HOW TO BUILD YOUR VIRTUAL EXHIBIT

By Dennis Shiao

Chapter 1: How to Build Your Virtual Exhibit (Booth)

Your company is exhibiting at a virtual event and you've been assigned the responsibility of building your company's virtual booth. You've had plenty of experience assembling a physical booth, but never before have you built one virtually. What's your first step? To immediately **resist** the urge to start the virtual build.

Set/Confirm Objectives & Goals

The objectives and goals for your virtual booth should align with the goals for your company's participation in the virtual event. If you do not set the direction yourself, be sure to round up the necessary decision makers and have a documented set of goals - publish them internally and be sure that all stakeholders have a copy. Sample goals include:

1. Obtain contact information from "X" number of prospects
2. Generate "Y" number of meaningful prospect engagements in-booth
3. Yield "Z" number of qualified sales opportunities
4. Generate "X%" of brand uplift, as measured by "Y"

It's absolutely critical that goal definition be your first step, as it drives the decisions you make regarding the build-out of your virtual booth.

Content is King

The main elements of a virtual booth are (1) content [e.g. images, signage, videos, documents, links, etc.] and (2) virtual booth staffers. Your first job is "content curator" - review all content available and be selective about which content you'll place in your booth. It all goes back to the defined goals - the content you select should align with the goals.

So if your goal is demand generation, find the same White Papers that your marketing team is using to generate sales leads across the web. If your goal is driving awareness around a product launch, grab that 2 minute video of your product manager and have it auto-play when visitors enter your booth.

Besides documents in your marketing library, be sure to cobble together useful links on your web site, along with third party articles, blog postings and product reviews that reinforce your objectives.

Booth Labels Are Like Headlines

Content in a booth is typically housed behind a set of "booth labels". Your next job is one of headline writer - you'll want to craft captivating "headlines" for the booth label, along with attention-grabbing titles (and descriptions) for the underlying content items. You're like the home page editor for your favorite content site - you need to figure out how to write headlines (titles) that will grab your visitors' attention.

While you certainly want to avoid the "bait and switch" (e.g. writing a label/title that intentionally deceives), your labels need not literally reflect the underlying content. For example, if you assemble a set of blog postings from your company's blog, you need not label these "Blog Postings". Instead, organize the blog postings into themes - a set of postings on best practices could simply be labeled "Best Practices" in your booth.

While I suggest you do **not** change booth labels while the event is live (that would significantly confuse your booth's repeat visitors), you'll want to review the activity reports from your booth to learn from the labeling decisions that you made. You'll begin to figure out what worked and what didn't - and can use those learnings for your next event to more effectively use labels/headlines to achieve your goals.

Use A Call To Action - Not A Declaration

For signage within the virtual booth, I prefer to use a call to action (e.g. "Ask Us Why 2010 is The Year of The Hybrid" above) over a declaration. So instead of declaring, "The world's leading producer of plastic widgets", try a call to action, "Ask us why plastic widgets are the new metal widgets". The call to action **initiates** a conversation with your visitors, rather than **telling** them what they should know. If visitors enter your booth's group chat and proactively ask the question stated in your call to action, then give yourself a pat on the back.

Stand Out From The Crowd

You'll likely have competitors exhibiting in their own virtual booths, which means that a key part of your job is to figure out how to separate your booth (and company) from the crowd. Greenscreen video (aka an embedded video greeter) has been used at enough virtual booths that it won't make your booth any different.

Instead, try an offbeat video that's not yet made its way to YouTube. Or, how about an avatar of your CEO whose mouth movements are synchronized to the words s/he is speaking. Perhaps an animated avatar is the new greenscreen. Thinking further outside the box, how about bringing one of your products to life - personalizing that product to the point where it speaks and delivers a message to visitors. A good example (in general - not in a virtual event) is the DCX Man character created by Brocade:

Source: Brocade (dcxman.com)

Optimize Your Content For Search

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is not the sole domain of your web site or blog - it applies to virtual events as well. How can this be? Well, most virtual event platforms provide basic and advance search capabilities - they index all content in the event (e.g. documents, links, Webcasts, etc.) and some platforms even index the contents of uploaded documents.

As a result, keep SEO in mind for selecting documents to include in your booth, along with the labels, titles and abstracts that you use to catalog your booth content. Taking a step back, be sure to write an SEO-optimized description for your company and booth - if attendees search for a key term and your booth is at the top of the search results, then all is good in the world.

