

Small Exhibitors,

BIG

IMPACT



By Matt Alderton

Nine ways to maximize your presence in minimal square footage.

You don't need the biggest boat in the marina to make waves.

The same is true of boat shows: You don't need the biggest booth in the hall to leave a wake.

"It's challenging being a small exhibitor, but with every challenge comes an opportunity," says Greg Jenkins, partner of Bravo Productions, an event planning, design and production company in Long Beach, California that has worked with Raytheon and Boeing. "There are many simple things you can do to get people to your booth and, once they're there, engage them to make a sale."

Whether you're selling life jackets, navigation systems, stereos, apparel or supplies, here are nine simple techniques to maximize boat show ROI:

1. Stake Your Claim

So your exhibit doesn't dominate the whole aisle. That's okay. Just remember those three magical words: location, location, location. "If you can, be in a high-traffic area," says Steve Sprole, vice president of sales

and marketing at Ritchie Navigation, a marine compass maker in Pembroke, Massachusetts.

A spot near the exhibit hall entrance or exit is always good, adds Charles Greene III, founder of Corporate Shuffle, a show consultancy in Washington, D.C. If that's not possible, he recommends either end of a row, as people typically pause there before committing to an aisle.

"Corners will give you the most exposure because you've got people coming at you from two directions," Greene says. "Also, you can angle your exhibit for better visibility."

2. Be Open for Business

Just because you have a smaller space doesn't mean you can't be inviting. "So many times I'll see other exhibitors set up their booths like they are trying to keep shoplifters out or reserve space for the staff to sit down," says Allen Schneider, vice president

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—Greg Jenkins, Bravo Productions,
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of sales at Si-Tex Marine Electronics in Riverhead, New York. "Customers just keep on walking."

To pull them in, create a welcoming atmosphere. "Too often, exhibitors wall off the space with a 6- or 8-foot banquet table in the front, providing a barrier between the customer and exhibitor," Jenkins says. "Instead, why not purchase some inexpensive floor lamps, chairs and tables to create more of a lounge space? You want to maximize your space and allow people to walk into it like they would a store."

3. Encourage Loitering

There's nothing like a little entertainment to get people to stop and hang out, especially if your magicians or artists adopt a nautical bent. "If you're using a caricature artist, you might have all the caricatures drawn in some kind of boating situation or in some kind of scene where they're using your product," Greene says. "An attraction also creates a line. While people are waiting to get their caricature done or watching other people get theirs done, it gives



Tim McAfee



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you an opportunity to engage them in conversation.”

You could also opt to create a product-related game, suggests trade show coach Susan Friedmann, author of *Meeting & Event Planning for Dummies*. “It’s a really great way to help you get into conversations with people,” she says.

4. Be Sense-sational

You’ve seen the crowds at recent shows—they’re teeming with people looking down at their smartphones. How do you get them to actually raise their heads before they glide on by? Try creating exhibits that reinforce your brand by appealing to the senses with music, lighting or even scent. A barbecue exhibitor, for example, shouldn’t underestimate the power of the smell of grilled sausages wafting down the aisles.

“Instead of just walking past your booth, people will be drawn to it,” Jenkins says. “When people smell, hear or see something, they’re going to stop and wonder, ‘What is that?’”

5. Make News

Accessories exhibitors usually see the best results when showcasing their latest and greatest products. “The focus needs to be on what’s new, because what’s new is what’s most exciting,” Friedmann says. “If you show the same old stuff, you become invisible.”

TIP: Get some free publicity. Talk with boat show staff about having your product be part of their public relations campaign.

tip:

If your space is limited, look beyond the walls of your booth.

“If you have something new and interesting to talk about, put together some press kits before the show starts and drop them off in the press room,” advises Allen Schneider of Si-Tex.

6. Allow Your Product to Sell Itself

Let your customers check your products out for themselves with a hands-on showroom.

“You want to showcase your products so that customers can touch and feel them,” Schneider says. “Nowadays they can see everything on the internet without going to a show, so you need to give customers the opportunity to see a product up-close and personal.”

For example, Poly-Planar Group, a Hanover, Maryland-based manufacturer, lets show attendees see exactly how its marine audio systems can stand up to water, says Bill Pieklik, the company’s director of sales and operations.

And FLIR tricked out its display with working infrared camera systems to demonstrate how the products could help boaters navigate at night.

7. Embrace Education

Accessories manufacturers can’t always expect to win over attendees with just a glance. You may have to teach them why they need your product—and sometimes how to use it.

“We live in an information age,” Friedmann says. “So, what can you do to educate your target audience?”

If there’s an educational track or seminars running concurrent with the boat show, consider being a speaker. Or, create tip sheets that provide an in-depth look at how your products really work.

Ritchie Navigation offers demonstrations

aimed squarely at creating a more knowledgeable customer. “We get a number of people who say, ‘I’m so glad I came to this show and saw you’—if only because we show them how to take off the compass that’s sat on their dash for 20 years and disassemble or repair it,” Sprole says.

8. Stand Out

Often overshadowed by the neighboring flashy megayachts and go-fasts, smaller exhibitors must find their own ways to stand out on the show floor.

One of Jenkins’ strategies is to rent attention-getting costumes for his staff, then station them at high-traffic areas throughout the exhibit hall. If it’s allowed, “put people at different places or have them walk around with candy that has your logo and booth number,” he says. “Why wait for people to come to you when you can direct traffic to your area?”

Load up representatives with business cards

bearing your booth number so people know exactly where to find you.

9. Join Forces With Manufacturers

“If you’re selling accessories, maybe you can partner with one of the big boys,” Friedmann says. Arrange to have your accessories displayed on a boat in exchange for directing customers to your boat partner’s booth, for example. And collaborating with another exhibitor on a promotion or event can give you added visibility.

Ultimately, your success as an exhibitor doesn’t hinge on the size of your staff, your booth or your budget. It comes down to your ability to think—literally—outside the 10-by-10 box.

“Just because you lack the size doesn’t mean you lack the creativity,” Jenkins says. “Take a chance on doing something new. You might be surprised at the response and ROI.”



Mid-America
BOAT & FISHING SHOW

January
I-X Center, Cleveland, OH
clevelandboatshow.com

CATAWBA ISLAND
BOAT SHOW

April / May
Catawba Island Club, Port Clinton, OH
catawbaislandboatshow.com

MICHIGAN CITY *in-water*
BOAT SHOW

August
Washington Pk., Michigan City, IN
michigancityboatshow.com

North American In-Water
Boat Show

September
Cedar Point, Sandusky, OH
cedarpointboatshow.com