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Tradeshows: Where good leads go to die...

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A Very Brief History from 3500 BC to today

There's an amazing amount of money invested each year in events and tradeshows. Everyone wants to interact with new products, educational seminars, social networking and the buzz of simply being in the place where business is happening. But how much business is really happening?

"What are we getting out of that show?" asks the counter of the beans. That question created a culture of sponsorships and lead tracking dating back to the first Wheel Technology Expo in 3502 BC. Back then leads were written in stone. When you said you were interested in a follow-up you really meant it!

Ever since then, technology has done its part to speed the process; the automatic ink pen, printed business cards and thermal tape lead printers. More recently we've seen RFID tracking, handheld computers, e-mail blasting, text messaging, Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter to communicate with people faster and more often. But are we getting messages we either don't want or don't have time to respond to? How can we be sure these leads are "rock solid" and worthy of a follow up?

The Exhibitor's Perspective

As an exhibitor, we attend shows because it's the fastest way to meet new people. Our competition is there so we have to come. Occasionally we launch a new product and this is the best way to show off our latest stuff. It's hard work and taking the time to follow up is difficult. We take notes on some of the better leads but there are dozens or even hundreds more we never seem to get to because we're preparing for another event.

The current lead management process simply doesn't work for us. Expensive equipment rentals are followed by days or weeks to get a list of mostly unqualified leads. We spend thousands to participate in a show and then another \$500 to \$1,000 to capture the results of that investment. Especially since the CFO says we need to justify why we went. Technology has sped the process, but nothing is in place to qualify the leads; leads that are mostly followed up by phone.

And the calls are grueling. "Hi, this is Steve with Innocuous Technology. We met at the Expo... do you remember stopping by our booth? We were giving away the combination flashlight/mint dispenser. SO, I was wondering if we can schedule a time to visit with your group. Yeah, I know those were awesome... no we don't have any more... so can we talk about helping your company?"



The Attendee Perspective

As an attendee, I decide which show to attend by reviewing the mix of speakers, educational sessions, an expo of new products and the opportunity to network with others in my industry. Getting approval to go and taking the time away from work to sharpen the saw is important. Therefore, returning with useful information to share with the group is important.

So here I am at the Expo. There are hundreds of booths to visit and new stuff to see. I grab a mint after lunch and the exhibitor asks if she can scan me. Sure I say, without thinking as I pick up a brochure. And just like that, I'm on another list of calls after the event. Will I ever have the time to look at this literature and will I remember who everybody was? Hey, this is a cool flashlight/mint dispenser!

After stopping at 147 booths, which ones had the best technology and ideas for my business? Which salesperson did I talk to and will I remember the booth? Or will it be the combination flashlight/mint dispenser?

Changing the Responsibility

What if the responsibility of lead management shifted to the attendee? Think about the simple act of browsing the Internet and capturing a bookmark for a favorite site. Now bring this idea to a live event. Wouldn't this reduce the amount of brochures and help enable "Green Meetings?" Bookmarks might be speaker presentations, people you met, specific products, electronic brochures, event photos and just about any information you can capture at an event.

But where do vendors and sponsors see the benefit? In the current model, they are fisherman casting their lines into the great big pond. By reversing the process, they still meet the same people and discuss opportunities during the show, but instead they get a high-tech fish finder to see which areas are best for success. Attendee interest is electronically tracked once when they add a bookmark and a second time when they review that bookmark. An exhibitor will meet 100's of people during a show. With event bookmarking, they can know which 100 to contact immediately.

And if an attendee decides they are not interested in some of their bookmarks and even opt out of certain connections that can send a message as well. What a company does with a non-lead is often as useful as a good lead.

Reaching the right people with the right message at the right time

After awhile we can know quite a bit about event attendees. That knowledge is key to creating a high-quality experience. For example, during the event check-in process we see that Joe, a financial analyst has selected three breakout sessions; e-waste disposal, technology leasing strategies and reducing the cost of corporate software acquisition. We had an opportunity to survey Joe during registration to see that he enjoys golf, wears a large shirt and is responsible for "Green Initiatives" at his organization. We know that if we offer Joe a premium golf shirt (with sponsor logos) and an opportunity to learn about new EPA compliance



laws for 2010, we have a good match for a number of technology sponsors and vendors who will gladly participate in a special event where Joe can have some fun and learn.

And during the show we see that Joe bookmarked almost every sponsor that participated. He went back to his office and reviewed his links resulting in activity from a number of vendors at the show. Bean counters rejoice... we have ROI!

Year over year improvement – Capturing the Voice of the Customer

Information over multiple shows can reveal potential improvements to the event experience. Reviewing what was most bookmarked and most visited can only increase the value of an event. Attendees vote with their actions, but surveying and polling an event in progress captures the voice of the customer. Event improvement based on real data creates more valuable sponsorships, higher booth rates and higher attendance year over year.

Can Everybody Win?

Everyone deserves to win. They put in their time, money and hard work to make the best experience. When done properly the following should happen:

- Attendees meet new people, products and get introduced to the latest ideas
- Exhibitors get to show off their latest stuff and find out exactly who is interested
- Sponsors and exhibitors entice the right people to learn more about their company. Getting your logo on signage is good but there should be more of a direct payoff.
- Event Managers should easily tweak and improve an event in real time based on high-quality information. Why should they wait for the next event to make improvements?
- Directors of sales and finance see full reporting of the level of success of every dollar spent on event activities.

