Getting Signed Contracts at Home Shows

by Matt Gard

After participating in local home shows for a couple of years, my company analyzed the numbers, and we realized we weren't getting a worthwhile return on our investment. We had two choices: stop attending or make major changes to how we used the show as a marketing tool. The key, we determined, was to better qualify the leads.

Unprofitable Shows

When we started doing shows, we thought they'd be a cheap way to be seen by the public and build our brand.

At the 2003 home show, we spent $10,000. This included $6,400 on the show alone (20x20 booth on the main show floor, four outdoor displays, and our company name and logo on the back of each ticket), plus the cost of the new materials used in our display and the labor to build and tear down the display as well as to staff the booth for the weekend.

We netted zero signed contracts that weekend. We did get a lot of leads, but those led to our staff wasting a solid two weeks dealing with homeowners who weren't even interested in our services.

At the 2004 home show, we spent $8,000. The cost for the show was $6,100, which included a 20x20 booth on the main show floor, two (down from four) outdoor displays, and our company name and logo on the back of each ticket. We did reuse most of our display from 2003, but we still had to pay the cost of the labor for the set up, tear down, and staffing of the booths.

We sold one job during that weekend. Again, we got a high percentage of leads that consumed a lot of time and effort with little result.

Because we track the sources of our leads (Yellow Pages, home shows, Web site, and the like), we knew — after two years and thousands of dollars — that home shows were giving us the lowest success rate of any of our marketing efforts.

One of the biggest problems we identified is that it's difficult to prequalify leads during the show. When traffic is slow, you can spend time talking with prospective clients, but the traffic usually comes at such a pace, however, that there's little time to do more than get the clients' contact information so you can "get them scheduled" before you have to move on to the next person. Then after the show, you end up wasting time pursuing unqualified leads.

Breakdown of Show Expenses

Before the show

✓ Booth space
✓ Literature, brochures, and business cards
✓ Display planning and design
✓ Dress uniforms
✓ Marketing and promotional items
✓ Display materials
✓ Cost of nonproductive time for building and setting up the display

During the show

✓ Hours (usually overtime) to staff the booth
✓ Cleaning supplies to keep the display sharp

After the show

✓ Cost of nonproductive time for tearing down and transporting the display
✓ Storage of the display and leftover items, such as literature
✓ Staff hours to enter leads into the company's database
✓ Staff hours to call, schedule, and confirm estimates with each lead
✓ Fuel for driving to each estimate
✓ Hours to design, price out, and write up each proposal

A Different Strategy

Once we saw the facts in black and white, we knew we had to try something new. We decided to hold an open house at our office and showroom on the same weekend as the home show. We would offer same-day estimates to interested, qualified clients.

The challenge was to get the clients out of the home show and to our location, not an easy task after they'd driven to the stadium and purchased their tickets. We didn't know if our plan would work, but we knew that at least we wouldn't spend close to what we did in 2003 or 2004.

We downsized our booth to 10x10, with the intention of using the same display for several years. Two or three employees staffed the booth, handing out flyers with maps to our office and descriptions of our open house. We greeted anyone and everyone who came by, trying to make a first impression that was both personable and professional.

The big draw for the open house was a chef serving free pulled pork, hamburgers, brats, and all the sides to go with them. In addition to the chef, all our employees — from the laborers to the owners — were at the office looking sharp and professional.

At the 2006 home show, we spent approximately $2,600 for the booth and the open house. We signed $88,000 in contracts that weekend.

Prospective clients who showed up at the open house got to eat, relax, and get to know us. We had a slide show playing and photo albums of completed jobs lying around to keep the prospects' minds on their projects. When they were ready, an employee sat down with them and discussed what they were in the market for. After this initial information was garnered, in most cases the prospect was handed over to our management or sales staff, who were briefed by the employee who'd made the first contact.

Unlike when we're on the home-show floor, at an open house we have time to qualify the interested buyers and get more of the details we need to estimate the jobs. Once we have a pretty good understanding of the project specs, and the clients have finished eating, we ask them if they'd like a company representative to follow them home to check the job-site layout.

An employee brings a digital camera to the clients' home to photograph the project area and gets measurements and other pertinent information for the estimate. Then the employee and the prospect return to our office and review the photos and measurements with the management staff to begin working up a price.

Spectacular Results

At the 2005 home show, we spent approximately $4,600 ($1,200 to build and display a 10x10 booth on the main show floor and the remainder on labor, chef, food, and display).

We signed $80,000 in contracts on Saturday and Sunday.

At the 2006 home show, we spent approximately $2,600 ($1,200 to display the 10x10 booth, and the remainder was for the chef, food, and labor).

We signed $88,000 in contracts that weekend.

At the 2007 home show, we spent approximately $5,400 ($1,200 for the 10x10 booth, $1,400 for the chef, food, labor, and with the remainder we ran TV commercials and bought marketing items like cozies and dry-erase boards with our company info on them).

We signed $43,000 in contracts that weekend.

Clearly, our gamble has worked. And we get the satisfaction of being out installing projects for our home-show buyers while our competition is out chasing low-yield leads. ❖

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