Subject Matter Experts as Booth Staffers

While you'll certainly want sales reps and sales engineers as booth staffers, it's critical to work subject matter experts into the staffing schedule. A visitor who asks specific product or service questions is a hot prospect - and telling that prospect "let me get back to you with an answer to your question" becomes a lost opportunity. Even worse, that opportunity could fall into the lap of your competitor, whose booth is only one click away.

If you're a technology vendor, try to have your product manager, chief engineer or event your CTO available within the booth. While some technology folks may not be comfortable face-to-face with a customer, most feel quite at home in a text chat session.

Optimizing For: Demand Generation

If you're looking to generate sales leads, cobble up all your best lead gen content - the latest White Papers, Case Studies, product sheets, videos, podcasts, customer testimonials, etc. Be liberal and selective at the same time - that is, ensure there is a good mix of content choices, but be religious in making sure the content you select aligns with your goals - and relates to the theme of the virtual event. The beauty of a virtual event is that registration occurs once - but all activity with your content is tracked. So you'll have rich activity profiles at your disposal to help you separate the cream of the crop leads from the visitors who came simply to enter your prize drawing.

Optimizing For: Thought Leadership

Are some of your co-workers experts or luminaries within your industry? If yes, then have them be staffers within your booth! Visitors will have a natural inclination to engage with them - and they'll be able to funnel the ripest opportunities to sales reps within your booth. If your employees have not achieved rock star status within your industry, leverage some of the luminaries to produce content on your behalf.

Perhaps it's a research report authored by an industry expert - or, a video interview (hosted by the expert) with your CEO. Better yet, a Webcast within the virtual event that features the expert(s) who provide a presentation prior to your own speakers. If the experts are available to attend the virtual event, invite them to provide Q&A within your booth, as they'll serve to draw interest and engagement from visitors.

Conclusion

While much of the logistics occur "online", building a virtual booth will take longer than you think (if done right). Be sure to clearly define your goals first - then, make sure your booth achieves those goals. Take planned breaks from the virtual build to assess whether your booth aligns with the stated goals. Finally, be sure to study activity data from the live event so you can make improvements for your next event!

Chapter 2: Additional Considerations for Your Virtual Exhibit

Introduction

During the ski season, I spend a lot of time on **Interstate 80** in California. When I'm unfortunate to get stuck in "stop and go" traffic, it makes me realize the effectiveness of highway billboard ads. At the same time, however, I find that the majority of ads are poorly done and only a handful truly resonate with me.

I also got to thinking about the **similarity between highway billboard ads and the signage in booths** at virtual trade shows. In both cases, the "target audience" is highly transient, moving from one location to another. As on a highway, you may zip right past a sign (or booth) without event noticing it. With foot on the brake pedal, I pondered how the concepts behind effective billboard ads can apply to the design of your virtual booth.

1) It's not about you.

Advertisers (exhibitors) all too often think in their own terms, when they should be thinking **on** their audience's terms. Remember that prospects don't care about your product offerings, they care about how to solve their business challenges. So talk to them about them and not about you.

Jiffy Lube had an effective billboard. It said, "**My time matters**." Instead of talking at you (i.e. "Your time matters"), they put the advertisement in your own voice. In doing so, they made it about you, and not about them.

2) Make your audience interpret a bit.

My favorite billboard ad was from ING Direct. It said, "**Drive Safely**". That's it! The vast space of a billboard ad, consumed by two words. My first reaction was, "Thanks!" and my second reaction was, "Hmm, drive safely ... and my money is also safe with ING." The impact of an ad is enhanced when viewers need to think in order to interpret its message.

3) Eliminate the Gobbledygook.

David Meerman Scott (@dmscott) wrote about The Gobbledygook Manifesto, a set of overused and cliched business terms. While I don't see much gobbledygook on highway billboards, I see them in virtual booths. As I mention in point #1, "it's not about you", so speak in terms that your audience understands. More often than not, that's plain English (*substitute your local language here*).

4) Invite rather than declare.

Unlike a billboard ad where viewers can zoom by at 55 MPH (or higher), a virtual booth's signage can invite visitors to start a conversation with your company. Rather than declaring your "market leading product" via gobbledygook, invite visitors to speak to you about their business challenges.

Remember, it's all about their challenges and not about your products. If your products can help address those challenges, then you may have a sales opportunity. But don't assume that "everything fits" at the outstart.

5) Less is more.

As Jiffy Lube and ING Direct demonstrated, eloquence is all about short and sweet, not about wordiness. Twitter taught us to go 140 characters or less - with billboard ads and booth signage, think about 14 characters or less.

Conclusion

Keep some of these principles in mind as you build your next virtual booth. If your visitors are flying by at 55 MPH, make your booth that highway lookout, where they stop the car, pull over and stay for a while.

