

Graphics That Sizzle

Early in my career as a corporate exhibit manager I learned that effective graphics were paramount to stimulating booth traffic. In spite of all my well-researched arguments I continued to encounter insistent product managers who wanted to list the entire product reference manual on a 3' x 4' back-lit Plexiglas panel. It would include at least 2 illustrations, 3 pictures, 20-30 long wordy bullet points, all in a horribly unreadable type size. I'll bet many frustrated exhibit managers share my passion for attractive, well-designed, effective booth graphics.

After years of heated discussions I concluded I needed a winning show-stopper measuring tool. The best way to find one was at a trade show. See what the competition is doing, evaluate it, analyze it and borrow from the best. I looked at plenty of graphics, good ones, bad ones, totally ineffective ones, and downright confusing ones. I analyzed them and wondered they had in common that made the best good and the worst ineffective.

It took a while but in time I developed a simple to understand, easy to apply and absolutely enforceable formula. It is three simple questions that people walking past your booth might ask themselves and the answers will compel them to stop because, indeed, they are interested prospects, or help them pass on by and not feel like they may be missing something they should have stopped to understand.

"Who are you?" That question ought to be easily and rapidly answered from the header or the top graphic in the booth. Here is where you sell the corporate identity.

"What are you selling?" Seems simple enough, but I can assure you that I often walk the aisles at a show and see graphics that fall far short of an answer to this question. Not a trick, cute name, not a secret code word that may have leaked out, not some industry buzz word, but exactly what does the XYZ company have to show at this conference?

The last one is the fun one: "Why does the prospect want to buy it?" What's in it for the buyer? Does it have a feature or benefit he needs more than anything else? Is it better, faster, cheaper or is it the next industry standard? This line of thinking gets that vexing product manager to think, really dig down, cut through all the "Blah, blah, blah," and list some clear hard facts that make a compelling argument to anyone interested in his widget. I start off telling them they can have 3 bullets and one picture or illustration. Make it a choice, not both, and then let them negotiate for more.

This formula works! You get the countless stream of words off your graphics and have room for a designer to do some bright attention getting design and produce effective panels. Try it! Next time you have a few spare minutes at a trade show, take a walk up and down the neighboring aisles and weigh the ability of the graphics to communicate. Next, evaluate the graphics in your competitors' booths. We all seem to quantify lead counts and name collection as a measure of booth success. If you have more effective and compelling graphics you will take home far more names than your competitor.

Take that difficult product manager on the walk with you. Get him to evaluate the other booths, especially his competition. Remind him of the three questions, take them in order

and you will be amazed. It is not unusual to find a booth that fails the first question. They have packed so much information into a small area, spent so much effort making it cute, that it is often not possible to identify them. What are they selling? Who knows? And, Wow, why would I want to buy it?

A good tool for this stroll is a digital camera, easy and quick documentation of the afternoon's research. It is also very easy to later drop the images into a Power Point type presentation and haul them out at the next tradeshow planning meeting.

When I first developed these questions I chose to spring them first on a product team comprised of "loose cannons" while we prepared for an upcoming show. This was the company's premiere event of the calendar year and held a very significant portion of my budget. I got a big rousing raspberry and was nearly run out of the building on a rail. A few weeks later another smaller but related conference was scheduled near our headquarters and as luck had it our product Vice President was invited to participate on an industry panel. I wrangled an invitation to accompany him. After the panel I took him for stroll down the aisle at the tradeshow. Half way through the 100 aisle, he was in stitches as we saw debacle after debacle. We skipped the rest of the show, drove straight back to the office, called the team leaders together and reworked the messages and graphics for the big show. We worked until after midnight but we got them ready for the designer the next day and into production without incurring rush charges. Better yet, I had a disciple in a very high place, one whose opinion was generally accepted throughout the corporation.

Several years after we implemented this method a recently promoted VP who had come up through the ranks and had worked with me many times walked into my office with one of his product managers in tow. He told me they were here for a tutorial on booth graphics, preferably the short one, since his "meathead product manager" didn't seem to understand them. By the time they left he did understand and is a strong convert.

So the moral of the story is be careful rolling it out. Maybe even bring in some outside help. This is very clearly the sort of thing you rely on consultants for. They can be the industry experts, even apply pressure you might not be comfortable trying. It's up to you! Try this and you will soon have the product managers singing your praises.

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