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An effective and entertaining exhibition

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Exhibiting at a trade show can be a worthwhile investment to stand out from competitors. But it's important to follow some guidelines to keep a trade show appearance from being a very costly mistake.

As a manufacturer of athletic performance apparel, Wacoal Sports Science has exhibited at the Outdoor Retailer Winter and Summer Markets show in Salt Lake City, UT, for the past six years.

To show off the company's fitness apparel, Wacoal makes sure to hire models that look like they actually use these products.

“One model, a woman in her 30s, with four children at home, has rock-hard, six-pack abs,” says Jeff Blumenfeld, president of Blumenfeld and Associates, Wacoal's agency. “Another was Miss Utah, who also works out.”

Instead of confining these brand ambassadors to the booth, the team makes sure that they roam the exhibition floor wearing Wacoal products.

“After six years, the models are well known as they chat up the product among retailers, encouraging them to make the booth one of their stops,” Blumenfeld says.

When Smarti Solutions exhibited at last month's ad:tech in New York, a digital marketing conference, its booth included “Sales & Marketing SAM,” a superhero with the powers to save marketers from the perils of faulty agency choices.

Corny? A bit. Distinctive? Certainly. Especially after a couple of “Talent on Tap” premium Blue Moon draft beers, branded with the company's corporate orange.

Despite the theatrics, Smarti's team focuses on simple speaking points.

“Don't do shtick for shtick's sake and lose the message and the brand in the process,” says Smarti CEO

Michele Harris. “The only job of the trade show booth is to make people stop so the team can sell stuff. Keep the creative simple and direct, and use minimal copy.”

Superheroes aside, maximizing presence at trade shows means embracing all available tools, notes Susan McPherson, VP of global trade show services at PR Newswire.

“Many reporters and analysts plan their visits well ahead of time and will look to online scheduling tools to set up meetings and appointments,” she says.

Trade show management firms are also encouraging exhibitors to join their communities and connect to media, speakers, attendees, sponsors, and other exhibitors.

“In doing so, many are setting up social network portals,” says McPherson, who advises her clients to create electronic press kits that can be linked from the show's Web site.

Another way to increase ROI of a trade show expenditure is by hosting side events.

“But be careful about sponsoring cocktail parties unless you are going to be directly interacting with decision-makers for your key prospects or customers,” advises Julie Pitts, account supervisor at DMN3.

For example, in coordinating client Kraton Polymers' participation in the Kunststoffe International Trade Fair for Plastics & Rubber in Germany, DMN3 helped orchestrate a “Royal Event,” complete with fine dining, games of chance, and an overnight stay in a medieval castle in the German countryside.

The invitation yielded a 100% response rate, with more than 90% of invitees attending.

But not every company needs to exhibit at a major show, says John Hill, president of John A. Hill & Associates.

“I recommend to many of my clients to look at the smaller, more focused events, rather than the major trade shows,” he explains. “The audience may not be as large, but the possibility of generating more opportunities for my clients has proven to be higher. With this approach, the client can get two or three trade shows out of what it would cost to exhibit at a single major trade show.”

Technique tips:

Do

Hire staffers that look like they use the product/service

Schedule appointments in advance with media and buyers

Embrace all of the tools available from organizers

Don't

Do shtick for shtick's sake

Invest in just one major show. You can get better results from several smaller ones

Forget to keep the brand's message consistent in all displays