

Exhibit design: We've come so far ... or have we?



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Poor Best

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I started in this business when a rendering was created using colored markers, CAD was drawn with a pencil and a scale ruler, architectural models were made for final presentations, and my account manager typed the proposals. My first cell phone was in a bag the size of my purse, and I carry a big purse! We didn't have laptops or voicemail, and a blackberry was something you put on your corn flakes.

The bid process was handled much like purchasing a capital piece of equipment – and procurement required three bids – a practical practice. Unlike an ad agency, the exhibit business has always participated in “speculative” bids. Can you imagine one of your customers asking you to design a custom product or service and, if they liked it, after you spent time and resources developing it, they MIGHT buy it?

As an account executive, it was my responsibility to seek out companies building a new trade show exhibit and it was typically done by “cold calling.” This was a time when many people still answered their phones! Once we found a prospect, a meeting would transpire where we would present our capabilities by showing examples of our work in our portfolio. Companies were selected to participate in the bid process based on pretty pictures in portfolios and a reference check.

We sat face-to-face with the exhibit manager, marketing and product manager in a question-and-answer process in order to create a solution to their specific needs. After all, this exhibit was a substantial investment to be used for several years and it had to satisfy a host of requirements. The brainstorming meeting was a crucial step. Designers would draw in front of the group to ensure they were interpreting the needs of the client correctly. The group in attendance felt ownership in the design, since concepts materialized right in front of their eyes.

Back at our firm, those ideas were expanded upon and transformed into a viable three-dimensional environment. Intricate models were produced depicting marketing messages, traffic flow and product displays. Once again, we sat face-to-face with our potential client explaining the methodology of our design. We had an opportunity to walk our client through the exhibit environment and answer any questions that arose.

Then the world of high tech was born! Designers could put down their markers and create environments on a computer, where you could actually walk a prospect right into their exhibit. CAD could put down their scales, while programs were developed that calculated for them. And, I no longer had to worry about the model breaking before I get to the presentation.

We have come so far or have we? We can now be reached 24 hours a day via cell phones or e-mail. It doesn't matter whether we're on vacation, sick in bed or at a family outing. We never have to speak to anyone; we can just type and click. We hardly have to leave our desk!

But what has this really brought us? We work in a communicative industry, yet we don't communicate. Prospects can now send out RFPs over the Internet and they send them to as many companies as they desire. Do you know why? Because they can. It doesn't take any more of their time than a couple key strokes and hitting the send button.

Sometimes exhibit companies are allowed to e-mail a question or two, hoping to receive a response. In fact, we hope the question was clearly understood. Once we have created what we hope is a viable solution, we get to e-mail the concepts. There is no interaction, no brainstorming sessions and no give and take.

How can we develop an environment that is supposed to communicate a company's philosophy, brand, products and offerings when there is no communication?

My grandmother use to say, “You get out of something what you put into it.” So I suggest, if you're a marketing communication manager tasked with creating a trade show exhibit, you must invest your time and select your vendors wisely. Of course, we must use the modern tools we now have available.

You can research potential companies to participate in your RFP process on the Internet. You can see samples of their work and check their references. You know the companies you select can design and fabricate a trade show booth or you would not have selected them.

Upon choosing companies to respond to your RFP, take the time to meet with them personally. You're investing a significant amount of revenue in an exhibit, but more importantly, you're selecting a team to support your marketing efforts. This is a team you have to trust. This team has to be dedicated and working in your best interest. This team needs to watch your budget and make cost-effective suggestions.

There's a lot riding on this project. The personality of a team cannot be e-mailed or found on a Web site. We call it three-

dimensional, face-to-face marketing for a reason. Or maybe it's time we should get back to our colored markers!

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