Is your company exhibiting at AWCI's Expo: Construction Directions or any other industry trade show this year? If so, you'll want to know about the following 10 tips; they'll help your investment in the show be that much more rewarding.

1. Decide on why you plan to attend the expo.

Why are you exhibiting? Who are your target prospects? What do you want to accomplish?

If you answered the first question with "because we always exhibit there" or "because my competitors will be there," you'd better think again! You must have a valid reason to be there, and make your exhibiting experience a part of your company's overall marketing plan.

2. Set measurable goals for the show.

Be specific! Don't just say, "to get leads" or "sell product." Instead ask, "How many leads?" or "Sell to how many new customers?" These goals are much more concrete, making it easier to communicate them to every member of your staff. They can also be quantified, making it easier to evaluate the return on your exhibit investment. Measurable goals need a specific number attached to them. Don't just say you want "a bunch of leads." How many is that? Instead set goals like: gain 100 qualified leads, generate $100,000 in new orders, or hand out 400 samples.

Your goals should also be realistic and attainable. (If your goals are unrealistic, it will actually demotivate your staff.) Once you have measurable goals, break them down for each staffer, day or hour the show is open. Consider creating some type of reward for those who meet their goals, or for the entire team when the company goal is achieved.

3. Create a theme for your exhibit.

A theme can be consistent for all your shows or specific to the AWCI expo. The most important thing is to make it relevant to your message and carry it through all aspects of your participation in the show (booth design, pre-show promotions, giveaways, etc.). A theme helps to give your exhibit focus, make your message more memorable, and also to distinguish you from all the other exhibits.

Don't just look for a gimmick—
your theme needs to trigger an emotional response and reinforce your brand. It doesn’t have to be expensive, either. Some very clever and memorable exhibits have been done with very small budgets.

So where do you begin to create a memorable theme? Start by answering some basic questions about your company:

- Who are you, and what does your company do?
- What do you want people to think of when they think of your company?
- Do customers really know what your company does, or do they have “tunnel vision?”

Boil your message down to one main concept, then look for a way to “illustrate” that concept.

4. Design your booth display

Think billboard! Just like on the highway, you only have five to seven seconds to capture your audience’s attention and convey your main message. Your booth shouldn’t look like a catalog of everything you have to offer. Attendees are basically “cruising” the aisles. If you’ve got too much going on in your booth display, people will choose to move on. Keep it understated, with your product or service as the main focus.

A well-designed booth should be inviting, entertaining, educational and memorable. Give attendees a reason to buy from you. Offer “real-world” examples of problems you can solve—be sure to think from the audience’s viewpoint. Promote benefits, not features. And never, ever knock your competition!

Evaluate your existing materials to see if you can use what you have or if you need to start over. Use large type in a standard typeface that can be easily read from across the aisle, and keep it to seven words or less (just like a billboard). Make your graphics large and powerful, not a collage of little images. Remember to tie the design in with your theme and marketing materials. Pull the entire display together with carpeting in colors that coordinate with your theme or corporate logo.

Plan to involve multiple senses in your booth. Ideally, you should appeal to all five!

- Sight = visuals, graphics, props.
- Sound = music, live presentations, video (be considerate with noise levels).
- Smell = scent machine, aromatherapy or the product itself (because we all know how fresh wallboard smells!).
- Touch = hands-on demonstrations, sampling, products to pick
- Taste = food aromas or snacks (for the attendees only, not your staff!).

The more senses you combine, the higher the retention rate. In addition, you are creating an overall experience for your visitors.

Since your booth is your store-to-Trade-Show Exhibiting Success.
5. Plan your publicity.

How can you gain the attention of the media? Create a publicity schedule and follow it. Define your media targets and send out a newsworthy press release. If you don’t have any “hard news” (such as the unveiling of a new product), then focus on a human interest or feature story. Don’t include opinions (unless part of an attributed quote). Write in third person (no “I” or “we”), with plenty of facts and statistics to back up the information. Be sure to include any relevant photos with your press release.

6. Utilize pre-show promotions.

To neglect this step is the same as having a party without sending out any invitations! How do you expect people to come? You’re just one of dozens of exhibits in that big convention hall, and guess what? Most of the people aren’t coming just to see you. Somehow, you must get on their must-see list.

Promoting your exhibit doesn’t have to be hard. It can be as simple as printing stickers that say, “See us at booth XXX at the AWCI Expo in San Antonio, Texas, March 15-16, 2002.” Then put those stickers on all your correspondence between now and the show. You also can put the invitation on all your fax cover sheets.

