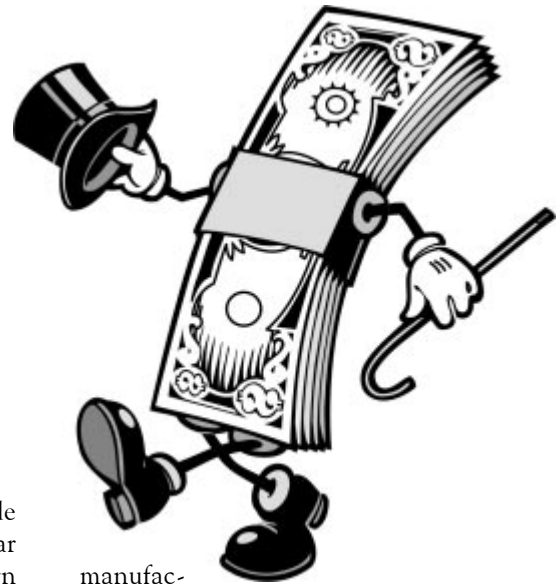

“The Show Must Go On”

by CHARLES SHAW



We all agree that technical trade shows are not what they used to be. A quick check of Wescon, Comdex, Electro, EDS, Northcon, Southcon, etc., will show that those still in existence are smaller and different than they were years ago. Even the Design Engineering Show in Chicago 2003 was smaller, with fewer attendees than in past years; maybe the six inches of snow might have had something to do with it.

Large, broad-based shows that derive the majority of their income from the sale of booth space are not drawing attendees, and consequently are losing exhibitor-driven revenue. Even the smaller technical conferences which rely on revenue generated from sale of conference tickets are experiencing similar problems. Attendance continues to drop off at these shows, yet nothing is being done to counteract it. Show management must accept the fact that the world of the technical trade show is changing and take the appropriate steps to evolve, and thus ensure their survival.

Seeking the Right ROI

No longer are companies just

throwing money and time at trade shows just to be there and appear in the preview program. Return On Investment is a major consideration, and a good ROI must be demonstrated to both exhibitor and attendee. If one does not see the benefits, that person will not attend. If important manufacturers are not at the show, attendees will not be there. Or, if they go to one show, they will not go to the one next year — and if attendees are not there, exhibitors will not return.

There are three partners required to put on a trade show. One is show management, the second exhibitors, and the third attendees. Each one must give serious thought and make specific plans and actions.

No longer can show management just lease a facility, mail out announcements to any and all

manufacturers, and hope to fill the convention hall with the right kind of exhibitors. Show management must first determine what kind of a show they want, decide what kind of exhibitor they need, then go after only those exhibitors. It will be a sales job — a tough sales job — but it can be done. After the first success, it becomes easier. For the broad-based shows, the show management must resist the temptation to just fill the hall with any company, with any product, just to sell booth space. It might generate immediate income, but it lowers the perceived quality and value of that show. This has a negative effect on exhibitors, and they will be reluctant to return.

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Location, Location, Location

The location of the show must be considered. It must be easy and inexpensive for both exhibitor and attendee. Low-cost parking; easy, convenient and inexpensive public transportation; and reasonably-priced hotels for exhibitors and attendees are essential. Even the hours the show is open must be considered and in many cases changed. What was good 10 years ago might not be good today.

Not too long ago many thought, "don't worry about the expensive hotels and plush restaurants. Those costs will go on an expense account," with the thought that once expenses are put on an expense account they disappear. Those expense accounts were magic. That doesn't work anymore. In this time everyone is concerned with costs. It fits in with ROI.

The right exhibitor, and the right kind of exhibitor, are essential. Well-known companies, new technologies and new products will draw attendees, and a large number of attendees will draw the exhibitors.

The exhibitor has more to do than just show up with his booth. After deciding to be in a particular show, the manufacturer must take steps to insure his ROI. Here are some suggestions:

- Examine the customer list and potential customers who might come or should attend that show. Do this in conjunction with your representatives. Send invitations to all the individual names on that list with a general letter saying: "Here is a free ticket to "X" show. We will be there and look forward to seeing you and showing you our new widget."

Free tickets are usually available to the exhibitors.

- In addition to the general mailing, a personal letter should be sent by a specific person from the exhibiting company to specific customers or potential customers saying: "I plan to be at 'X' show. I am anxious to meet with you. I will be at our booth #XXX, and have reserved 9-9:30 a.m., Tuesday, to discuss the new widget and other business-related subjects." I knew one company that did this and while they did not get a 100 percent response, they did get about 65 percent. Their efforts made for a very profitable show.

- The exhibitor and the type of exhibit is important. At one show a number of years ago there was an exhibit with a live boa constrictor draped over part of the booth. The neighboring exhibitors were not very comfortable and attendees didn't get too close or spend much time in that area. Then there was a power failure. That exhibitor did get that snake out of the auditorium and did get it out fast. No immediate danger, but there were many very nervous exhibitors and attendees. The booth must be attractive and inviting to all. The above-mentioned exhibit did more to keep people away than to attract them.

- Most exhibitors prefer to take

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an attendee's name, address, etc. and mail him/her the requested literature. That means the person will not see the requested info for at least a week (and that is optimistic). To solve this, some exhibitors bring with them literature in a stamped envelope. All that is needed is the customer's name and address, which is obtained at the booth. The information/catalog can then be mailed the day it was requested. The person requesting information should have it the next day, or the second day at worst. That is impressive. Requested information arrives within days, not weeks, and before all the other stuff that the person requested. All of this takes time, effort and planning insofar as locating a post office or mailbox with late pickup, but it is worth the effort.

- Very often many employees from the same company go to the show. Each one should be on a mission: "Get literature on this particular product or line of products. Talk at length to those ex-

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hibitors. Find out about new products, new trends, general business activities, etc. Become a specialist in that area. When you return, report on that segment of the industry so that the company will be better prepared." If a company sends a number of employees to a show with the above directions but has each one gather information on different products, that company will not only be more knowledgeable and aware of products and industry trends, but also the vendors will be aware of the needs of that customer. A dialog has been established. A win-win for both customer and vendor.

- Yes! There is information all

over the Internet, but it is just data. There is not conversation on the Internet — no matter how much e-mail is sent. It is difficult/impossible to establish and maintain a strong personal business relationship electronically. Face-to-face meetings at shows are most beneficial.

Many use the Net as an excuse or reason for not exhibiting at or attending a show. That is just an excuse and short-term thinking.

As reps, we must be aware of all aspects of the trade show market so that we can advise our principals in which shows they should exhibit and how they should prepare so that the show is beneficial to both of us. □