

the strengths and weaknesses of the competition. “Get specific details from them as to how a particular show aligns with their objectives and whom they’re trying to reach,” Cox says.

Product/Vertical Industry Marketing Managers: Talk specifics with product or vertical-industry marketing managers, who should be able to provide you with the bulk of the information you’ll need. Question them about specific marketing and show objectives, market trends, and products and applications. What shows do they perceive as most valuable and why?

Sales Force: Get the skinny from the sales force. “They’re the guys in the trenches who talk with prospects,” Cox says. “They’ll tell you what’s hot; they’ll tell you what’s on their customers’ minds.” Then, you can determine how their needs best mesh with your company’s objectives.

Step 2: Seek Feedback From Current and Prospective Customers

The next step is to find out what shows these buyers attend, what value they place on those shows and, most important, their true interest in your category of products. “Once we’ve identified prospects, we want to find an independent list of people that fit that profile,” Cox proceeds. This list can come from your own in-house database and/or outside list database sources. Just be certain that your final list includes prospects, as well as current customers. If time and funds permit, send a formal survey to several hundred respondents per market from this database. At minimum, conduct informal interviews by phone with several dozen customers. “But don’t limit your research to current clients or to show-goers alone,” Cox cautions. “You want opinions from a cross-section of your potential audience.”

Here’s what you need to learn:

Their Interest Level in Your Products: Ask respondents what they know about your company and its products. Then ask about their interest level in the specific products and services offered at the show. Simply put, the higher the level of interest in your product, the higher the likelihood that attendees will visit your exhibit. This will aid you in developing and refining objectives for the show and strategies for achieving them.

Their Feelings About Particular Shows: Ask attendees what shows they attend, what shows they are aware of but do not attend, and why. What shows do they consider most important? Not only will you learn about shows you’re considering, but you may learn of events with better payoff for your time and money.

Their Feelings About Tradeshow in General: What role do shows play in the pantheon of marketing tools that influence them: direct mail, sales calls, ads in trade magazines, etc.?

If you have questions about the value of a specific show your company has traditionally attended, conduct a survey of past attendees to evaluate their awareness of your company and its products, the effectiveness of your exhibit and the decision-making level of the prospects. You may discover that many who visited your booth were already loyal customers who simply wanted to chew the fat with their buddies in sales. If that’s the case, you may want to reconsider the value of that particular show.

Step 3: Create a Master List of Shows

Creating a list of show opportunities is where most companies begin. “Big mistake,” says Cox. Without the background established in Steps 1 and 2, your chances of selecting the right shows are about as good as winning a fortune in Vegas. The mission of this step is to develop the Mother of All Lists—a compilation of all possible shows and events that might meet your company’s marketing objectives. This list will serve as the basis for further investigation. There are many sources, both direct and indirect, to help in this compilation. Alas, no one directory will include all possibilities.

Start your search by accumulating whatever show directories you can get your hands on. Add to these the shows you’ve learned about through your colleagues and customers. Then search the Web for on-line show directories.

The direct mail you probably receive from show producers is another source of information, as are company or association websites and the websites of your competitors.