

How to Get More from Your Trade Show Investments

by Glen McCandless, Focus Marketing, Inc.

I'd like to suggest an important strategic marketing commitment. You should promise to stop doing 'conferences' (aka. trade shows or exhibits) and start doing 'Association Marketing'! You may not have a clue what I'm talking about or know why you should care. So read on...

In my experience, no area of the marketing budget is more underutilized (and exasperating) than exhibit marketing. Yet trade shows are a fact of life for companies in the school market. Year after year, companies set up booths at the same shows and do things pretty much the same old way. It's as if there's a manifesto that certain events are sacred cows.

Well, just say NO! Remember, most education conferences (trade shows) are sponsored by associations on behalf of their members. And, typically, once the big event is over and the carpet's pulled up, you're glad to be off to the next show or event. It's sayonara for another year to the conference's constituency and sadly, to some great sales opportunities. The follow-up plan is rarely as thorough as the plan to set up and staff the booth or orchestrate the freebie giveaways.

While your company shifts its focus to the next marketing program on your to-do list, the association that sponsored the trade show you just left goes back to work, continuing to serve the same audience you just spent a lot of money to engage with.

That's why savvy marketers develop year-round strategies to tap the full potential of education associations. Conference exhibits should be part of a twelve month association marketing plan - not the whole plan, otherwise you miss a major opportunity. Why should you focus more of your attention (and budget) on education associations?

Here are four good reasons:

- 1. Education Association Members Want Information.** Educators join professional associations because they're seeking ways to do a better job, to get ahead, stay on the cutting edge, and increase their knowledge. They're hungry to know the benefits of your product or service.
- 2. Education Association Members are Buyers.** Education associations solicit members by mail. So, here's a segment of the market you know responds to direct mail offers. Since many of you market products and services through the mail, why not target people who prefer to shop that way?
- 3. Education Association Members are Motivated.** A recent survey by Learning magazine found only half of our teachers are motivated and innovative. Fortunately, it's the motivated half who belong to associations and make the decisions to buy and use technology in schools!
- 4. Associations Offer the Products and Services their Members Want Most.** Most education associations have product catalogs or online stores and offer special benefits to their members. Why not your product? Less

noise, less expense, and less hassle than other catalogs and sales channels! And, these catalogs are packed with great premiums for direct marketing programs you are doing now.

Ready to commit to this new strategy? Here are six-steps to a hard-hitting association marketing plan, a marketing strategy that I guarantee will produce better results than the typical trade show exhibit schedule you may be doing now.

1. **Be Selective!** Target only those education associations whose member profile matches your best customers. Seek smaller, more specialized groups where you can stand out. Don't know where to find those organizations? A terrific resource is the National Trade and Professional Association directory. Call now- 202-898-0662. It'll set you back about \$75. It's the best bucks you'll spend this year I promise!

2. **Invest in Association Members Year Round!** A year-round promotional campaign with one carefully chosen association is much more effective than just exhibiting at a bunch of trade shows. Exhibit at a conference only if you can afford a sustaining campaign to the members of the association all year long.

3. **Put Your Customers on the Spot!** Educators buy technology products by referral from their peers. Get your customers to speak at conferences. Sure, associations don't want your sales pitch on their agenda, so, have your PR person help your customer create the appropriate spin. The audience will eat it up, your customer will bask in the limelight, and you will pull in the P.O.s.

4. **Be Visible in Association Publications.** Association publications hit your target buyer like a laser and at a lower cost than the mass-market publications. If the academic journals and newsletters for your targeted associations won't accept display ads, have your customers submit research papers instead, or ghost write articles for your customers to submit.

5. **Make the Right Offer.** Want a sure way to boost response to your direct mailings? Educators love premiums! Don't take the easy way out by ignoring premiums in favor of a boring offer like a price discount. Negotiate deals with associations for irresistible bonus merchandise, subscriptions, membership discounts and other goodies. It's more work, but you'll get your prospect's attention and boost the results from your direct marketing programs.

6. **Let Them Hear from You, Loud and Often!** If the only time association members see your company name is at a conference exhibit once a year, don't be surprised if they walk past your booth with a dazed expression. Buy the mailing list and send the members special offers all year round. Next time you exhibit, they'll stop at your booth and pay attention to what you are offering.

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