

Embracing Technology

How implementing technology now can save you time and money later.

By Kenya McCullum

When you are planning a trade show, it is easy to get lost in the minute details—and even easier to neglect the tools that will ultimately make your job easier. One vital tool that is often overlooked by trade show organizers—sometimes because of the initial investment of time and money—is the technology that makes running a show more efficient. But although updating your company's technology may sound like a daunting task, once you have it up and running, and experience the numerous benefits, you will wonder how you ever got along without it.

Making technology work for your shows

LaManda Minikel, vice president of Project Management at ProActive, said that when a company is first starting to update its technology, it is best to start small and then gradually build from there.

"My advice to people would be start with something small, so you get used to it," she said. "Maybe do not take on the whole enchilada, but start with one thing that you understand how it either solves your business problem or your client's business problem. Once you do that, then it is not so scary," she said.

ProActive has been able to solve many of its problems through the use of technology. One area where technology has been helpful is collecting data before and during their shows. For ProActive's need before a show, the company uses a registration tool that gives users the ability to acquire data such as when show attendees plan to arrive and their preference of hotel room.

But ProActive's use of technology does not end with registration; the company uses programs that help it follow the activity at their clients' shows, which aids them in planning for future ones. One such tool that ProActive uses is radio frequency identification (RFID), which is a chip placed in attendees' shoes to track where they went within a two foot radius. This can help a show organizer determine what products were looked at and what classes were attended during the course of the event.

Similarly, Hanley Wood Exhibitions has successfully leveraged the use of technology to manage its 17 successful trade shows, making it easier for the company to manage both its show exhibitors and attendees.

On the exhibitor side, Hanley Wood uses an extensive contact management system to collect data on companies that have bought booths and sponsorships, as well as to sell to prospects. The program collects extensive data about exhibitors that includes a description of their companies and booths, what products they intend to sell at the show, and how they would like to be contacted. By accumulating this data, Hanley Wood's attendees can find out what companies will have booths at their shows and the sales staff can see what products exhibitors will be selling at their booths and how many shows they will be participating in.

On the attendee side, Hanley Wood first enlists the help of a third-party registration company to collect attendee data for each of its individual shows. Each night, this information—which includes demographics, what shows attendees went to, and what classes they took—is transferred into Hanley Wood's database so that it can be used for marketing purposes.

In addition, the company is in the process of revamping its Web site to create a matchmaking feature that will allow exhibitors to do more targeted marketing and attendees to find the shows that will be selling the products that they need. According to Shawn Pierce, Hanley Wood's director of Infrastructure, the most important part of maintaining a program like this is keeping accurate data because if garbage is going in, garbage will be coming out and the system will be rendered useless. It is imperative to pay attention to small details, such as ensuring that each

exhibitor and attendee has one identification number. Although this step does involve some extra work, it keeps the database accurate and lends itself to more effective and versatile use.

“Keeping a common customer ID for your constituencies—meaning either exhibitors or attendees—is very important and that is the base building block. Once you have that in place, it allows you to pull together other systems on top of it—your contact management, inventory management, and invoicing. Then your online systems, as well as each of those components, are tied together by this common building block of the customer ID,” Pierce said. “Most people would not put the time and effort into creating that customer ID properly, or they will do it one time and other people will continue to create new customer IDs. When people are not doing their research to make sure that is still not the same customer, the database becomes junk after a number of years and you have to start all over again.”

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