

Healthcare Marketing

Trade shows ideal time to make key media connections

Spring is in the air and the thoughts of thousands of healthcare professionals nationwide are turning to . . . industry conferences and trade shows.

Between March and June, there are dozens of key industry trade shows, including major shows such as the National Managed Healthcare Congress and scores of regional and association-sponsored conferences and shows.

Conferences and trade shows are the ideal opportunity to meet with current and potential customers, get the latest insights on new trends and hear from some of the nation's leaders in their respective areas.

They can also provide an ideal opportunity to reach out to editors and reporters at key publications and media outlets. However, trade shows are a very hectic time for all attendees, and it is important to keep some rules of the road in mind. For an effective public relations program at trade shows, keep in mind these basic recommendations:

1. Secure the list of attending media. Many reporters attend the major trade shows, as well as key association shows, for the industries they cover. Many conferences - but not all - will provide a list of attending media. Contact the conference public relations or communications director.
2. Understand the needs and time constraints of reporters. The majority of reporters who attend trade shows do so to cover the presentations and keynote addresses. They cover the presentations and conduct research during the day, and write and file stories in the evening - it is a busy time.
3. Don't have a press conference. This is one of those rules that can be broken. However, reporters have become wary of press conferences at trade shows. If you have an announcement to make, make sure it is one that has significant impact on your industry - not just your organization. If you are announcing a breakthrough in medical treatment or first-of-its-kind technology, that may well warrant a press conference. However, the next generation of software or an alliance with another partner typically aren't worthy of press conferences for most reporters. Again, their time is valuable so analyze your announcements carefully.
4. Know what you have to say that would be of interest to the industry. Remember that reporters cover news, trends and issues of interest for the industry they write about. Unless it is an innovative or first-of-its-kind product, most reporters are not necessarily interested in a particular company or its products or services. They are interested in how your product has solved a problem or addressed an issue. Think about what you have to say that addresses one of these points.
5. Distribute news release judiciously. There are many companies with legitimate news to announce during a trade show. Perhaps it is a new product that is being unveiled at the show. If you have such an announcement, again, try to focus on what makes the new product or service unique and of interest to your industry. If you don't really have an announcement to make, sending

- a release just to send one is NOT a good strategy. Remember there are hundreds and perhaps thousands of other attendees that also have releases. Yours will get lost if it isn't viewed as one truly worthy of coverage. Plus, when you do have legitimate news, it may not be covered as readily. (Remember the boy who cried wolf one too many times).
6. Try to arrange one-on-one interviews with reporters. Trade shows are a great time to meet reporters you want to develop a relationship with or those who may have covered your company or industry in the past. Write a brief overview, focused on the key messages addressed above (under one page - better yet, so the key message can fit on an e-mail screen). Using the media list, fax or e-mail the information to the reporter.
 7. Contact the reporters as early as possible. Schedules fill up quickly so try to send your information early. Call to see if the reporter has any times available for a quick meeting - often it may be no more than 15 minutes. Be flexible and adjust your time to theirs.
 8. Don't go overboard. It's best to use the limited time at trade shows and conferences to make connections with key reporters; introduce the key executives; and provide basic information. Don't overwhelm the reporter with formal in-depth presentations and meetings with multiple executives. Pick one or two key executives at the most and find a quiet place designed to encourage a "get-acquainted" conversation.
 9. Walk the halls. Many reporters also attend trade shows to represent the publications or media outlets they write for. Often these reporters will be assigned to booth duty. You can check out where the booths are located and visit the booth. If the reporter isn't there, go ahead and leave a business card.
 10. Go with the flow. As anyone who has ever attended a trade show knows, it is difficult to keep schedules. There is always someone else to meet or an appointment that runs long. Reporters face the same situation. You may well have an appointment with a reporter, and they are unable to attend. Recognize this is due to the busy nature of their schedules and try to contact the reporter to reschedule.

As a final note, most major shows will also provide a Press Room designed for reporters to pick up press kits and other information. (Make sure your company provides an adequate supply.) These rooms are typically off limit to non-reporters as they are designed to be a working area where reporters can escape the hustle and bustle of the show. Try to respect this area.

By developing a strategy about what your company should say to key media and following some simple guidelines, you could plant some seeds with key industry reporters this spring that could grow into strong relationships for the future.

Scott Public Relations, in Woodland Hills, CA, specializes in healthcare, benefits, insurance and technology public relations. The company can be reached at **818-610-0270**.