Chapter 3: Applying Tips from The Farmers Market

My local farmers market had a "Vote 4 Your Favorite Booth" contest. While the contest was active, I noticed that the fruit vendors were much more engaging and the amount of free samples increased dramatically. The fruit stands had become more customer-friendly as a result of the competition. This was a great thing.

I immediately thought - virtual trade shows are a lot like farmers markets - how about creating a similar contest? Let's consider a "**Vote For Your Favorite Booth Contest**" at your next virtual trade show. The benefits:

Attendees Take Notice

The contest causes attendees to take notice, especially if you offer up prize(s) for voting. The contest provides attendees a framework (and context) for their booth visits. Now, when they enter any exhibitor booth, they are paying more attention to what's there, to judge the current booth to other booths they visit. Ultimately, they will need to determine their top vote, which requires a certain level of engagement and awareness as they move from one booth to the next. And that's a good thing for exhibitors.

Exhibitors Boost and Optimize their Presence

Ever sell a home or condo and host an open house? I bet your home was de-cluttered and nearly spotless. And I bet some of you baked cookies for the occasion. A booth contest is a lot like the open house: the host knows that its visitors will be evaluating the space. This results in:

1. More captivating and refined booth imagery
2. Booth content that aims to please (the visitor)
3. A higher level of booth staffers
4. More engagement from booth staffers (just like at the farmers market)

With everyone "raising their game", this means that exhibitors win and attendees win as well.

SaaS: Sampling as a Service

In the picture above, a fruit stand placed a large assortment of samples in labeled bins, allowing visitors to sample for themselves. I call this Sampling as a (Self) Service! The idea here is to allow "prospects" to sample your "products" (on their own) and then have a "staffer" come by to see if they have any questions.

The same could be done in a virtual trade show. Place your products in your virtual booth and allow visitors to take them on a test drive. Let them do their thing, but check in with them from time to time to see if they need assistance.

Logistics

Here's how the booth contest could be run:

1. Heavily **promote the contest** prior to the event
2. **Educate and inform** exhibitors on the ground rules
3. Create **meaningful incentives** for attendees to vote
4. **Announce the winner** two-thirds of the way through the event. This leaves the remaining one-third of the event for the winner to receive the benefits (traffic to their booth)
5. **Create a badge** or logo that the winner can place on their web site and share via social networks

Conclusion

The virtual booths at some events can be underwhelming. A contest can encourage and motivate the exhibitors and create a win/win/win for attendees, exhibitors and you.

Chapter 4: Hybrid Events: Use Virtual Booths to Follow Up with Leads from Your Physical Booth

Introduction

Making your trade show presence a "hybrid" (with a virtual component) can significantly augment your reach. For folks who are unable to attend the physical event, your virtual booth allows you to connect with prospects you otherwise would have missed. In this posting, however, I'd like to explore methods for leveraging a virtual booth to follow up with leads from your physical booth.

The "greening" of booth collateral

With a virtual booth to complement your physical booth, you can print less (paper) collateral to bring to your next trade show. Visitors are invited to peruse your printed collateral and if they want to take a copy, they can access your virtual booth (from a display at your physical booth) to place the requested documents into their virtual briefcase.

When they return to the office, they'll receive an email with a link to take them back into the virtual booth - and from there, they can download the PDF's from their virtual briefcase. The email follow-up and virtual briefcase lend themselves well to **lead qualification**, as you'll be able to track whether prospects responded to the email (i.e. logged into the virtual booth) - and, review which documents they viewed and downloaded.

Nurturing the less qualified leads

You're bound to have some booth visitors who did not take printed documents - and, did not interact with your on-site virtual booth. All you have is their business card, or their business profile (from scanning their badges). These prospects showed interest by visiting your booth and they can be valuable leads.

Try nurturing these leads by inviting them to visit your virtual booth. Include an image of your virtual booth in the email offer and make it easy for them to respond. Since you already have their basic business profile (e.g. name, title, company, email address, etc.), pre-register them for your virtual booth and ensure that a single click brings them directly in.

Once there, provide them with access to a "**personalized briefcase**", with content tailored to their particular interests or needs. The beauty of the virtual booth is that it now acts as a mini marketing automation system, allowing you to track which content is viewed by the prospect. Then, feed this data back into your "real" marketing automation system and CRM system, so that Sales is armed with new intelligence on this potential buyer.

Engage with Prospects in Real-Time

If you're successful in getting prospects to respond to your virtual booth offers, then add staffers to your booth to match the amount of traffic you're getting. Initially, you'll probably see intermittent traffic, as a visitor (or a few) enter your booth at random times during the day. But view this as an opportunity to **re-engage with prospects**.

