



Planning to Win: Will Your Company Exhibit By Hope or By Objectives?

By Jefferson Davis, *Competitive Edge*

Maybe you've heard the quote, "*If you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there*". Unfortunately, this describes the way some exhibitors approach exhibitions. The Center for Exhibition Industry Research found that **only 24%** of exhibitors set measurable objectives. And of those who do set objectives, less than 10% take the critical next steps of committing the objectives to writing, developing a written action plan, then executing and measuring their performance and results against the plan.

There are basically two ways of exhibiting: By Objectives or By Hope. Renting exhibition floor space, sending your stand, equipment, products, literature and team members while hoping that things work out is Exhibiting by Hope. This is one of the primary reasons many companies do not derive maximum benefit from exhibitions.

Exhibiting by Objectives is the process of identifying your best reasons for exhibiting, converting those reasons to SMART goals (below), developing plans for execution, and measuring results. To begin the Exhibiting by Objectives process, start at least six months before the exhibition begins by asking yourself and key stakeholders in and around your company, "*Why are we exhibiting?*" Here is a list of the top reasons why companies go into exhibitions. Review this list carefully and select the top three to five reasons your company exhibits:

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| <input type="checkbox"/> capture leads | <input type="checkbox"/> write sales orders at and/or post |
| <input type="checkbox"/> introduce new products | <input type="checkbox"/> demonstrate product capabilities |
| <input type="checkbox"/> create/maintain/expand visibility | <input type="checkbox"/> demonstrate thought leadership |
| <input type="checkbox"/> branding | <input type="checkbox"/> recruiting new talent/employees |
| <input type="checkbox"/> meet with customers | <input type="checkbox"/> competitive research |
| <input type="checkbox"/> generate public relations/press | <input type="checkbox"/> customer/industry research |
| <input type="checkbox"/> test market a product | <input type="checkbox"/> get customer feedback |
| <input type="checkbox"/> gain distribution | <input type="checkbox"/> meet w/vendors, distributors, partners |
| <input type="checkbox"/> gain access to "no see" buyers | <input type="checkbox"/> advance sales proposals in pipeline |

Identifying your reasons is a good start, but to provide the necessary focus, your reasons need to be converted to SMART goals. (i.e., Specific, Measurable, Actionable, Realistic, Timeline). For example, if one of your primary reasons for exhibiting is to capture leads, then your SMART goal might look like this: "*To capture at least 45 qualified leads before the exhibition closes.*"

Every goal needs a planner and a plan. Once you've converted your reasons for exhibiting to SMART goals, the next step is to create a written action plan. This is the road map to achieving your goals. It clearly identifies the actions you must take to achieve each goal. A thorough written action plan will detail six elements:

1. Goal: Statement of the SMART goal.
2. Strategy: A paragraph or two outlining how you plan to achieve the goal.
3. Tactics: A list of the specific action steps you must take to achieve the goal.
4. Timeline: Define when the steps will be started and completed by.
5. Responsibility: Define who will be accountable for each step.
6. Budget: How much time and money will be allocated for each of the steps.

Once your written action plans are created, assign the actions and timelines to the appropriate people, schedule and follow-up to ensure the actions are taken. Rest assured that Exhibiting by Objectives takes effort, but the rewards are well worth it! It's the difference between "*making expensive appearances*" and "*making profitable investments.*" Decide to lay a solid foundation for exhibiting success by get started now.

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