Home Field Advantage at a Trade Show: A Sure Fire Way for Developing Customer Insights Outside of the Trade Show Venue

by Jonathan Calof
Getting quality time with customers (current and potential) is not easy at trade shows. They are busy and so are you. Past columns have mentioned how to collect some of this information both in the booth and out of the booth and the importance of analytics to make sense of these bits and pieces. However, there is a unique opportunity at events to potentially get a lot of face time with your customers and be able to develop valuable customer insights during the trade show and outside of the trade show itself. The opportunity: Hosting a customer event and running it as part of your event intelligence program.

The article focuses on two types of customer events:
1) having a customer event at your facility when the trade show happens to be in the same city as your organization; 2) hosting a customer reception somewhere around the trade show venue when the trade show is not in the same city as your organization. Hosting multiple customers together at your own corporate event, outside the trade show facility (and outside of prying eyes) provides a unique opportunity to find out what’s on your customer’s minds. It’s a great way to further your win/loss analysis; identifying not just what your customer’s current and future needs are but also why they have these needs; it can even be used to develop competitor insights as well. Caution or a big warning: Whoever you are inviting to your company event is going to be busy at the trade show and probably put their own meeting schedule together well before the event. If your company is going to do one of these intelligence rich events, be sure that the invitation gives them a compelling and valuable reason for attending. Also commit to doing this long enough before the trade show so that the customers you want at the company event are not already booked up.

This article is being written dominantly from the perspective of hosting an event at your company facility, the real home field advantage. I will however point out where the advice changes if it’s an out-of-town trade show. While for the in-town trade show, the location for your company event should be your own facility, when it’s out of town your company hosted customer reception should be in one of the event hotel reception rooms or in some other attractive location. Ensure however that the location is conducive to company presentations, interviews, and networking. Your company may want to choose a location based on glitz, which does make sense from a marketing perspective (and they are likely footing the bill), but you need a location that is also conducive to event intelligence.

There have been several events that I have been at where the event has happened in the home city of one of the organizations I was helping. Let me lay out a compilation of the flow of one of these events when a company hosts a customer reception at their facility (the full home field advantage). I will point out where there is a difference in flow when it’s a non-home facility.

A few months before the trade show, the company invites several of their customers (and some potential customers) to the event for a tour and meet and great with the company’s personnel (including R&D staff). It’s an opportunity to show off to the customers how well the company is doing with upcoming products and so forth. Management, sales staff, and others also extend invitations to people they see at the show that they feel should be invited but were not part of the initial invitation list.

I hope those reading this will see the enormous CI potential in all four of these mini-events and their extraordinary opportunity for developing customer insights. I also hope for those of you whose companies have done of these receptions before without CI involvement are now realizing that you better push your way into the planning of these events.

What follows are five planning tips for your organization when inviting key customers (and sometimes others) to maximize each of these opportunities. It’s not a complete event plan guide, but it should give you a great start.

Hosting multiple customers together at your own corporate event, outside the trade show facility (and outside of prying eyes) provides a unique opportunity to find out what’s on your customer’s minds. It’s a great way to further your win/loss analysis; identifying not just what your customer’s current and future needs are but also why they have these needs; it can even be used to develop competitor insights as well.
1. Get Your Organizations Event Logistics Details Including Schedule, Invitees, and Company Personnel to Be on Hand

Clair gets to influence how the event is run – typically its marketing/sales that does this. However, if you are well respected enough by marketing/sales and have a well thought out plan you may be able to influence who is invited (beyond the current customers) and also influence the schedule (see my last column for more on that).

The schedule of events mentioned earlier is important as it lays out the different opportunities to gather information and the kind of information that likely can be gathered. For example during a product development tour you will likely hear the customers talk about their future needs/requirements. At a recent event one commented upon seeing the product development “that will certainly help us with our Northern Europe Expansion”. You might even get technical questions depending on who is invited.

Arm yourself with what you want to collect at the company event (#2) and who you are able to get to help you (#1 and #3). You may need additional subject matter experts or just additional helpers. Either way, home field does have its advantages because there is no real cost (except for food) to getting more of the company employees at the event. #4 may also include asking management to invite additional customers, suppliers, or others to the event if you feel that they can also help either with information needs, or if they can be valuable helpers (#2 and #3). Of course, if the event is out of town, planning early enough might give you the lead time to have additional company personnel there or give you time to approach friends that will be at the show who you feel comfortable asking to help you.

