

# Software

The Magazine of the  
Software Industry

# BUSINESS

a webcom publication

July/August 2005

[www.SoftwareBusinessOnline.com](http://www.SoftwareBusinessOnline.com)

## Thinking 'Outside the Booth'

*Unconventional Software Marketing Means Better Trade Show Returns*

By Jason Foodman, Digital Swift

Each year, dozens of trade shows all over the world feature software companies unveiling their latest products, in an atmosphere of competition so fierce Darwin himself would approve.



Such events are often critical to a company's success, so tensions are high, with each company doing its best to get the attention of visitors—all this among hundreds (or even thousands) of rivals on all sides. That extra beat of attention, those few seconds of pause, can mean the difference between huge sales and no sales, between a successful event for a software company - and a complete bust.

I attend numerous trade shows each year, and I'm always amazed to see people who spend thousands of dollars and travel thousands of miles, only to sit in a nearly invisible booth in a bad location, hoping against hope that people will find them, walk up and strike a conversation.

Such approaches no longer work, if they ever did. And they're a waste of the visitor's time as well as your company's. It's becoming increasingly clear that just participating and staffing a booth are not enough anymore. You've got to make a splash.

Our company CFO and close friend once told me the story of his father, who started a maintenance company and bought a van for the business. On the side of the van, his father had put his company logo, as well as the notation "Service Van Number 6," leading the reader to assume the van was simply one of a fleet. This was a man who understood unconventional marketing.

I've never forgotten the story, or the lesson.

This individual understood that the perception of success is just as important as the achievement of actual success, and that one can lead directly to the other. It's all about perception.

So let's look at several techniques, tricks and sheer antics you can use at a trade show to stand out, make an impression, get noticed and - hey, potentially, even get thrown out. But you won't be ignored.

### The Importance of Perception

It's certainly one of the core principles of unconventional marketing - controlling what the customer perceives about your business. In the customer (or booth visitor) perceptions lead to assumptions, which in turn create the customer's reality. If the perceptions are positive, so, too, will be the assumptions that follow.

It's human nature to shape our realities around our perceptions. We're driven by perception as a matter of course. For example, most people who see the words "Service Van Number 6" will naturally assume there are five (or more) similar vans also in operation for the company. It's certainly not illegal - the businessman in this instance is simply letting the customer make an assumption that his business is bigger and more successful than it is. The customer may feel subconsciously comforted by this assumption, and may be more apt to do business with a company he perceives as successful. This assumption then (somewhat ironically) could certainly lead to a bigger and more successful business.

And how much original effort was involved? Some innovative thinking and a little extra lettering.

Some of the world's best sales and marketing people (as well as some of the great magicians) use suggestion and perception to achieve significant results. They do so - as my friend's

father did - with an action that isn't necessarily large or expensive, but which is imaginative and unconventional. It can be a bit of a gamble (proceed at your own risk!), but such actions can completely transform your business.

Trade show exhibit floors can be fairly chaotic with exhibitors, staff, consumers and organizers roaming around. It's a battle for attention in a throng of similar booths, businesses, and individuals. You've got to stand out - so here are just a few conventional as well as offbeat approaches to getting noticed in a trade show environment.

### Location

As in real estate, one of your primary concerns in getting a booth at a trade show has to adhere to that age-old adage, "Location, location, location."

The best locations are driven by three different components - traffic flow, visibility and proximity. For example, from a traffic flow perspective, a corner booth with an aisle on the front and one side is often ideal, as this gives you two directions with which to get the attention of your visitors.

How to get that prime spot? First off, it never hurts to ask. More times than not, I've been able to secure a really good location simply by asking. If you ask, however, and aren't happy with what you've been offered, try for a bit of creativity. In some cases I've "tweaked" the description of our company and service for the given trade show to ensure that I will be allowed to exhibit in one specific area where we want to be.

But sometimes a location's assets don't reveal themselves at first glance, yet may prove to be priceless. For instance: years ago at a trade show in Russia, we were told to set up anywhere we liked in a general area. It was

## MARKETING STRATEGIES

already pretty full, so we moved one of the tables in that area outside of the main exhibit area, and positioned ourselves at the top of a staircase that we knew the attendees would use many times a day (to attend the discussions). This unconventional and slightly risky move paid off, as every single attendee saw our banner 5+ times a day! Each time someone came up the stairs, they were basically walking directly into our booth - and couldn't help but read our banner and make eye contact with us. It's the perfect example of an imperfect circumstance that we transformed into an ideal situation. As it happens, my business partner is something of a genius at this concept - he's always on the lookout on whatever we can use as an asset as we set up, and he knows that if you look like you know what you're doing and you're unquestionably authorized to do it, very few people will challenge you. So don't be afraid to use the tools at your disposal - even borrowing chairs, tables, extension cords, or other small items discarded or not in use in your immediate exhibit area. It almost always pays to arrive as early as possible to stake your claim.

