

Taking it to the Max at Expo

Maximize your presence at franchise trade shows to get the most for your brand and your money.

By Joel Goldstein



When an MFV-Expositions-produced franchise trade show opens its doors, thousands of prospective franchisees descend, each hoping to meet a franchise match and find the right concept.

Attendees have their pick from a variety of industries and can, and do, spend days searching and networking to find a company to join. For attendees, the more concepts available, the better. But for an exhibitor, standing out from the crowd of hundreds of booths can be difficult, not to mention expensive.

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What's going to grab a potential franchisee's attention? Is it a huge floor plan with 10 plasma televisions? A paid emcee hired to do demonstrations? Plastic "tchotchkes" and giveaways emblazoned with your company's logo? Franchise development teams spend hours considering ideas like these and the best way, to leverage booth space.

After talking with some top franchise concepts about attending a local franchise show, or the larger

International Franchise Association-sponsored International Franchise Expo, Franchise Expo South or West Coast Franchise Expo, it may not be all about the flash.

Bring the Right People

Doug Pendergast, chief franchise officer for Church's Chicken, prefers to put the focus on the representatives in the booth, not on the booth itself.

"The thing we find the most productive at a franchise show is to bring senior executives and make them available to potential franchisees," said Pendergast. "That personal top-to-top relationship is the way we do business."

When Pendergast joined the Church's team, one of the things he wanted to accomplish in his role was a push for development.

"We haven't had a strong presence at trade shows in a few years," he said. "But we are developing a renewed energy around our international and domestic development. We were opening less than 20 restaurants a few years ago, but last year we opened 60 and this year we're on track to open 80. Because franchising is our key growth vehicle, we've really increased our emphasis on development, and attending trade shows is a large part of

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our success in that.”

In these changing times, Pendergast said franchisees have easier access to company franchise statistics and come to expos savvier and more informed.

“We’ve definitely seen a higher level of education and sophistication in prospective franchisees,” he added. “Our management team is much more entrepreneurially focused. We share a tremendous amount of detail with our potential franchisees and tailor our message and materials for them at the shows. We want to have a detailed conversation with them when they walk into the booth.”

And what about those giveaways so many companies bring along?

“When it comes to giveaways, attendees grab them, put them in a bag, and then go see the three to five companies they are actually interested in,” Pendergast said. “We get more bang for our buck by having senior management there. And the more sophisticated buyer is looking for a company with more to offer.”

Introduce Attendees to a Franchisee

Showhomes, a Tennessee-based company that has been in business more than 20 years, helps realtors and homeowners sell homes by staging and marketing the properties. Thomas Scott, director of operations for the company, recently attended the International Franchise Expo, the company’s first appearance at a trade show in nearly five years.

“This year I’ve heard nothing but good ‘buzz’ about IFE and these trade shows,” said Scott. “People are going ‘old school’, they want to physically talk to other people. The Internet is impossible for that.”

To make the most of his company’s presence, Scott and his team invited their oldest and newest franchise owners to IFE to help meet and greet attendees at the booth.

“We have two franchise owners that come with us,” he said. “Of course, our franchisees are interested in seeing the company grow, and who better to ask questions about being a franchisee than someone who’s been there?”

Scott said in addition to bringing current franchisees, Showhomes has

another tactic to make the company stand out.

“We actually give away Granny Smith apples,” he added. “We just have a bowl of green apples sitting on our table. It distinguishes us and there’s just something about it that people remember. It conveys an upscale look and people love a healthy snack.”

So how do you actually get an attendee to seek out your booth? According to Scott, it doesn’t hurt to give them a little something.

“We gave away a cruise for IFE,” he said. “We buy a two-person cruise package and invite people to register at the booth to win. It’s cost-efficient for us and people really like them and we get a lot of marketing coverage out of it. Plus, attendees have to register to win, so we capture their contact information. It helps us prioritize leads and we continue to get entries all weekend long. And it gets people to stop by and talk to us that wouldn’t have otherwise.”

Showhomes also recommends taking advantage of e-mail.

“We use eCampaignPro, a real estate-oriented, mass e-mail marketing tool,” Scott said. “For IFE, we sent a mass e-mails to 10,000 realtors in the D.C. area. We also sent e-mail blasts to all the registered attendees. We got a lot of interest from doing that, mostly people thinking about opening a franchise. It gave us the opportunity to make an impact on them before the show started.”

Be visible

1-800-905-GEEK is taking a different approach. The company is sponsoring the IFE registration booth and putting the company GEEK mobile in the convention center lobby to ensure the highest visibility.

“We couldn’t necessarily have the largest booth at the show, so we decided to take the path to position ourselves in various places that allowed us high visibility that we could afford,” said Bob Crabb, chief marketing officer for 1-800-905-GEEK. “Everyone comes in the front door, so we’re putting the GEEK mobile right there in the lobby. We also have banners at the registration area and sponsored the computer monitors with a branded message in registration area. Over the weekend, anyone at the computers will see our brand. Sponsoring the area near the computers

made sense because that’s our industry.”

In working with the IFE to become a show sponsor, Crabb said brands can get more out of the weekend than the average exhibitor.

“Our company has been a member of IFA, but we haven’t had a strong presence in a few years,” said Crabb. “We decided to take a stronger position within the franchise industry and realized we needed to get more involved. As a result, we decided to come to the show in D.C. as not only an exhibitor, but also a sponsor.”

When a company is one booth among hundreds, the more visible it is the better.

“We don’t have a great booth or a bunch of giveaways,” added Crabb. “Trade shows aren’t really a science. If you stand out, it’s because of visibility. There are huge national franchises that can literally buy an entire corner, so they will stand out more because of their curb appeal. You have to take a step back and ask yourself ‘what’s the purpose of being here?’ The majority of the people at a franchise trade show are franchisors who are mostly there to attract people to own their own businesses and attract those people to them. In lieu of being able to afford the real estate at a trade show, take advantage of what they offer the little guy. Buy in at whatever sponsorship level you can afford.”

With the West Coast Franchise Expo only a few months away, now’s the time to consider the best way to maximize your company’s presence at the show. Whether it’s through the booth, a sponsorship, your franchise network or your executive staff, find the right fit for your concept.

For more on the International Franchise Expo, IFA and MFV Expositions’ family of shows, visit www.franchise.org, IFEinfo.com or mfvexpo.com. ■



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