



Breaking out the big idea.

A success story in black and white.

By Thomas Stirr

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O.K., I admit it. I love planning trade shows. I mean...I really love planning trade shows! Now before you put me in a straightjacket and call for a padded room staffed by extraordinarily large humanoids, let me explain. Trade and consumer shows are the ultimate creative opportunity. Where else can you be in contact with your target audience with so many potential tools at your disposal? All in one venue! National advertising. Video. Audio. Rotographics. Literature. POP. Interactive computer technology. Advertising premiums. Contests. Product displays and demonstrations. Direct marketing. All that PLUS human contact. If Nirvana exists for integrated communications, this has got to be it! The trick is to figure out which tools to use.

Trade show heaven is easier to find if you follow a few simple rules:

- Establish specific, measurable objectives.
- Determine your measurement criteria.
- Remember your brand character.
- Integrate the above with a **Big Idea**.
- Don't get your display company involved until you've completed the first four steps, because if you do, you'll spend more than you need to on displays.

It may sound simple, but here's a step-by-step case study of it worked for me at the Truxpo 1992 show in Vancouver.

The Challenge:

1. To project a high quality image.
2. To communicate the bottom-line benefits of the brand.
3. To generate a minimum of 500 sales leads for heavy-duty trucks.
4. To display the same selection and number of heavy-duty trucks as the 1990 show.

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This meant we had to rent approximately the same amount of display space we used then – 4,000 square feet – but reduce the overall show expense by 30%.

The Strategy:

The theme for our exhibit – the Big Idea – was “Take a Break with Us”. To project an upscale image, all sales staff were dressed in white dinner jackets and black pants, complete with black bow ties, cummerbunds, and a red rose in each lapel.

A custom black-and-gray billiard table (provided at no charge in exchange for some tasteful signage) became the centerpiece of the display. In exchange for filling out an entry ballot (the sales lead mechanism) and having it verified by sales staff, show attendees could make a donation to charity for the chance to break a rack of balls on the billiard table (we used a black cue ball and 15 white balls to fit with the overall black-and-white look). Various branded sales promotion items were available as prizes, based on the number of balls that went into pockets off the break.

All signage in the booth used a billiard theme (and black and white lettering) to communicate brand benefits, such as “You can bank on our parts and service support.” For continuity, all display trucks (measuring an average of 8.5 feet by 28 feet), as were the rented leather sofas and chairs used in the display’s rest area to help encourage discussion and support the “Take a Break” theme. And to capture attendees interest, the entire booth was surrounded by 12-foot high black drapes.

The results:

1. 726 sales leads were generated
2. Over \$1,600 was raised for charity. Subsequent press coverage of the donation was obtained.
3. The approach won the 1992 Truxpo Best Display award.
4. The overall cost was 33% less than the 1990 show.
5. Competitors were so upset with our dominance at the event that they pressured show management into setting special restrictions on the use of drapes for future events.

Trade show success has nothing to do with spending a bundle on lavish, static displays. When people leave the exhibit hall virtually no one is going to remember the colour of your booth or what it looked like. What they will remember is how they were treated by your people. And just maybe...a Big Idea.

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