



7 WAYS TO
DISENGAGE
ON THE
SHOW FLOOR

A stylized illustration of a person's mouth, open as if speaking, on the left side. A large, white speech bubble extends from the mouth, containing the title text. The background consists of green and white diagonal stripes.





With all due respect to The Rolling Stones, time is not on booth staffers' side. Between welcoming attendees to the exhibit, qualifying prospects, keeping scheduled appointments, and engaging with clients, every minute is precious. And nothing can derail a well-oiled marketing machine faster than just one or two attendees — whether they're valued customers or unqualified "looky-loos" — who feel like an exhibit is their neighborhood coffee shop and its staffers are their best friends who have all the time in the world to shoot the proverbial breeze. So EXHIBITOR asked four staff-training experts (Susan Brauer, president of Brauer Consulting Group LLC; Jefferson Davis, president of Competitive Edge LLC; Robyn Davis, trade show strategy specialist and owner of When I Need Help; and Jean Howard, director of business development at TPG Trade Show & Event Marketing) for their strategies on how to politely disengage from attendees with more talkative energy than a Chatty Cathy doll. *By Brian Dukerschein*

1. The 007



Establish a discreet signal, such as clasping both hands behind one's back, that staffers can use to cue a nearby — and preferably unoccupied

— coworker to interrupt a conversation and provide an exit strategy, e.g., "Sorry to intrude, Tom, but we're having issues with the Wi-Fi, and you're the only one who ever seems to know how to fix it. Would you mind taking a look?"

When to use it:

The 007 is best deployed when stuck in conversations with existing clients who have no show-related business to attend to and just want to chat with their favorite reps.

Possible pitfall:

There must be some follow-through on the interrupting staffer's request. If clients see the staffer who was wanted for a computer glitch cross the exhibit and immediately begin engaging with another attendee, they're likely to connect the dots — and leave with a bad taste in their mouths.

2. Follow the Leader



When attendees are stuck to you like glue but they check a few key boxes on your lead-qualification list, escort them to another portion of the exhibit,

such as a presentation theater, where they can learn more about your company.

When to use it:

Wait for the attendee to finish his or her sentence, casually glance at your watch, and say, "Would it be alright if we finished this conversation after the show? I only ask because we have a presentation starting in five minutes that I think you'll find interesting." Walk the attendee to the space and make a personal handoff to another staffer.

Possible pitfall:

Don't just pass the attendee off to another staffer who will simply rehash basic talking points you've already covered.

The intention of this strategy is not only to make yourself available to attend to waiting booth visitors who are visibly displaying their impatience, but also to provide other avenues of education and engagement.

3. The Gift Basket



Kill the conversation with kindness by offering attendees a giveaway, product literature, your business card, and, if applicable, entering them

in your company's drawing or raffle. Close the interaction by escorting them to the aisle while saying, "Well, I think that's everything for now. Please look over our materials, and let me know via email if you have any questions. It was a pleasure meeting you, and I hope you enjoy the rest of your time at the show."

When to use it:

The Gift Basket is one of the easiest ways to break away from attendees who, after answering qualifying questions, are deemed not a suitable fit for your firm but show no signs of being ready or willing to leave the exhibit.

Possible pitfall:

Attendees who are brusquely handed an armful of swag and then abandoned in the middle of the exhibit are apt to carry that memory with them — and spread word about their negative experience. It is therefore crucial that staffers act positively and patiently, even when showing someone the metaphorical door.

4. Phone a Friend



Introduce a talkative attendee to an existing client in the booth, just as you would at a networking event. Reference anything the two parties

have in common, with an emphasis on your company's offerings, e.g., "Jim, Cathy here

increased her customer base by more than 25 percent using our software. Cathy, would you mind sharing a bit of your story with Jim while I take care of this other gentleman?"

When to use it:

This tactic is ideally suited for when attendees have committed to the next step of the sales cycle but now seem convinced that staffers are absolutely fascinated by stories of their families' summer vacations to the Grand Canyon, Niagara Falls, and Walt Disney World.

Possible pitfall:

Before using this tactic, consider your exhibit layout. Without adequate seating or a designated meeting area, loitering attendees can interrupt your booth's traffic flow and make it difficult to engage with new potential prospects.

5. The Matchmaker



Before the show, identify other exhibitors whose offerings may be able to fill your prospects' needs in a value-added, i.e., noncompetitive, way, and

vice versa. When an in-booth conversation has run its course, direct the attendee to visit this company's exhibit, either by giving him or her the booth number or escorting them personally and handing them off to a staffer. This results in an end to the conversation, the attendee feeling that you truly have his or her best interests at heart, and your "partner exhibitor" potentially referring some traffic your way as well.

When to use it:

Much like Phone a Friend, The Matchmaker is a tactic that works best when used on a qualified attendee with whom you've established a clear follow-up plan.

Possible pitfall:

If you don't reach out to each of these partner exhibitors prior to the show to discuss potential referral opportunities, it's possible they'll steer your hot new prospects toward one of your direct competitors. Prevent such a costly backfire by getting your mutually beneficial arrangement, however informal, in writing.

6. Blame it on the Boss-a Nova



Explain to a verbose visitor that while you'd love nothing more than to have a show-floor gab fest, your supervisor has been cracking the whip

lately and urging staffers to stay on task.

When to use it:

It's poor form to throw a superior under the bus when engaging with an attendee, so this tactic should be reserved for when staffers have been paid a visit by an acquaintance from another exhibiting company that wants to talk shop in the middle of a crowded demo area.

Possible pitfall:

While some exhibit managers will happily play the scapegoat if doing so is a painless solution to a problem, others might resent the implication that they're a hard-driving boss. Check with your superiors and make sure they are comfortable being portrayed as the bad guy or gal.

7. The Travel Guide



End dragging conversations (and look like a considerate show-floor savant) by suggesting other areas of the exhibit hall or convention center

that the attendee absolutely must visit — ideally sooner rather than later.

When to use it:

Is it lunchtime? Then tell babbling booth visitors about the food cart near the registration area that sells the best quinoa bowls you've ever tasted, and encourage them to get extra guacamole. Or if a noncompeting exhibitor is offering in-booth shoulder rubs, give them the aisle or booth number and recommend they stop in and enjoy an afternoon pick-me-up.

Possible pitfall:

Put some distance between your exhibit and any promoted hot spots, as attendees may boomerang right back to profess their thanks for the spot-on recommendation if you send them to a nearby locale.