When they enter the virtual booth, ensure they know who's there and provide clear calls-to-action on how they can engage with your staffers. Visitors to your virtual booth are raising their hands and signaling to you that they have a further interest. Make sure you deliver to them what they came to receive.

Conclusion

Virtual booths can be a great way to augment the reach of your physical booth. Think about using them as the foundation of your post-event follow-up as well. They can be a great vehicle for moving the prospect down the sales funnel.

Chapter 5: Re-Thinking the Virtual Exhibit Survey
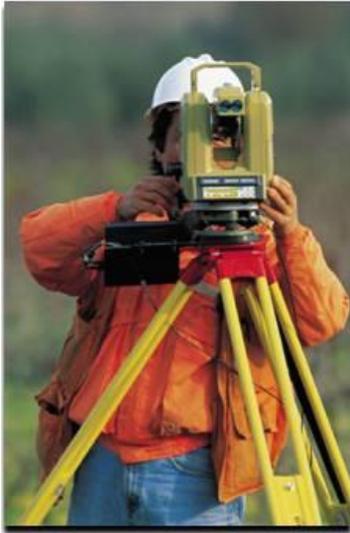
Introduction

Surveys should not be difficult to operate! Too often, however, they are. For virtual trade shows, booth surveys can complement the demographic data (collected during registration) with **psychographic data** to help you further qualify your virtual trade show leads. In this post, I introduce a new approach to the virtual trade show booth survey.

Make it Fun

Surveys are no fun. As a first step, don't call your's a "survey". If you sell B2B products, call it a "Readiness Assessment" instead. Then, **make it fun**. Introduce a host or hostess (audio voiceover) who talks to the end user after each step, cracking jokes along the way.

Develop humorous text or imagery, to encourage users to unmute their speakers. After every few questions, pipe some humor into the process. For instance, insert a text bubble that reads, "4 out of 5 of virtual event attendees surveyed indicate that they ... dislike surveys!"

Provide Instant Feedback

When you complete most surveys, the feedback you receive is, "Thank you for participating in our survey." The new approach to the booth survey leverages **numerical weightings** to each multiple-choice answer. You design the survey questions (and the answers), so that the answers are summed up to a total "score."

Next, capitalize on the current **popularity** of badges (a la Foursquare) and assign ranges of scores to custom-designed badges. For instance, in our B2B Readiness Assessment, the badges could be:

1. The Dunno Badge ("I don't know if I'm ready or not")
2. The Boyfriend Badge ("I don't know if I'm ready to commit")

3. The Trooper Badge ("I think I'm ready, let's do it")
4. The Honeymoon Badge ("Let's skip straight to the honeymoon")

(Note: use of sarcasm for demonstration purposes - may not be appropriate for a B2B setting.)

Your Ticket to Lead Qualification

When you designed your survey questions to add up to a score, did it seem like **lead scoring**? It should have! Just as you'd calculate an "A lead" based on their activity in your virtual booth, you badges become a form of a lead score. If you're implementing lead scoring for your booth visitors, you can augment scores with badge information.

For instance, "A leads" who completed your survey and received the "Honeymoon Badge" are the cream of the crop. They receive higher priority than other "A leads" who received the Trooper, Boyfriend or Dunno badges.

Be Prescriptive on Next Steps

Surveys provide little to no information on next steps. Since your survey is labeled a "readiness assessment," you ought to prescribe the next steps to the user.

Our new approach **assigns a specific piece of content to each badge**. For instance, users with the Dunno Badge receive the "Widgets for Dummies" eBook, while Honeymoon Badge users receive the "Widget Implementation, Volume I" white paper. By giving users a clear follow-up plan, you're delivering tremendous value in exchange for filling out the survey.

Conclusion

The new approach to booth surveys can create a win/win/win scenario. First, by making it enticing and fun, you generate more survey completions. Next, by mapping each survey responder to a badge, you provide instant lead qualification (which helps you). And finally, by prescribing a follow-up plan for each badge, you provide value back to the user, while conveniently leading them down the sales cycle.

About The Author

Dennis Shiao is Director of Product Marketing at INXPO and author of the book "Generate Sales Leads With Virtual Events." At INXPO, Dennis is responsible for go-to-market strategy and execution, and for shaping product and platform evolution via the "voice of the customer." Dennis has managed virtual event campaigns for Cisco, HP, Oracle and Microsoft, among others. Dennis blogs about virtual events at INXPO, and on his personal blog, "It's All Virtual." Dennis can be found on Twitter at @dshiao.