

10 Tips for First-Time Trade Show Exhibitors

It can feel daunting the first time you exhibit your startup at a trade show, so make the most of these top tips from a founder who's already taken to the floor.

By Dana Ostomel (Founder & Chief Gifting Officer, Deposit a Gift)

Exhibiting at a trade show is a very different experience from attending a trade show. You have to be “on” and organized in a completely different way. I run the crowdfunding website, Deposit a Gift, an all-in-one social fundraising platform for donations, sponsorships and ticket sales that allows you to raise money for any organizational or personal need. People use us for everything from charitable and school fundraising, to memorial funds, medical bills, disaster relief, pet rescue or crowdfunding a personal project.

We recently exhibited at our first major trade show, and boy did we learn a lot! Rather than the experience just benefiting our company, I wanted to share what we learned and open up a dialogue to make us all better exhibitors.

Before the Show...

1. Make Cheat Sheets

Organization is the name of the game and cheat sheets can help you do that. You want one cheat sheet that is dedicated to setup so that you don't forget anything and includes technical instructions to avoid malfunctions.

Create a second cheat sheet for the day of. Shows typically start early when heads are foggy and you want some quick reminders to get the team focused. Here are some of the things on our list:

Always:

- Strike up conversation with people, even if you aren't at your booth. Coffee breaks and mingling can be a great time to meet someone.

- Read their name off their nametag and make sure yours is positioned on your right shoulder to correspond with your handshake.
- Make eye contact with people walking by.

Be sure not to:

- Be heads down answering emails or doing other work.
- Eat, drink or chew gum while talking to someone.
- Have your arms crossed.

2. Create a List of Pick-Up Lines

We created a list of “pick-up lines” to help us initiate conversations. There is a real skill to connecting with someone in a matter of seconds, especially when the premise is that you want to sell him or her something. Sometimes, even a simple, “Good morning” with eye contact and a smile will reel people in to your booth.

Seriously, someone actually told me they stopped at our booth because I was the only one who made eye contact.

We created categories of pick-up lines including targeted questions, challenging questions, personal connections, indirect questions and more. Some examples are:

- “What is your biggest question or concern about online fundraising?”
- “Do you know what the average amount raised by an individual is through crowdfunding?”
- “Where are you traveling from?”
- “Do you know what crowdfunding is?”

What we learned is that our premium ended up being our best ice-breaker. We had mints with the slogan ‘A Fresh Approach To Fundraising’ on them, and our best pick-up line turned out to be “Would you like some mints.”

3. Make a Strategy the Night Before

Something we will certainly consider next time is making a game plan the night before. Knowing your ‘prime times’ for traffic flow is key. For us, the day consisted of four main windows during which the attendees had a break between workshops and would walk

around to check out the booths. This is important to know because it determines when you need to be forward facing and focused.

How could we have prepared better? By doing two things:

- Reading the program the night before with a strategic eye to assess these windows.
- By arriving even earlier for more time to settle in and assess the landscape.

4. Don't Be a One-Man Band

It takes a village to prepare for trade shows. Always be sure to have a team that can help you with all the necessary prep, especially the day before. It is ideal to have more than one person come the night before to set up so that you are prepared the morning of the show.

And on the day of the show, if you can have at least two people present, that is best so that during high traffic times you have enough people to interact with prospects.

During the Show...

5. Don't Pitch to Competitors

Within the first half hour, a man came up to our booth asking about Deposit a Gift. We were so excited that we started singing the praises of our site's benefits without quickly assessing who we were speaking to. As the conversation progressed, we discovered he was a peripheral competitor. Although it is great to talk to other exhibitors, we recommend not pitching your company to competitors, so be sure to ask whom they are representing before engaging.

However, taking the time to walk around and visit other exhibitors is something you definitely want to do during a break. You can pick up important tips for upcoming tradeshow by observing what other booths do well, or not so well.

6. Bring on the Balloons

When you are designing your booth, think about what will make yours feel festive and fun. Trade shows are like trick or treating for adults. They come for the candy and stay for the

information. Beyond good eats, we brought balloons to attach to our retractable. None of the other booths had balloons, so it made ours stand out visually.

7. Write Notes on Business Cards

At a trade show, you talk to hundreds of people in a span of a few hours. It is easy to forget particular conversations you had throughout the day.

To avoid this, write down parts of your conversation on the person's business card. Also, write down ways they could use your services based on their concerns or questions discussed. Referencing key points from your conversation in a follow-up email will make it easier for them to remember you so that you can pick up the conversation where you left off to engage them in a follow-up meeting.

8. Be Prepared for Those Without Business Cards

You'd be surprised at the number of people who attend a tradeshow without business cards, so make sure you come prepared with blank paper and some pens. We wrote down people's names and contact information, and of course, notes about our conversation.

This way, we could still reach out to them afterwards. If you forget to ask for their contact information, you can use other resources like LinkedIn and company websites to connect with them.

After the Show

9. Organize Your New Contacts... Quickly!

It is important to go through the business cards while the day is fresh in your mind. Sort the cards and make two piles to help you prioritize. One stack should be for important contacts that you should reach out to immediately, and the other stack is for less urgent contacts.

It is still important to get to the second stack, but it is more crucial to reach out to those contacts you had special conversations with that day.

10. Follow Up!

Once you have your business cards organized, immediately enter them into a spreadsheet or database to guide your follow-up. Make sure to include notes about your conversation, why they are a good prospect, etc. Now it is time to follow up with them to secure personal meetings.

Source: Make the Most of the Tradeshow: 10 Tips for First-Time Trade Show Exhibitors, Kate Bradock, Women.2