And whatever you do, do your best to present yourself in a visually striking and professional manner. Remember, you'll typically have just three seconds in which to grab the attention of the passerby - and tell your story. So once your booth is set up, take an objective look at it. Do a few flybys as a mock pedestrian. Are you able to quickly identify who your company is and what you do? You should be able to grasp within just a few seconds what it is your product or service provides - and (ideally) what sets it apart. Again, at nearly every trade show I attend, I'm amazed that there are inevitably a few booths offering no possible "at a glance" clue as to their business, service or product. In some cases, far too many, there's nothing but a card table and a person sitting behind it - a complete waste of time and money.

### Success by Association

One of the more interesting aspects to choosing a location is to consider the neighbors you'll have. You may not be able to get that prime, high-traffic placement you wanted - but you could attract a superb amount of traffic simply by getting a place close to a "hot-spot" or high-profile company. Or perhaps there's a company taking part that you'd really like to form a relationship with? If so, set up next door and say hello.

Sometimes the best location has to do with

proximity to other companies. I've intentionally booked spots directly next to companies that I wanted to notice me, or near companies whose customers I thought would also be prime customers for my own products. I've even set up next to direct competitors that I knew were going to spend many times on their marketing budget what I could afford - thereby capturing some of that hard-won traffic at a fraction of the cost. In fact, I've exhibited many times at trade shows where my primary objective was not to hand out anything at all, but to simply develop a relationship with the

**In some cases, far too many, there's nothing but a card table and a person sitting behind it — a complete waste of time and money.**

folks in the booth next to ours. And it worked. Be creative — and if necessary, a bit devious — about your location. Business is all about strategy - so have fun, and be strategic!

### Pick the Perfect Giveaway

Years ago, I was involved in a company planning an exhibit at a trade show, and we found out that the organizers of this relatively small conference were going to have a 'cash bar' for those wanting drinks.

Therefore, when we decided on what giveaways to bring to the show, drink holders seemed like the perfect choice (and in fact, we brought enough drink holders for everyone at the show). It was as gamble, but worst case scenario, we could hand them out at the booth. And, best case (luckily this was the outcome we got), we could 'bribe' the bartender to put each beer and soda into one of our own drink holders.

So we asked - and we received. Apparently, the trade show organizers didn't mind or didn't notice as the entire day everyone walked around carrying drinks in our own drink holders. This is the kind of promotion that many companies pay dearly for at a trade show, but we got it for next to nothing (only the cost of the drink holders and \$20 for the bartender).

So do your research - find out what special things might be happening at the show that you can capitalize on with just a little creative planning (and modest spending).

### Giveaways:

#### Give Customers What They Need

Some of the smartest and most common handouts at a trade show fill the customers'

needs of the moment. For example, you might notice that often exhibitors near the entrance hall doors are giving out bags - it's common sense to give something useful (although ideally something useful beyond the day of the trade show). Pens or coasters might seem fairly ordinary, but if the customer needs a pen at the moment, he'll carry around your brand name for the rest of the show, and probably long after the show.

Conversely, if you're going to hand out something the visitor doesn't need at that moment, it had better be unique, exciting, or (frankly) really expensive. Some of the more interesting uses of this idea I've seen over the years include branded bottled water (personally though, I don't like to hand out anything edible), Internet access, and Chinese food. Companies may also provide free services versus merchandise - seating, for instance. In general, though, for long-term success and overall relationship building, they provide things people really need at that particular moment. This concept basically involves packaging yourself with whatever the visitor needs at the event itself - but taking care to do so with something useful and in demand.

Years ago even a simple bowl of mints was an easy and affordable way to draw in visitors; today, that's so commonplace it's really lost most of its punch.

### Giveaways Part 2: Give the Other Exhibitors What They Need

I once attended a trade show in New York where almost every exhibitor participating had a computer set up for demonstrations. However, I noticed that only about half of them had mouse pads, so the next year I showed up with 250 mouse pads — and each of them ended up spending four days sitting at demo computers at hundreds of other exhibitors' booths. For the cost of a one hundred dollar gamble, thousands saw and registered our brand while investigating other products. Not a lot to lose, given the circumstances.

### Gift Swapping

I also highly recommend going out of your way to say hello to the other exhibitors around you - especially in those cases where there is potential synergy. I make a point to do so at each event I attend - not just because it's potentially useful from a company standpoint, but also because it enlivens the event on both sides, and can make the difference between an

## MARKETING STRATEGIES

enjoyable trade show and one that's stressful and distinctly less than fun. Every new contact is a potential goldmine for each involved somewhere down the road.

