

Trade (show) secrets for retailers

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Recently I had one of the most immersive, exciting shopping experiences ever. I got to play with a bunch of cool products and to engage with employees and other shoppers who had similar tastes and interests as mine. The experience whetted my appetite for more products and I left totally pumped up about several brands. I told several people about my experience and they wanted to go check it out themselves.

This unique experience didn't happen in a retail store. It was at CES, the trade show for the consumer electronics industry. But don't let the description "trade show" mislead you. The show engages attendees in the kind of compelling and memorable experiences that every company hopes to create on its retail floor. And CES gets over 140,000 people buzzing about, promoting, and wanting to buy the products they saw there.

CES -- and other phenomenal trade shows like it, including the UFC Fan Expo which drew 125,000 attendees last year and Comic-Con which had 130,000 -- may not seem to have anything to do with retail. But in fact they are extraordinary shopping experiences. And retailers would do well to follow the practices that companies use to engage people at them:

1. hands-on everything

People are naturally drawn to touch and try -- it starts when we're kids and the thrill of pushing buttons and turning dials never really leaves us. At CES rows and rows of displays invite people to pick up and use the products; you can fiddle and futz with them to your heart's content. In doing so you get to learn all about a product and determine whether it "fits" you.

This contrasts starkly with many retail stores where products are kept in glass cases or are displayed so that don't invite people to use them. The thrill of discovery is lost and many cool products get overlooked.

Gadgets or gear aren't the only products for hands-on experiences. Fabric displays, food samples, and try-on/try-out zones are all different ways to invite people to try your products for themselves -- and they're more likely to want them if they do.

2. dynamic demos

Practically every booth at CES is manned by an army of company representatives who demonstrate the products. Whether through staged presentations with mics and lights or informal, personalized one-on-one walk-throughs, the demos help people understand what makes the products different and special. Importantly you don't have to ask for the demo – exhibitors are constantly demo-ing their products so that passers-by are drawn in. (917) 446 9325 © 2011 Denise Lee Yohn, Inc. mail@deniseleeyohn.com

Knowledgeable employees who have a real passion for the products can get the products noticed, bring them to life, and justify a higher price point – all through demos. They're the oldest form of sales and they work.

Demos are particularly important for technologically-advanced products, but can be just as compelling for basic ones. Show all the different ways an article of clothing might be worn; or how to easily make an appetizer.

The point is to attract attention and add an element of drama. It makes the shopping experience – and the product -- seem special.

3. sensory stimulation

Booths at mega expos like CES and Comic-Con are so intense, they border on sensory overload. But there's a method to their madness. They connect with all of the senses so that the experience is unique and memorable.

They tap the sense of sight through lighting, signage, colors, videos, and people in uniforms or costumes; the sense of sound through well-picked music and announcements through their PA systems; and the sense of touch through fixtures, flooring, and the aforementioned hands-on displays.

Some exhibitors use candies or other treats to appeal to the sense of taste, and I expect it won't be long before we encounter exhibits which use smells to create a distinct sensory experience.

With a little attention to these details, you can develop similar signature experiences in your stores.

4. story-telling signage

In retail stores, as at trade shows, signs are needed for way-finding, signaling location, and describing product. But they can play more than simply a functional role.

At Comic-Con and UFC, signage brings the characters and fighters respectively to life. They tell their stories and show their personalities. Companies at CES use signage to do the same for their brands and products. Such emotionally-engaging signage conveys meaning and connects with people.

You may be tempted to treat your signage space as scarce visual real estate which must carry a sales message or be promotional in nature, but these trade shows demonstrate the potential of using signage to communicate brand stories and

messages which ultimately influence purchase interest too.

5. swag

It's a common trade show sight -- attendees laden with bags full of swag. People love free stuff, no matter whether or not they really have a need for a stress ball shaped like UFC (917) 446 9325 © 2011 Denise Lee Yohn, Inc.
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President Dana White's head or yet another logoed thumb drive. So they collect the stuff and treasure their souvenirs.

So why shouldn't retailers follow suit?! A small logoed gift which costs pennies to offer might deliver thousands of dollars of brand exposure if it's kept and used repeatedly and seen by others. It also might attract people to your store as word spreads about the free giveaway.

It's important to select swag which reinforces your brand message or conveys brand attributes -- a grocery store can give away green food bags to reinforce the freshness of its produce; a fitness store can use pedometers to promote exercise.

You probably can't give away swag all the time, but it would make in-store events or special sales that much more exciting.

At a time when retailers struggle to compete with online merchants, trade shows are a great model to follow. They create inspiring, interactive experiences which engage people with products and bond them to brands. In many ways, they're the ultimate sales floor.

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