



# Let Me Entertain You: Trade Show Exhibits of Meaningless Marketing

I recently attended my first trade show in over five years.  
A lot has changed.

I walked down every aisle. Inhaled a wealth of networking opportunities lost in the systemic grandeur of a national expo. Marveled at the level of effort that went into creating themed booths that drove lines of curious attendees to brands unknown.

**But that's where it ended.**



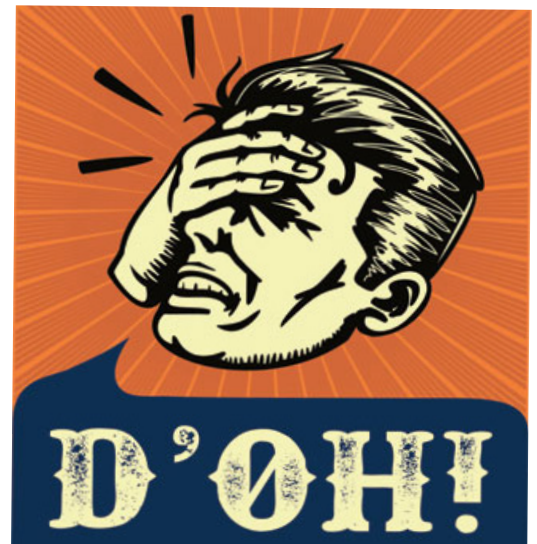
I waited for a photo with an 80's icon, and wondered why this B-lister was representing the company.

Equally disappointing - no one helped me make the connection.

No one at the booth approach me.  
Not even a hi, or thanks for coming by.

Companies are notorious for pulling out all the stops at these national conferences. Like travelling productions of Broadway hits, major brands and upstarts go the distance to hire experiential marketing teams to put on quite a show. Preceded with a personal invitation mailed weeks before Booth #XYZ unveils its marvel, a Pavlovian anticipation all but guarantees a crowd.

**But what's the point?**



# Don't Take Eye Candy from Strangers

Analytics will tell you attendees should be given the interactive, the over-the-top, the swag-infused. And for the most part that's exactly what they get. Nothing more. **That's all I got.**

In a sea of hundreds, sometimes thousands, of exhibitors you need a shtick to stand out. But the bigger picture is slowly being sacrificed to the gods of the most memorable display. *(And I say display, not company, because name recognition gets devoured by the ostentatious surrounds.)*

## Do exhibitors need to be reminded why we attend these events?

We don't go for the comped trip with sponsored cocktail hour and expensed room-service. The exorbitant cost of admission needs to cover something other than a collection of pens and USB sticks or we wouldn't be investing time or money.

## Trade shows are more than a line item on a corporate budget, they're conduits of revenue.

At the expo, I weaved through floor traffic and scanned outrageous budget-busters doing little more than creating a turnstile of curiosity. The marketer in me wondered how many lackluster handouts on a draped table could have been purchased for the price of their equally ineffective big-time spectacle.



## When did brand awareness become more about awareness and less about the brand?

For the record, not all excessive booths missed the mark. Some had relevant value. And others could have been right on point, if they were supported correctly.

As I neared the front of the lengthy line to snap my selfie with this nostalgic actor however, I was shocked that not one person manning the booth had approached me the entire time. **Too busy making dinner plans. Too busy checking smart phones. Too busy to notice a host of potential sales within their reach.**

I took the bait but was left on the line, quite literally. And I exited their area as I came, just another face in the crowd.

# Drowning in Shallow Ideas

While gimmicks may be a success, campaigns can be complete failures.

In the remaining exhibit hall hours, it became clear this was no isolated incident. Booth after booth I tripped over larger-than-life experiences and useless bag fillers. Absent from most of these giveaways however was the one thing I was hoping for, an introduction.

Companies had a captive audience. Warm bodies swarming around their wares and they chose not to engage. Little to no conversation was initiated and even fewer opportunities to ask questions. There would be no follow-up and no ROI.

## So again, what's the point?

They fell victim to shallow marketing. They used a one-off approach and then missed the bigger opportunity. These booths were just a ploy to get my attention, not sell the services.



**Where were the reps to discuss partnerships?  
Why did no one scan my badge or take my business card?  
How would they keep the conversation going if it were never started?**



There's a big difference between trying to get noticed and trying to get leads.

Trade shows are a cog in a holistic strategy that requires choreographed tactics timed to a market's movements. This isn't hands-off selling.

**It's a contact sport involving multi-touch campaigns.**

# Funnel Vision

If we backtrack into one of these trade show planning sessions, it probably looks a little like this:

Prime placement and sponsorship opportunities ✓ Brainstorming ideas to try and one-up the neighbor. ✓  
Pre-show marketing. ✓

**Where's the post-show nurture stream?**

**No follow-up communication at the ready?**

**Why does none of this enter the equation?**



Avoid the pitfalls of shallow marketing with an analysis of the buyers' journey. From top-of-the-funnel assets that capture attention, (in this case, a booth like no other) to valuable content that feeds curiosity and consideration. The delivery of this material must also be addressed, starting with distribution by booth reps to automated post-show emails that trickle into a full-blown nurture campaign.

Let's say these companies somehow ended up with a small treasure trove of names and emails from the show, what then? Does it get rehomed into Salesforce or some other CRM? And even if it's divvied among the best inside sales pros, how will you support their efforts?

**Your trade show efforts don't end at a wow-worthy booth.  
That's where it starts.**

Expos are a kickoff to digital marketing and corresponding sales strategies complete with trust-marks, demos, case studies, webinars, and thought leadership pieces. Which brings us back to the buyer's journey.

**The bigger picture.  
The holistic marketing approach.**

Warm leads cool off quickly if you can't get them fully invested in your message after a show. A missed opportunity can be traced back to planning sessions sans follow-up and additional outreach.

No mind-blowing backdrop, interactive play and stay, or meet & greet will help you recoup the money you shelled out on a national conference (and forget about profiting from the event) if that's all you're going to deliver. Shallow marketing tactics will never yield the return on investment.

As I waded through internal marketing and agency concepts until the next workshop started, whatever I wanted to know about these companies became lost in a circus of creative.

**I left the hall with a handful of recyclables, and a hashtag infused Instagram post thought up in the queue.**

**And they left a potential partnership on the table.**



Tom Prendergast is President and Managing Director of 190west, a leading digital marketing agency in MA. As an indispensable resource for companies, 190west fills sales pipelines, generates more marketing qualified leads (MQLs), and provides innovative online strategies that increase ROI.

Prior to 190west, Tom was Director of Sales at ImageTech, a Xerox Company, and was a Principal at AdvancedRecovery, a company that introduced automotive technology to expedite convalescence and asset protection to banks and lenders.