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Should we re-evaluate trade shows?



by MARIA ZAMPINI

'My bottom-line thought is this: Trade shows need to look at merging to decrease the number of shows, increase their drawing power and just plain make them better for all involved.'

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It's February, the month in which Punxsutawney Phil looks for his shadow and — no matter if he sees it — the snow continues to fall and fall and fall on those of us silly enough to live in the snowbelt. A couple weeks later is Valentine's Day, a good excuse to buy new lingerie and indulge in chocolate (not that we women really need an excuse to do either). And in our family, on the 28th we celebrate both my brother Joe and my father Jim's birthdays. But, first and foremost, February means the winter trade show season is almost over!

While I hate to admit this, I'm rather glad another show season is nearly history. Don't get me wrong — I really, truly enjoy the chance to visit with industry friends, get to know customers better and meet new and interesting people. There is no other event where you can see so many customers and potential customers in such a short span of time. What an excellent time to network! Plus, many shows also have educational programs in conjunction with exhibit hours. A plethora of opportunities abound for those who see the value in taking advantage of them.

I suppose kissing the kids goodbye January 1st and pretty much not seeing them for an entire month has lost its luster. Most years I hoped they would remember who I was when I finally made it home. Then again, when they were little they'd run and jump in my arms for hugs and kisses. Now that they're older, I'm usually greeted with, "When are you going grocery shopping? There is nothing to eat in the house." No matter that I stock the fridge and cupboards each time before I leave and there is a grocery store at the end of my street. Some things never change, do they?

In fact, one saying I really like is, "Things must change to stay the same." Which actually brings me to the point of this month's column: In my humble opinion, I think now, more than ever, the organizations that manage trade shows must seriously re-evaluate this proverbial cash cow. In these extremely difficult economic times, I believe that not only is the milk drying up, but the calves

are headed to greener pastures or simply just staying home.

The way I see it, you can almost say that pretty much everyone and their brother still puts on a show. Each convention is experiencing declining attendance. Subsequently, each group is putting fewer and fewer dollars in its coffers. I suspect that if shows continue to do things the same way (or only make minor changes) and expect a different result, many are destined to fall by the wayside.

My bottom-line thought is this: Trade shows need to look at merging to decrease the number of shows, increase their drawing power and just plain make them better for all involved. In combining shows you may lose a little at the beginning, but it potentially may make for more consistent and stable future income. I don't know about you, but I'd rather have a part of something, than a part of nothing.

Concurrent with trade shows, many offer educational programs either they organize or put on by partnering with educational institutions. Personally, I think having classes makes for "more bang for your buck" for both exhibitors and attendees who want to grow themselves and their staff (pun intended). However, this added element means an additional piece of the puzzle to solve if shows were to join forces.

For those who consider this route, it certainly won't be an easy task. It would take an exceptionally positive attitude of "How can we do it?" — not "why we can't." It would likely succeed only if egos are checked at the door and the pot of

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the line of sight. No doubt it will take forward thinkers and/or those who are willing to consider ideas that are out of the box to make things fly. Everyone will have to be willing to share and play nice. No matter what, it is a daunting challenge — but not one so extreme that it can't be met if the desire is there.

Furthermore, I think that this recession has forced companies to become extremely budget conscious and thus ultimately better business people. You must ask yourself at every step, "What will this add to my bottom line?" Moreover, companies that exhibit at trade shows will continue to take a hard look at what shows they are participating in and what type of return they are getting for their investment. The same goes for those attending the shows.

I've been involved on both sides of the aisle, and I think that whether you are an exhibitor or an attendee, what you get out of the show is simply what you put into it. What was good enough in the past isn't good enough anymore. Exhibitors can't afford to spend time in the booth on their phone, reading the newspaper or just sitting there like a bump on a log watching people walk by. Attendees won't be able to leisurely meander the show floor talking to only those vendors they already know.

Just like show organizers, both groups will need to force themselves outside of their comfort zones. But, no matter what role you have at the show, you've got to play your part. I call it "putting on my happy face." While it is hard to be "on" the entire time, you want to be at your best for each and every customer you meet or vendor you visit, even if you don't feel like it. As Daddy always told me, "You've got to make hay while the sun shines." During winter, the sun shines brightest in January. And with a little advance thought and planning, coming home from the trade shows with a nice tan can potentially lead to a nicer bottom line on your year-end financial statement. ♥

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