

## 10 Steps to a fantastic trade show

By Brian Greul

It's that time of year again. Sleigh bells are ringing and cash registers are a ching-chinging. Say that out loud a few times and you'll know why I help clients promote their businesses and why I'm not in the entertainment business. The 20 days of turkey will be upon us and gone, St. Nick will come and go. And then my absolute favorite time will be here, Trade Show Season.

Some of you probably think I'm nuts. Tradeshows are the lifeblood of our industry. I've solved more problems with suppliers and mills at tradeshows than anywhere else. Okay, so you're probably thinking that this is something you'll mess with in a few weeks. I hope to change that and to help you have a whiz-bang trade show season.

Getting the most out of a tradeshow is just like getting into that big account. You have to start with a plan, work your strategy, meet with people, and adapt and adjust. Too often when we go to tradeshows we see "Handout Harry" with a rolling trash can trolling for trinkets. I think everyone groans. There really *is* a better way. Here are 10 steps that I guarantee will improve your trade show:

1. Sit down and determine what shows you want to go to for the next year. At the very least you should be thinking one national, one regional, and if a traveling show comes to town, by all means hit it! The advantage to the traveling show is that you can get face time with the rep because it's a smaller show. National shows frequently have vendors that don't go to regional shows. January shows are when a lot of mills roll out their new apparel lines and suppliers are hot to trot to drive spring sales with specials, coupons, and promotions.
2. Once you know what shows you will go to, start booking travel now. Those fantastic hotel deals vanish early. I know of one particular hotel in Dallas that goes for \$50/night. But you can't wait to book it until the week of the show. The same goes for airfare the best deals go months before the show. Free Tip: Check for the best airfare deals on Tuesday and Wednesdays. This is when reservations made over the weekend get released and put back in "inventory".
3. Now that you have your schedule and travel done, you can concentrate on the real work. Make a list of your 10 best accounts. We'll call these your prime accounts. For each prime account make another list of 2 things you'd like to do for them. For example, I have a financial client who I want to do more paper printing for and I want to get the uniform program for them. This is like a shopping list but it's what I call my Hunt List. It's the 20 things I'm really looking for that will make me money.
4. Next make a list of your 5 best and 5 worst suppliers. For the good ones I want you to stop in their booth and ask what they can show you that you may not know about. For the worst, I want you to visit them and ask how you can work with them to make things better. Too often we want to play pin the blame on the supplier. The reality is that it's a team approach that wins the day. We have to

- work together. At the trade show there is no hanging up, hiding behind voicemail, etc. Go in with a win-win attitude and you'll be surprised.
5. One thing that is particularly good to do is to visit with the apparel suppliers and mills. Ask them what is hot. Ask them what their top 10 styles are. I am sometimes really surprised. When they do surprise me I like to ask who buys a particular style or how it is sold. These ideas can be helpful in increasing your sales.
  6. When you visit with suppliers be sure to ask what the key selling features are. I like to know why they think my customer will buy their product. Sometimes they surprise me with things I hadn't thought of. Other times they say something I don't agree with and I'm able to ask further and learn something about the product. I always refer back to my list of 20 things I'm hunting for. I like to ask questions while thinking about each of those 10 accounts.
  7. Take advantage of Catalog Express to send those catalogs back to your office. As an ASI member we get some fantastic benefits and Catalog Express is one of those benefits. It's much cheaper to pick up samples and catalogs you need and have them sent back. Think about what it would cost to have 10 or 15 samples sent in one at a time.
  8. Budget your time. As you move through the show floor be sure to pace yourself. Don't get stuck at one booth for an hour and find yourself out of time. While many suppliers, distributors and others will want to socialize the show is a time to research and identify opportunities. Resist the urge to be a "chatty Cathy." If you need more time with a supplier schedule a follow up call. If you've never exhibited it can be an exhausting experience. Imagine meeting 2,000 people who are bright, aggressive, and looking to sell your product. Now imagine meeting them in 2 days. That's what exhibiting is like. A follow up appointment or call can be much more productive when the supplier is back to normal and you have their full attention.
  9. When you leave the show at the end of the day write down what you liked the most. With hundreds of suppliers at each show it can be impossible to remember them all. Nothing is more frustrating than remembering the perfect item from the friendly people whose company you can't remember. You know you met them at the ASI Show.
  10. Last, and perhaps most important. Look for the emails, catalogs, and calls you'll get after the show. One of my favorites is the email that ASI Show sends me with a list of where I had my badge scanned. I use this as a list to help me remember vendors I spoke to.

You'd really be amazed how many distributor sales people don't do any of the 10 things I've listed here. They come to the show, wander around, chat suppliers up about anything but their product, collect "stuff" for the kids and friends, and then wonder why they aren't growing their sales. Follow these 10, easy steps and you'll have a great trade show.

Brian Greul is the president of ASI/343253 Texas Shirt Company. Brian also serves on the ASI Show advisory board.