2. Look at Your Current Customer Insight Needs (And Maybe Beyond That) to Identify How the Corporate Event Can Help Your Insight Program

Look at the event two ways. First, go over your current intelligence plans and ask who on the invitation list has that information. For example during a product development tour you will likely hear the customers talk about their future needs/requirements.

However, it is also important to look at the event as a whole and see how the opportunity both to develop customer insights and for other elements in your insight program, but only if you plan properly for it. Hopefully this article, which is based on several company trade show receptions that I have been part of, provides lots of ideas on how to maximize the benefit of these kinds of events.

3. Identify Individuals Within and Outside of the Organization Who Can Be Assigned Roles at the Corporate Event

You were given the guest list in #1 and hopefully you also got the list of who was attending from your organization (you don’t normally see them on the guest invitation list).

There are lots of roles in event intelligence. You will want people who can ask questions to your customers during the walk around and at the receptions. You need people who will write down the questions asked by customers during the tours and presentations as this reveals a lot about their needs/concerns, also for writing down customer’s answers to questions posed by your collectors, and finally people to watch the customer’s body language. For example what part of the presentation did they get most excited about (and most bored)? Which new products were customers most excited about? For example if you invite the customer’s technical senior management to the event, you may want your organizations technical staff talking to them (they speak the same language), I call these subject matter experts.

Unlike a trade show also which has high cost associated with sending extra people to it, there’s not much cost associated with inviting a few extra company employees to an at-home event. As for the externals who were invited (those from outside your organization), do you have any, what I refer to as, friendlies – people who can ask questions and watch on your behalf? In one company trade show event, there were government and association people invited. Both of these individuals were very effective at asking questions. Customers that are particularly close to may also be asked to keep their eyes open and ask questions at the corporate reception.

4. Identify If Additional Individuals Should Be Invited (Either from Inside or Outside the Organization)

Armed with what you want to collect at the company event (#2) and who you are able to get to help you (#1 and #3), you may need additional help. You may need additional subject matter experts or just additional helpers. Either way, home field does have its advantages because there is no real cost (except for food) to getting more of the company employees at the event. #4 may also include asking management to

5. Establish a Logistics Plan

You now know what information you want from those in the room so that you can develop customer insights; you know who to work with for collecting the information. Now it’s time to assign information collection roles and establish a logistics plan. Logistics can include things such as who collects what and at what part of the company event (mingling, company presentation, plant tour, and reception), and even where you want people to sit. At one company event where I was one of the targets for information, I always seemed to have someone from the organization sitting next to me asking questions. It was very effective and prevented me from spending too much time gabbing with my friends (they did allow some time for that!!!).

Logistics also includes setting up meeting times for those helping you at the corporate event – real time debriefing the intelligence team during the event. For example, I suggested that the people conducting interviews at one company event meet up three times during the event.

The time would be spent on quickly reviewing how well collection was going, identifying any problems that were occurring, and determining if any person or topic needed additional support. Given that the event only lasts a few hours, having these short meetings are critical to ensure that the activity remains track. For example, at one event that I was co-coordinating, we decided to change who was interviewing certain key targets – we swapped assignments.

Summary

Trade shows, conferences, and other events which bring together customers are great venues for developing valuable customer insights. Hosting an event either at your own facility (if the trade show is in your company’s home town) or hosting an event for customers in the event city (if it is out of town) provides a great opportunity both to develop customer insights and for other elements in your insight program, but only if you plan properly for it. Hopefully this article, which is based on several company trade show receptions that I have been part of, provides lots of ideas on how to maximize the benefit of these kinds of events.

About the Author

Jonathan Calof is a full professor of International Business and Strategy at the Telfer School of Management at the University of Ottawa, an extraordinary professor at North West University in South Africa, Leading Research Fellow at the National Research University, Higher School of Economics in Moscow and Adjunct Professor at the University of New Brunswick. Dr. Calof combines research and consulting in competitive intelligence, foresight, and business analytics to help organizations develop key insights on their competitive environment and become more innovative. In recognition of his contribution to both professional practice and academic development in these fields Dr. Calof received the fellow’s award from the Strategic and Competitive Intelligence Professionals (SCIP), the lifetime achievement award from Frost and Sullivan and recently received SCIP’s distinguished member award at the SCIP 2016 annual conference. He has over 200 publications and has given over 1000 speeches, seminars, and keynote addresses around the world on intelligence, foresight, analytics and innovation. Jonathan can be reached by email calof@telfer.uottawa.ca or by phone at +1 (613) 228-0509.