

The Seven Deadly Sins of Tradeshows By Joanne Ireland, President of Ireland Presentations

We've all been there: it's the biggest show of the year in your industry, your senior management is expecting miracles, and the show is an unmitigated disaster. What went wrong? How can you avoid a similar meltdown in the future?

It turns out that there are seven "deadly sins" that, separately or together, can spell doom. Below we present each one, and give you advice about how to avoid them. Armed with this knowledge, you can ensure that your tradeshows enhance your company's reputation, build marketplace buzz and move the company forward on its path to greatness.

Sin #1 - Not knowing your market

Sad but true: many companies pick the wrong show(s) for the wrong reasons. They don't take the time to understand the probable attendees. Just because a show is focused on your market, it doesn't mean "this" show is the right show for your company to be at. Exhibiting at an ultra-techy show can be perfect – or perfectly wrong, if you are selling to senior executives.

Advice: Do a deep dive into the past attendees of the show, and the expected attendees. Don't just settle for what the show management tells you in their glossy brochures. Talk to people who have exhibited in the past, and find out what they really experienced – who was there (Executives, CTO, Engineers) and what they were looking for or at (specific product and solutions, new technology, just looking).

Sin #2 - Setting expectations improperly

Experienced event management personnel know that it is impossible to judge the ultimate value of a tradeshow by attending just one show. Statistics show that you must commit to at least three shows in the same market in one year – or attend the same show three years running - before you will start to see results and any type of return on your investment.

Advice: Let senior management know this fact early on. Educate them as to how important it is to buyers to see that your company is stable, and will still be around in three or four years. Make sure they realize that they are in this for the long haul. Everyone needs to have realistic expectations and your ROI needs to be built into your long term goals.

Sin #3 – Not understanding the budget implications

It's easy to underestimate the costs of a trade show. This is doubly true for senior executives, who often look at the floor space cost and believe that it represents the total cost, when in fact it is only a fraction of the cost of attending a tradeshow. A good rule of thumb for budgeting is the following:

- The total cost of the show will be 3-5 times the cost of the floor space.
- Thus, if your exhibit space costs \$5,000 then you should budget between \$15,000 and \$25,000 for the show. Budgeting more is better.

Advice: Educate your management about the expected costs of a tradeshow. Explain to them the reasoning behind the above "rule of thumb." I find that most executives understand a detailed budget best, so make sure you know how to do one and in a language they will understand (not tradeshow jargon). Ensure they are clear that even this amount does not include "people-hours" (staff working the show and NOT at the office doing their regular job) and probably doesn't include staff travel expenses (since most companies track travel expenses independently of a tradeshow budget estimate).

Sin #4 – Lack of preparation

It's simple – just show up at the tradeshow, unpack your booth, and you're good to go. Right? Wrong! Every show should have a theme, and an accompanying messaging platform and show plan. The plan will indicate how you plan to showcase the event, promote it, drive traffic to your booth, and effectively make use of the leads that are generated.

Advice: plan the work, and work the plan. Make sure your plan includes clear messaging, pre-show promotion, clear promotion on your website, and some kind of press outreach before the show to build excitement about any announcements you will be making at the show. Train your sales people, execs and marketing team in the messaging for the show, so that they will all understand and effectively communicate the key messages. And most important, make sure your plan addresses how you will communicate with the company during the show, and how you will follow up with visitors to your booth within a week of the show.

Sin #5 – A booth without a message

Walk around any tradeshow and note the number of booths that instantly tell you what the company does, and why it matters to you. Unfortunately, at some shows it's a painfully small number. Take a good look at your booth. Does it look professional and make your company look like an expert in the field? Does it "scream" what you do? Are you displaying the right products and services, in the right light?

Advice: Break out of the mold and get a second opinion. Ask your friends and colleagues – those who are not associated with your company – to critique your booth. If they don't "get" what you are selling, others won't either. Use their feedback to tweak your message, and make sure the booth graphics showcase the theme of the show, and the products you want to promote.

Sin #6 – Sending too many people – or the wrong people

Conventional wisdom says that the marketing and sales teams will be the ones to work a show, with perhaps some backup from the customer support side of the house. But we often see booths that are filled with people who are talking to one another, facing away from the aisle, or making phone calls. Think about it: are salespeople really interested in speaking to prospects that are not in their territory? Will they be able to focus on the show, or will they need to leave frequently to make important calls? Don't you want the most dedicated people you can get for this important event?

Advice: Think about how to best staff the show, and reach beyond the usual suspects. You need people who are going to be willing to stand on their feet for eight hours at a stretch, keep a smile on their faces, and be willing to reach out to passers-by to engage them in conversation. Most importantly, you will need people who are willing to listen more than they talk. Your booth staff should be informed and educated about what you are selling, but they don't have to be (and aren't expected to be) the technical experts. There's nothing wrong with having a reason to get back to the prospect next week, and the promise of a one-on-one with your technical experts is a great reason.

Sin #7 – Failing to get the lead – and follow up after the show

Too often a prospect is so engaging that the booth staff forgets to get the lead information! Attendees have become accustomed to filling out lead cards. Don't omit this important step. It's the only record of the conversation you will have after the show. But even when lead cards are filled out, business cards are collected and badges are scanned, many companies fail to do timely follow-up after the show. Thus they squander the leads that they have worked so hard to get.

Advice: Make sure booth staff are trained, and reminded frequently, to ask for the lead information. Make sure they rank the leads on the spot, not later in the day or after the show. Make sure they take the time to write down any important information, anecdote, or other note that will help refresh their memory back at the office. Take the extra step of copying the leads each night, just in case something happens to the originals. And take one last look at your show plan: did you include a follow-up task within a week of the show?

Conclusion

Most of this information is common sense. However, trade shows are complex undertakings, and the atmosphere at a show can often be chaotic, frenzied and confusing. By taking the time to look at each one of my “seven deadly sins”, you can prepare a battle plan that will ensure success before, during and after the show. Best of all, you will meet or exceed everyone’s expectations. Being a hero – it’s nice!

About the Author:

Joanne Ireland, a 20 year veteran of the meeting and event planning industry, is Founder and President of Ireland Presentations, a meeting, conference and event planning company based in San Francisco. Joanne is one of San Francisco’s leading consultants in planning, coordination & management of conferences, meetings & events. Her expertise is design, project standards/content, conceptualization & design of project strategy, and contract negotiations. Joanne and her team continue to produce successful events and meetings for a wide range of corporate and non-profit clients both large and small, domestically and abroad. More about Joanne and Ireland Presentations can be found at www.irelandpresentations.com.

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