “total solution” are indicators of narcissistic messages. A good event message should explicitly state how your company solves the prospect’s business problem better, cheaper and/or faster.)

The Solution
How do you avoid wimpish messages and all the costly false starts, revisions, and organizational angst that is all too common in the event planning process? Here are a few tips:
1. **Appoint a “Keeper of the Message”**

Someone who is responsible for crafting and riding herd over the message throughout the process with management and everyone involved in the implementation process.

2. **Develop a work-flow process map.**

Process is key. There’s a time for research and input, a time for planning, a time for reviews and approvals and a time for implementation. Appropriate personnel need to be involved at the appropriate times. Lay it all out for everyone to see and stick to it.

3. **Put together a market/message matrix**

Matrix should include prospects by industry and job responsibility down one side and the messages that will compel them to put your company on their short lists along the top row. The matrix should take into consideration the varying needs of different target market segments for each and every event, including where the prospect is in the commercial persuasion process (e.g., “unaware” versus “knowledgeable and in the market”). What do you need to tell purchasing agents in the healthcare industry to take notice? How can you recraft the message to impress CEOs in the same industry? What is the message that will create a buzz about your company among VPs of manufacturing in the automotive business? Sit down with your marketing and sales teams, work through the message matrix, and use it when you put together your annual trade show strategy.

4. **Incorporate customer input.**

Don’t assume you know what will turn on the customer. Do some market research. Include a good customer in the planning and review process. Show him a sketch of a pre-mailer or display and get his reaction. Do some “reverse-engineering” of the commercial persuasion process. Sit down with a few customers (not prospects) and have them retrace for you the various steps, including messages that they heard during the sales process that ultimately led them to your company.

5. **Write-up message platforms for each event.**

Put it in writing. What’s the dominant compelling message (your “elevator pitch”) that the pre-mailers, display, and at-show activities should deliver verbally and graphically? What are the key subpoints you want those working the booth to emphasize? What do you say when the prospects mentions Competitor X? Do you have organizational-wide buy-in to responses to the 20 or so most challenging questions prospects are likely to ask? Hold an internal workshop if you need to hammer out your key messages and responses, put everything in writing, and distribute the document (password protected) to everyone involved in the process, from the CEO to the display house.
6. **Build-in quantitative measurement.**

Measurement forces everyone in the process to think and not be satisfied with lazy messaging (such as “Tomorrow’s Technology Today” and other tired bromides). Every aspect of an event can and should be measured.

7. **Don’t be afraid to experiment.**

Event marketing remains more of an art than a science. If you aren’t quite sure what message is going to bowl over a prospect, try two. Break your mailing list in two, send different variation of your materials and see what version delivers the best results. Design your display so that you can easily change out messages or graphics and see which version attracts more visitors to your booth. Is it, for example, a back wall with beauty shots of the prospect’s industry, or hard numbers that underscore the cost-savings you can generate for customers)?

8. **Employ the concept of “Message Hierarchy.”**

It is ok to put your company identity at the top, in bright neon if you wish! Let everyone know where you are. However, the targeted individuals are whom you seek, so be sure the next most prominent signage is devoted to the “What’s In It for Me?” for your targets. This allows the visitors you want to see to self-select based upon interest, applicability and need for your offerings. Ten feet off of the floor should be the equivalent of “Street Signs” that identify what is available for your visitors to see, learn or experience. Finally, the features, benefits and details should be portrayed at the desktop and back wall level.

9. **Ensure consistency between the corporate advertising and PR plans during the time frame of your event.**

Nothing can undo a successful ad or PR campaign, or a successful event marketing activity like disconnected if not contradictory messages. Your first step in developing the written message plan should be with the corporate and marketing communications folks in your company.

10. **Ask customers for feedback on your messaging after the event.**

What resonated and what didn’t? What was the major learning point of value they derived from their visit? Are they more inclined to buy as a result of being at your event? And if so, how much will they spend? As part of your post-event measurement, evaluate your messaging and you will be able to make focused improvements at every subsequent event.

Before you call in the event agency or invest in a new high-tech exhibit, you might consider spending a bit more time with good-old pencil and paper and a flip chart or two. Work through your message strategy with your marketing team before you start spitting out tactical plans. It will pay big dividends in your event ROI.
Here is a little test that might surprise you. Choose which of the two messages is the best (Don’t fudge by looking ahead!)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>The World’s First “PC” based Scanning-Electron Microscope!</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Leading-edge solution</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Superior Interface</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Best-in-breed tracking software</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Ease-of-use</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>B</th>
<th>Automated Micro-Particle Analysis for Pharmaceutical Production Powders Under 10 microns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Meets FDA 1098</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Approved for inhalable powders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• 100x faster than laser techniques</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Answer:

“A” is an example of a typical vague, inward-looking message that will do little to attract or persuade prospects or customers...

“B” - While this message may lack “creativity,” it explained what the company/product did (without even mentioning the product!) indicated a speed improvement of 100x, and contained the key buzzwords that would stop targeted prospects dead in their tracks.

*Hint - The buzzwords prospects use are gold - Your buzzwords are lead.*

Good luck with your messaging. Effective messaging is the one of the most important parts of your event marketing plan and essential to attracting and persuading your targeted audience to act upon your behalf.

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For questions please call Ed Jones at 770-391-0015.