And it's always smart to meet the competition. It might sound like a potentially awkward introduction (and sometimes it is), but I've found that if I walk over with our 39-cent item and see if they want to trade for their 39-cent item, it makes for a great ice-breaker and discussion opener.

### Time Your Arrival

Most of the time when you're exhibiting at a trade show, there will be one or more competitors exhibiting as well - so I've found that it often pays to be present at the very end of the setup window, or after the show ends one evening. Simply staying put and paying attention after hours is a great way to get the scoop on competitor launches or developments, hear industry gossip, or to gather intelligence. In these moments, I'll also often study other booths (I even take pictures), and gather competitors' marketing materials if they've been set out for the public, so that I know what approaches and products/services rival companies are offering. Such information can either inspire you to alternative or new approaches yourself - maybe you disagree with the approach the other company is taking, or see a window of opportunity they're ignoring - or it may simply push you to greater heights as you work to outdo the other guy. Competition can be a great motivator.

### The Pros and Cons of Being Outrageous

Often, trade show exhibitors try and stand out by giving out some type of crazy or off-beat item that gets attention. I've seen potted meat giveaways for a junk-mail program, con-

doms for a security/protection product and dozens of other humorous and very creative approaches. A company I'm familiar with offers a helium remote control blimp with a lighted animated customized scrolling sign (to display your company name) and the ability to drop business cards or other promotional materials as it flies around. I've never seen one at a show (I'd sure remember if I had). Last year I attended a show where a competitor gave out little noses that, when squeezed, produced artificial mucus (seriously). Was this a good idea? On the plus side, it certainly was good for a few laughs and everyone seemed to want one to take home for their kids.

But was it effective? Not at all. The biggest flub by this company was their failure to put any form of identifying logo or messaging on each nose - tragic from a marketing standpoint, especially given a trinket that everyone would be talking about (or disgusted by, or both). Sure, you might bring home a nose to show the kids, but my guess is most people wouldn't have any recollection (certainly at a larger show) about where it came from - and what use is that? Handing out items that have no identifying mark from your company is a total waste of money.

So it's great to give out something unusual, but keep in mind that the ideal items make it home, say who you are, and sit on a desk or in a pocket for some length of time.

Of course, some shows are so loud, so crowded and so crazy that it's either impossible to stand out or not even necessary. Every show is different and your strategies and tactics need to stay nimble, to vary show by show.

### Putting it Together

The above ideas are not meant to replace doing the obvious things well. No matter what

the circumstances of a particular show, you'll want and need to have:

- A booth or space that is well designed and easily identified, and that tells a simple story about what you do (remember, you often have a glance for just three seconds or so to tell this story),
- Alert, well-groomed and well-dressed people, (ideally standing up and wearing your company shirt) in the booth who are able to speak knowledgeably about your product or service
- Professional, well thought-out printed materials to hand out.
- And then — those little extra touches to make you unforgettable — a great location, the perfect giveaway, and the industry knowledge that will help you to outperform the competition

Specifically, you've got to get the obvious things right and do them well, then use a few of these kinds of creative and unique ideas to make your products and company stand out from the crowd.

Hopefully these ideas and suggestions will come in handy while you dream up your strategy for your next trade show. Good luck!

*Jason Foodman is a technology investor and advisor who has been in the software business in various capacities for more than a decade. He has holdings in numerous software companies, such as NextUp.com and Testomatics.com.*

*Mr. Foodman also serves as Chief Executive Officer of DigitalSwift Corporation (the parent company of SwiftCD.com, a service offering on-demand custom CD/DVD manufacturing and fulfillment).*

*Mr. Foodman can be reached at [jfoodman@SwiftCD.com](mailto:jfoodman@SwiftCD.com).*



DigitalSwift Corp.  
1462 Eatonton Road  
Suite C  
Madison, GA 30650  
Phone: 770-922-4007  
E-mail: [sales@SwiftCD.com](mailto:sales@SwiftCD.com)  
Web Site: [www.SwiftCD.com](http://www.SwiftCD.com)

#### COMPANY DESCRIPTION

SwiftCD.com - the world leader in manufacturing and fulfillment of individual, custom CDs and DVDs. SwiftCD offers patent-pending build-to-order technology, advanced replication and complete logistics solutions to over 7,000 software companies worldwide.

#### PRODUCTS/SERVICES

- Complete replication service with unique license key onto cardboard sleeve capability
- Just-in-time manufacturing and fulfillment of individual CDs/DVDs which can have dynamic label elements, content and packaging
- Complete logistics solution, including warehousing with pick, pack and ship for individual orders

Distribution & Fulfillment