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Getting ready for “showtime”

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Almost any business or organization eventually needs to “show its stuff.” That is, show off your products, your services, your capabilities, your people to the public, with exhibits, displays and other types of in-person encounters.

Externally, that opportunity to show your wares may come at a business conference, trade show, convention, speaking engagement or some other kind of special event. Internally, at your place of business, the chance to “show” might come in the lobby, the aptly-named showroom, the waiting room, the conference room, etc.

The exhibit, display or information booth is a critical communication tool. But, the sad fact is, too many are ill-conceived, leading to lots of wasted effort and expense.

As you prepare an exhibit or display of your own, and plan to make it a component of a successful communications strategy, here are several key pointers to help you “think it through”:

1. Think “billboard”

Your display works best when there is one focus for the visitor’s eye. If there is more than one focus, there should be a logical, intuitive progression from one to the next. Just like a billboard on a roadway, your display needs to capture attention from people who are in motion in a busy setting and initially paying their attention to something else besides you and your message.

Always be aware of your visitor’s line-of-sight. Elements which help you achieve this focus include graphic design, structure, color, motion, lighting and, yes, even sound. You don’t have to cram your entire story into your display. Remember, your exhibit is just the first step in an “information trail.” (See 6., below.)

2. Think “context”

Will you be indoors? Or outdoors? Do you have to contend with wind and moisture? Special provisions must be made for these conditions. Whether inside or outside, always be aware of the ambient levels of noise and light, so they don’t diminish your presentation. If multiple exhibitors are involved, who



The display above was designed by Riger Advertising for Xonitek Corporation. It comprises reversible panels to vary the look during trade shows, and deliberately “tempts” viewers to step forward for a closer look at the key words and quotes.

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will be to the right of you? To the left of you? Across from you? (Or even behind you?) Context can make all the difference in the world to the effectiveness of your exhibit.

3. Think “people”

Many exhibits fail to take people into account. Is your booth going to be staffed? Or un-staffed? If staffed, where will your booth attendants be stationed? Where do you expect your booth visitor to stand? How will that visitor navigate through your exhibit? Sometimes the exhibit design places barriers between you and your visitor. Eliminate those barriers. Make the booth experience more intimate. If your booth is un-staffed, is it conceived so as to be self-sufficient? Better yet, is there a way to staff it instead? People-to-people is the best communication there is!

4. Think “conversation”

It follows from 3., above, that if you are thinking people, you should be thinking conversation. How do you organize your booth, and how do you station your booth personnel so as to stimulate conversation with your booth visitor? Any physical means of interactivity (i.e., computers, DVD playback devices, hands-on activities, etc.) should supplement — not replace — human interactivity. There is a skill called “boothmanship.” It’s worth finding out more about it.

5. Think “flexibility”

How flexible is your exhibit? Can you erect it free-standing on the floor? Can you place it on a table top? Does it lend itself to reconfiguration so as to suit changing environments? How portable is it? Does it require one person to set up, tear down, transport? Or more than one person?

6. Think “information trail”

Once you have captured the visitor’s attention and involved him/her in your booth experi-

ence, is there a logical, intuitive trail for the visitor to follow in order to learn more about you, your organization and your selling proposition? Have you planned for business cards? Literature? Phone number? Video? Web site address? Online connection? Give-away reminder token? When you properly manage the “information trail,” you will find it easier to achieve the kind of focus we talked about in 1., above, leaving some of your story for later. And, speaking of information trail, how will you be capturing contact info from your visitors for follow-up?

7. Think “utilities”

Are you going to need electric power in your exhibit? Are you going to need video playback equipment? Computer equipment? Online connection? Speakers? These take planning and coordination. (Remember: wires and cables are ugly and get in your way. Keep them out of sight if possible. Duct tape is your friend in so many ways.)

8. Think “secondary uses”

As a general rule, your exhibit or display should spend minimal time in storage. Keep it in use as often as possible, in as many different locations where it can capture public attention as possible. Even after the show or special event for which it was produced in the first place has ended, is there some other “high-traffic” place you can put it so it is working hard for you before you send it out to its next gig in your communications plan? (Instead of exiling the structure to your basement, how about putting it up in your lobby? True, many secondary uses will necessarily be un-staffed, but a good booth design can take that into account.)

Here’s to good “boothmanship”!

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