

Making an exhibit

With the CIPD's National Conference at Harrogate nearly upon us, Angela Lockett offers some practical advice following her own experience as a new recruit to the exhibition circuit.

Following my attendance at HRD 2001, I began considering the marketing opportunities provided by exhibitions. Having made the leap in mindset from 'I couldn't do that' to 'Why not?', I started to investigate the merits of being an exhibitor, rather than a visitor. Ever the activist, my investigations were somewhat perfunctory and I threw myself into a very steep learning curve by embarking on two major shows in the training calendar: HRD 2002 at Olympia (London), and Training Solutions 2002 at the NEC in Birmingham.

Following reflection on the actual 'doing', I can say that the decision to exhibit was definitely the right one for me. However, it can become a big expense with little return if you're not careful. So, for all you potential exhibitors out there, here are some reflections and conclusions based on my experiences.

The first question that needs an answer is 'Why exhibit?' Are there sufficient benefits for the smaller training organisation or specialist to invest in exhibitions? I decided to ask Sue Froggatt, expert in marketing training courses and consultancy services. 'If you don't realise how to get the best from an exhibition, they can become very expensive,' she says. 'Industry research shows that exhibitions are not a key influencer when it comes to deciding which training provider to choose, because training buyers prefer to rely on feedback and your reputation. However, exhibitions are important earlier on in the buying cycle if you need to increase your prospect database.'

In my case, my key aim was to launch a new product aimed at trainers and training managers; my secondary aim was to meet and attract new clients. I therefore believed that an exhibition would satisfy both aims and continued with my investigations, bearing in mind Sue's advice!

The next question is 'Can I afford it?' When I checked out the cost of a stand, I calculated how many leads/sales I would have to make to cover the cost and came to the conclusion that it was a viable proposition. Great! However, I soon discovered all the 'extras' involved, not just in monetary terms, but also time – something I have to budget for, as a self-employed training consultant. Table 1 (see page 34) summarises my lessons learnt for exhibition budgeting.

If you believe you have something that would interest other professional trainers, why not try exhibiting?

In terms of making exhibitions pay, Sue Froggatt's main advice to potential exhibitors is to use the event not only to generate leads, but also to network with other suppliers and influencers in the industry, meet the press, conduct market research and, if there is a conference being held alongside, try to present a paper. 'Use exhibitions to start the relationship-building process, turning a complete stranger into someone you can genuinely help,' she says. 'Most sales will take place months after the event, so you need to use other marketing tools to maintain contact.'

My personal experiences reinforced much of Sue's advice. I found that there were key things to do before, during and after the exhibition, which made a big impact on how successful and enjoyable the whole experience was.

BEFORE THE EXHIBITION

Be clear on your objectives. What exactly do you want to achieve? Make sure that your objectives are specific and measurable, rather than a vague 'To increase awareness of my company and services'.

Once you are clear on what you need to achieve, you will be able to measure how successful your approach is and make changes if required. Having objectives based on a sales target per day, a number of quality enquiry forms per day and a target for appointments with new clients following the exhibition certainly helped to focus my energy when tiredness set in!

Once you are clear on your objectives, put together a detailed plan of action, including timescales and dependencies. This will ensure sufficient advance planning to avoid any last-minute panics. By planning everything you need to do and pay for, you'll be able to determine how much you can afford to invest in your stand itself!

Which exhibition you choose to go for will be determined by a number of factors, including visitor numbers and profile, market focus, competitors, location, duration/dates and finally the cost itself. However, when comparing the cost of various exhibitions, ensure that you are comparing like for like. Although I paid more for my stand at HRD 2002, the price included such things as a training day for new exhibitors, an offer to mail up to 250 of my clients with invitations (you supply your letters, they organise the envelope stuffing and pay for postage costs), a comprehensive marketing manual, plus free features in their

Top five pet hates of exhibition visitors

Here are what visitors hate most about exhibitions. The solutions to all five points are in your (the exhibitor's) control.

1. Badge discrimination (ignoring visitors not considered 'important' enough).
2. Stand staff with a lack of knowledge/interest.
3. Nothing new or different to make visit worthwhile.
4. Unprofessional follow-up to enquiries (irrelevant information/no information/heavy sales pitch).
5. Late arrival of exhibition invitations.



Angela Lockett

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tion of yourself

Exhibition News paper and website, as well as the usual show guide.

Location

I believe that location is more important than size. The exhibition organisers provide a floor plan. Establish if there are any 'key' areas for your target audience and identify your potential 'neighbours'. There are some benefits to having a small stand:

- visitors don't have to make the commitment of crossing into your 'territory', and
- it doesn't take many people to create a buzz of interest around it!

If you find an ideal spot but your budget can't take the cost, why not consider sharing? This is something that has been done successfully by Sallie Phillips, of Freelance Training Services. 'Sharing our stand costs has meant that we've been able to have a professional presence at exhibitions,' said Sallie, following Training Solutions 2002. 'Visitors could talk to a range of training providers all on one stand and we could refer enquiries to each other, as our services were all complementary rather than competitive.' The experiment was so successful that Sallie is repeating this arrangement at Harrogate.

