

## The role of the sales process at trade shows



Business-to-business (B2B) marketing is one of the most underestimated and under-researched fields in marketing. Due to the unique characteristics of B2B markets, the emphasis has always been on one-on-one communication between the seller and the buyer. This means that in the communication mix, elements – such as personal selling and trade shows – play an important role in the selling and marketing of a business product and the accompanying services.

There is also an element of uncertainty on the role of personal selling, and more specifically, the sales process at trade shows. Previous studies focused on the general activities at trade shows; but none focused on the sales process that is interlinked with trade shows. Therefore, an explorative research study was conducted by Gert Antonie Petrus Drotsky, a [Doctoral](#) student in the [Department of Marketing Management](#), to determine the role of the sales process at trade shows; so as to guide exhibitors on how to more effectively use the sales process during trade shows. A multi-stage sampling plan was followed at various trade shows and a self-administered questionnaire was used to gather the data for the study from exhibitors at trade shows.

This study contributes to the current literature on trade shows by indicating specific actions in the selling process this can help exhibitors to improve the buying process. The findings of this study can assist the trade show industry to provide guidelines for exhibitors to better utilise trade shows as a marketing communication tool.

The findings depict the various factors that make up the different stages of the sales process during the pre- and at-show stage of a trade show. Firstly, the business actions of exhibitors were investigated that included a number of elements such as: trade-show marketing; written objectives; trade-show evaluation and plan, staff improvement, new product and non-financial success to name a few. Thereafter, the

stages of sales process at trade shows were investigated. The first stage dealt with pre-show marketing activities used to attract attendees, namely direct communication and promotional elements. The second stage of the at-show marketing activities used to attract attendees to the business exhibit stand at the trade show included trade-show sponsorship and promotional tools. The third stage dealt with the sales presentation at a trade show; and it had four factors that were identified, namely: presentation methods; presentation actions; approach method and questions approach. The fourth stage dealt with objections experienced and two distinct type of objectives were identified, manifested objections and latent objections. The fifth stage focussed on the most popular methods used to deal with objections. Standard-objection solutions and product-objection solutions emerged as the two distinct methods. The last stage dealt with the closing methods and results showed that exhibitors either use a typical closing and product closing approach.

Several differences were identified in the way in which sales versus non-sales exhibit stand staff applied the sales process at trade shows. These differences were evident in the “presentation methods”, “presentation actions” and “question approach” used by the two staff groupings. Non-sales exhibit staff in many cases does not have the experience that sales persons of the business have, especially on how to communicate during the sales presentation. Sales staff will also be more aware of the different sales methods and how to use these methods in different sales situations. However, of great concern was that both sales and non-sales staff indicate that they do not really make use of closing methods to close the sale – signalling missing sales opportunities and the loss of potential revenue for exhibitors.

Regarding the type of trade shows (international, national or regional) there were no differences in how the sales process is implemented during the pre-show marketing activities, at-show marketing activities, the sales presentation or closing method used. These findings are very interesting since for elements, such as the marketing activities before and at the trade show, one would assume that different approaches would be applied as the profile of the attendees of the various shows often differ as well as the reason for attending the shows.

Concerning the type of business that exhibited (sales of goods, service industry/professionals or construction/manufacturing) and how they implement the

stages of the sales process - there were no significant differences evident. This is interesting as one would expect exhibitors selling services to utilise different presentation methods as manufacturing firms based on the intangibility of services for example.

The findings of this study also provides an encouraging outcome for trade show role players in that there are no major differences for sales versus non-sales persons, type of trade show or business operations of the exhibitors. This provides an opportunity for general sales guidelines to be developed in order to improve the effectiveness of the sales process. Furthermore, the training of exhibit staff can be done more effectively and efficiently since there are no specialised requirements. Trade show organisers will benefit since material developed can be standardised for all types of trade shows.

One of the main contributions of this study is that it provides a comprehensive sales process for trade shows with insights into the various sub-stages. Finally, a comprehensive figure illustrates the interconnectedness between the various stages of the sales process with trade show activities and the attendees' decision-making buying process. With this holistic overview, conceptualisation is provided on how the sales process can be integrated into the buying process and stages of a trade show. The identification of the different actions can be an invaluable tool for researchers that want to expand on/or link the sales process and buying process at trade shows.

*This research was conducted as part of the fulfilment of the [PhD degree](#) in Marketing Management in 2016 with the [Department of Marketing Management](#) by Gert Antonie Petrus Drotsky under the supervision of [Prof M. Wiese](#).*