

Planning to Win: Will Your Company Exhibit By Hope or By Objectives?

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"*If you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there*" is a famous quote from Alice in Wonderland. Unfortunately, it also describes the way many exhibitors approach tradeshows. Industry research finds that only 24% of exhibitors set objectives. And of those who do set objectives, less than 10% take the critical next steps of committing the objectives to writing, developing a written action plan, then executing and measuring their performance and results against the plan.

There are basically two ways to exhibit; Exhibit by Objectives or Exhibit by Hope. Renting floor space, sending your booth, equipment, products, literature and staff and hoping that things work out is Exhibiting by Hope. This is one of the primary reasons many companies don't reap maximum benefit from tradeshows.

Exhibiting by Objectives is the process of identifying your best reasons for exhibiting, converting those reasons to SMART goals, developing plans for execution, and measuring results. To begin the Exhibiting by Objectives process, you should start at least six months before show time by asking yourself and key stakeholders in and around your company, "*Why are we or why should and could we be exhibiting?*" Here is a list of the top reasons why companies exhibit. Review this list carefully and select the top three to five reasons your company exhibits:

__capture leads
__introduce new products
__create/maintain/expand visibility
__branding
__meet with key customers
__generate public relations/press
__test market a product
__gain distribution
__gain access to "no see" buyers
__write sales orders at and/or post
__demonstrate product capabilities
__demonstrate thought leadership
__recruiting
__competitive research
__customer/industry research
__get customer feedback
__meet w/vendors, distributors, partners
__advance proposal in process

Identifying your reasons is a good start, but to provide the necessary focus, your reasons need to be converted to SMART goals. (i.e., Specific, Measurable, Actionable, Realistic, Timebound). For example, if one of your primary reasons for exhibiting is to capture leads, then your SMART goal might look like this: "*To capture at least 45 qualified leads by closing time*."

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Every goal needs a planner and a plan. Once you've converted your reasons to SMART goals, the next step is to create a written action plan -- this is your road map to achieving your goals. It clearly identifies the actions you must take to achieve the goal. A thorough written action plan will detail six elements:

1. Goal: Statement of the SMART goal.
2. Strategy: A broad brush paragraph or two outlining your game plan.
3. Tactics: A list of the specific action steps you must take to achieve the goal.
4. Timetable: Define when the steps will be started and completed by.
5. Responsibility: Define who will be accountable for each step.
6. Budget: How much time and money will be allocated for each of the steps.

Once your written action plans are created, assign the actions and timetables to the appropriate people, schedule and follow-up to ensure the actions are taken. Rest assured that Exhibiting by Objectives takes effort. But the rewards are well worth it. It's the difference between "*making expensive appearances*" and "*making profitable investments"*. Decide to lay a solid foundation for exhibiting success by getting started now.

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