DURING THE EXHIBITION

How many of you have experienced the two extremes of either being pounced on or ignored when visiting exhibitions? A pet hate for many exhibition visitors is 'badge discrimination', where the person on the stand looks at your badge before your face. That person's approach to you is then based on how 'important' s/he judges you to be.

I've witnessed some very wrong assumptions being made about visitors, purely on their badge descriptions – and heard what was said about the exhibitor afterwards! I found that engaging visitors in conversation was a lot simpler than it is made out to be. Eye contact, a smile, an initial question that is easy for the visitor to respond to – before you know it, a conversation is underway. ➤



► A genuine interest in your visitors and how you may be able to help them, plus excellent knowledge of and enthusiasm for your product or services, is all you need. Forget any gimmicks with giveaways and hard-sell lines.

AFTER THE EXHIBITION

Every exhibitor I spoke to said how much time they needed to invest in the follow-up to an exhibition – something that has to be planned in. If you haven't got the time to follow up your leads, or the resources to continue a marketing campaign with those leads, I would advise against exhibiting.

As long as you record sufficient detail of the enquiries you receive, you should be able

to personalise any follow-up contact you make with visitors. When I asked exhibition visitors about their pet hates, a number of people mentioned their annoyance at receiving either irrelevant literature, a heavy sales pitch that was not related to their original enquiry, or no information whatsoever! Think of the damage this may do to your reputation. How many of their colleagues will hear about their frustrations with you?

IS IT FOR YOU?

Despite the mistakes made and expense involved, I have to say that I loved the whole experience. It was a success not only financially, but also motivationally. As well as

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product orders and a greatly expanded database of potential clients, I came away with lots of new ideas on how to develop my business further, based on the conversations I had with so many interesting people. So if you believe you have something that would interest other professional trainers, why not try exhibiting? See you on stand 1082 at HRD 2003 next year – as a visitor or an exhibitor; the choice is yours! 

Table 1: Angela Lockett's budgeting advice for extra exhibition costs

EXTRA COSTS	HINTS AND TIPS
Lighting/power	You'll probably need some form of lighting to do your stand decor justice. Small stands don't necessarily need lighting. Check with the organisers in advance if the surrounding lighting will be sufficient. Power is only necessary if you're using technology.
Furniture	Take your own or hire it? Hiring is expensive, but hassle-free. I've tried both options and found that some items were cheaper to buy from Ikea than to hire! Using a floor plan, sketch out your furniture size and positioning. I was amazed at how much bigger the furniture was when drawn on a scaled plan. This prevented a costly mistake!
Brochures/leaflets	Keep them simple and inexpensive. How many times have <i>you</i> collected a pile of brochures at an exhibition, then thrown them out a month later without looking at them? Avoid dating or personalising your literature to any particular exhibition, so that you can use it again. And be realistic about the numbers of brochures/leaflets you think you need (I still have a box of them left after two exhibitions).
Stand decor	Next time you visit an exhibition, make notes on the most effective stands. What works and why? You don't have to spend a fortune to make an impact. Ask exhibitors for information on the wall posters and banners you find most appealing. Consider colour schemes and your display/demonstration areas. Think about access to your stand. Is it inviting or intimidating? Is there wheelchair access?
Stand personnel	This is the most important aspect of your stand! Ensure that you have sufficient people who <i>know what they are talking about</i> . Ensure that you, and they, have built in time for preparation – understanding your objectives, preparation of key questions and benefit statements, demonstration practice, closing methods.
Travel/hotel accommodation	Decide what is most beneficial to you and your team – avoiding hotel costs, or having early starts and late finishes with long journeys each day?
Invitations to exhibition/your stand client database	You'll be given as many free invitations to the exhibition as you want! Send out your letters to clients and contacts well in advance of the exhibition dates; help them with their diary planning. If you don't have a potential client database, you may want to consider buying one from an accredited list broker (visit Direct Marketing Association at www.dma.org.uk).
Giveaways and competitions	Consider this one carefully. If you're convinced this is what you want to do, think about something you can offer that is of value to your visitors, but inexpensive to you. (Try listening to conversations that are instigated on stands through 'giveaways' – are the leads quality or simply quantity?)
Stand security	A useful furniture item is a lockable cupboard to secure valuables. You can pay for security night sheets, but very few exhibitors bother with these.
Visitor recording system	You'll be offered an electronic means of recording all your visitors to your stand, at a cost. I used good old-fashioned paper and pen; it worked for me, and the only cost was the photocopying.
Press packs	These will disappear into a black hole, with no feedback on who has taken them and why (I'm working on this one!). You can collect any that are left over at the end of the exhibition, but these are useless if you have personalised the content to the exhibition. General guidelines for a press pack are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • contact details • press release copy on your product or services that the reporter can 'lift' • product samples or services details, and • colour photographs. I was asked to supply 20 of these, so costs can mount up if you're not careful.
Advertising/publicity	Although you will have a free entry to the exhibition show guide and website, you may wish to supplement this with advertising in the show guide or related magazines.