

Exhibiting at Local Product Shows - A Strategic View

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When deciding to participate in local CSI or AIA product shows, there are a number of questions that immediately come to mind. Are the time and resources to participate really worth it. Are product fairs and exhibits an effective marketing tool? Perhaps the sales manager or owner is not convinced that there are enough contacts to make the outing worth while.

While these questions have merit, they are NOT the best questions to consider. Rather consider these; can we afford to be "missing in action" from a key regional marketing event? Will our competition be present? Who will be attending and how do we increase our impact at the exhibit. If we do go, how can we be the most effective?

What do Specifiers think about local product shows?

Recently Orange County, CA independent specifier John Regener CSI CCS AIA SCIP, on www.4specs.com's discussion forum, asked specifiers "what do you want from product shows?" Here is what a number of senior firm and independent specifiers had to say about product shows and specifically about local shows:

I will always attend local or regional shows rather than national shows. I find that the national shows are somewhat helpful to learn about new products. But contacts with a company's national sales force [are] useless. The local or regional product reps are the ones that understand that responsiveness is key to survival, theirs and mine. Here is my story to make the point. I started a quest (before websites became vogue) to get technical data so I could properly specify elevators. I figured what better place than CSI convention - supported by at least one elevator manufacturer. I made the rounds, stopping at each elevator manufacturer booth. I received nothing. I repeated the same scenario the next year with the same result. However I did get the name of the VP of sales from one manufacturer. So I placed a follow up call directly to him. He assured me he would personally make sure I got the info I needed. Nothing! Meanwhile, through my local CSI chapter contacts, I got all the help I needed. Guess whose machines I specify. - David S.

I think the most valuable aspect of local product shows is "face time" between local product reps and design decision makers. I believe that most repeat product selections are based on the relationships between product reps and design professionals. Getting building product manufacturers to finance participation in local CSI product shows is a big challenge. The cost usually comes out of local reps' pockets or the cost has to be budgeted a year or more in advance. Dumb. The cost of 2-3 box lunch presentations should more than pay for a "booth" at a local CSI product show and, I believe, the potential for return on the investment would be far greater.

The scale of the [local] exhibit was such that I could get to every booth and still have time for conversation with product reps. I got to renew acquaintances with product reps and set follow-up meetings to get literature updates. I took care of urgent matters with a couple of product reps. There is definitely a role for the local product exhibits.local shows and the role of the local product rep will become more significant. - John R.

I couldn't agree more with the idea that it is the local shows that give me what I want. Not only do I get a better response, but I'm dealing with manufacturers who have local representation instead of a national manufacturer whose closest plant may be 2000 or more miles away. - Lynn J.

A massive convention floor is the last place I can do meaningful business. I thought it was my dislike of crowds.the wrong people are staffing the booths at national shows. They aren't the ones that provide us daily support. - Phil K.

Local product shows and exhibits are an extraordinary marketing value

Product shows and exhibits are still one of the best marketing values available to product manufacturers and representatives. However to obtain full value, manufacturers and product reps have to participate. Participation is much more than just showing up, it involves planning ahead, developing a clear exhibiting strategy, pre-show marketing, having the right people in the booth, and most importantly following up with the show attendees.

In my experience as an architect, specifier, product rep, and exhibit manager, I have discovered that we often miss the point when making the strategic decision to participate in a product exhibit. Some keep asking how is the exhibit going to benefit me, what's in it for my company, how many contacts will I get?

While these are reasonable questions, they are the wrong ones. The questions we should ask is how can we get more design professionals to attend and how can we make our piece of the exhibit the most effective? Rather than worrying about how many contacts, we should focus on making certain that the quality contacts are positively identified, and then follow up immediately and effectively.

Local product shows are tremendous relationship building and marketing opportunities. Sign up for your local show now. Better yet, get on the committee and help make it the best show ever.

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