Start by inviting your current customers, but don’t forget your current prospects, as well as prospects from last year’s show who have not yet become customers. Perhaps they just need another opportunity to see your product in action.

The most effective pre-show mailers must be engaging and have a call to action. Do you want them to bring the
card to your booth (this will help you track responses)? Would you like them to visit your Web site to answer questions or enter a contest (which gets them interacting and exploring)? Give the reader an incentive to take action. Let them know what’s in it for them to take the time to respond.

7. Train and inform your booth staff.

Selecting your booth staff should be a critical part of your exhibit planning. Not only do you need to have adequate staff, but you need to make sure you have the right staff. Good booth staffers should be approachable, outgoing and people-oriented; comfortable engaging people; good communicators and listeners; enthusiastic (attract, not attack); and knowledgeable about your company, products and competition. Trade
Even if you aren’t exhibiting in the AWCI Expo, you can still make the most of the opportunity to attend. Use it as a time to make some new connections in your industry. Save time, money and stress!

Start by setting goals, just like you would if you were exhibiting. What do you want to accomplish? Do you want to discover new products, research alternative suppliers or network with other attendees? You can achieve all these things . . . and more.

Register early so that you will receive preshow promotions. Study the materials you receive from exhibitors and from show management. Ask your suppliers if they will be attending the show. Schedule appointments with them, or arrange to meet them for lunch or dinner.

Before you arrive, study the show directory and plan an agenda for each day. Decide which education sessions you will attend. Then walk the show, focusing on the booths that most interest you. Be sure to pace yourself and wear comfortable shoes! Cover the entire show floor at least twice. That way, you can get a feel for the entire show, but still go back to certain booths to gather details.

A word of caution: Don’t ever solicit on the show floor! You didn’t buy a booth, so you shouldn’t be selling at the show.

Afterward, record your observations and create an idea file of new resources for use in making future purchase decisions. Show sales are very different from field sales—just because someone is great in the field doesn’t guarantee they will be successful in the booth. Train them!

Don’t take for granted that they already know your goals or how to best represent your company (this includes dress code). Keep everybody in the loop! Provide a pre-show meeting to define your goals and target market, outline expected behavior, explain lead cards, and go over a list of attendees’ frequently asked questions and appropriate responses. Research has shown that training can increase the number of qualified leads by 68 percent. Without training, your staff could end up looking like deer in the headlights!
(For even more staff training, be sure to attend the free exhibitor-only training provided by AWCI on March 14 at 3 p.m., in the food services area of the trade show. And, after the training seminar, you’ll have the opportunity to meet one-on-one with me! I’ll address any questions or concerns you may have.)

9. Decide what you will use to attract people to your booth.

If you’re not focused on your audience, your promotions will fall flat. Good promotions help you create excitement, build brand recognition and qualify attendees.

If you’re using a giveaway, the item you choose should be logical (fits with your overall theme and marketing message), memorable (unique and will be remembered as being from you), and practical (“gotta keep it on my desk” quality). If it has your company name on it, attendees might keep it—but if it has their name or photo, they’ll definitely keep it!

And don’t just put all the items out on the table for people to pick up; make them “earn” it by talking with a company representative, filing out a lead card or watching a product demonstration. Don’t simply do a business card drawing, because those names are not truly leads.

To truly create an exhibit experience that people will remember, you may want to use some kind of attraction to create energy and excitement, and bring your
message to life. Some possibilities include live presentations or product demonstrations, celebrities signing autographs, or interactive hands-on demonstrations. Remember: You want to attract, not attack.

9. Do timely follow-up.

Your job doesn’t end the minute the show is over. Instead, the most important part begins! Strangely, many exhibitors skip this step or fail miserably. You can’t assume that interested prospects will contact you. Have a lead management plan in place before you even arrive at the show.

The best way to accomplish this is to designate a lead manager to coordinate each day’s leads and forward the hottest ones back to the office to begin immediate follow-up. With every day that goes by, your leads are getting colder. Any lead not followed up within 30 days is dead.

What should you send? The best follow-up is timely, personalized and reinforces your exhibit theme or corporate message.

10. Continue building your image by evaluating your exhibiting experience.

What worked? What didn’t? Did you meet your goals? Use the information you gain to improve for AWCI’s 2003 expo in New Orleans.

About the Author

Marlys K. Arnold combines her expertise as an image consultant with real-world marketing experience to teach others how to improve their trade show results. Having been both an exhibitor and a show manager, she has a unique perspective on the exhibit industry.

(Portions of this article are excerpts from her new book, Build a Better Trade Show Image.)