

Exhibitions - a public relations tool

By [Laricia Smit](#)

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Many companies find themselves participating in exhibitions without realising what it is they want to achieve. Exhibitions can produce excellent results for an organisation if the public relations practitioner makes use of all the opportunities they present.

Exhibitions are not a public relations medium, but a tool if used to create awareness, enhance reputation as well as to sell products.

Public relations, as defined by the Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa (PRISA), is the management, through communication of perceptions and strategic relationships between an organisation and its internal and external stakeholders. Exhibitions, on the other hand, are ways of presenting products, organisations or services offered directly to the public with the intention to sell.

Exhibitions, although expensive, are among the most effective ways of communicating with the public.

People visit exhibitions for three basic reasons. First, to be entertained (maybe it is to get out of the office for a few hours), second, to find out how a new product or service actually works and last, attendance could mean that a business transaction might be agreed upon between the two parties.

The public relations practitioner plays a vital role in all of this. He needs to convey his company's image positively to the visitors, and promote any product or service the organisation offers, without forcing anyone to buy the product or service.

The effort of the public relations practitioner should be three-fold:

- Inform prospective clients of the exhibition before and during the show
- Obtain positive media coverage for the organisation, and
- Achieve follow-up coverage and feedback after the exhibition has taken place.

As the main responsibility of any public relations practitioner is to build the image of the organisation by obtaining positive media coverage, exhibitions are great opportunities to achieve this goal. Too often these opportunities are overlooked because organising of the exhibition takes priority. That is why the public relations programme should be planned in such a way that a publicity campaign for each exhibition is included and deadlines for publications are met.

Here are a few tips for obtaining the best media coverage before, during and after the exhibition:

- After you have confirmed your participation at the exhibition, send relevant information about your organisation to the media liaison officer of the exhibition organisers. It could be used for pre-exhibition publicity. This will help increase the number of visitors attending your exhibition stand.
- Always have a senior representative or an important company personality on the stand, as the organisers could call for a press conference.
- You could also secure positive media coverage during the show if an important guest comes to visit your stand. You could also make announcements on big business contracts that you have obtained during the exhibition.
- Make sure that you have a post-exhibition press release available. Journalists reporting on the success of the exhibition could mention your achievements during the exhibition.

The role of public relations in organising or participating in an exhibition does not stop at only obtaining positive coverage for the organisation. Public relations plays an important role in attracting both exhibitors and visitors.

The organisers should persuade potential exhibitors that a particular exhibition would be of substantial benefit to them. It should be clearly stated who the target market of the exhibition is, and approximately how many visitors are expected.

Build a good image of a specific exhibition by mentioning previous successes achieved. This would also assist potential exhibitors to decide whether they should or shouldn't exhibit at that event. By obtaining media coverage of an upcoming exhibition, by advertising or editorials, awareness is created and exhibitors and visitors are more likely to participate.

If an organisation is persuaded that this exhibition meets all its goals and objectives, it should make sure that the target audience identified by the exhibition organisers matches its own.

This is the responsibility of the public relations practitioner. A seven-step public relations programme (as lectured by the PRISA Education & Training Centre) should be drawn up for the exhibition:

1. Analyse the situation: one of the tools of a situation analysis is a SWOT analysis. This stands for *Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats*.
2. Set specific goals and objectives: in other words, what would you like to achieve by exhibiting at this exhibition in a long and short-term period?
3. Decide on your target market: would the visitors attending this exhibition really be your targets? Would they understand what you are trying to convey or sell? It's no use exhibiting children's toys at a business and marketing exhibition.
4. Define the specific messages that you would like to convey to your identified target market. You might have ten different target markets, therefore you need ten different types of messages. You would not use the same message for the media that you would for the junior to middle level visitors, or technical people.
5. The action plan is extremely important. Here you will decide on which activities you would include before, during and after the exhibition. Draw up an activity chart and clearly write down in which month you would do what activity, to make sure you meet deadlines. An active publicity campaign should be included in this to ensure that you receive the publicity you require.
6. The budget should be drawn up long before the exhibition, to make sure all expenditure is covered and surprises do not arise two days before the event. Always provide for a 10% contingency in your budget to cover shortfalls, if any.
7. And lastly, what value would all of this be if you have not evaluated the success of your participation at the exhibition? You should have evaluation techniques in place during the whole programme to ensure that if something goes wrong, you

have a back-up plan. You also need to inform senior management about the success of the exhibition to prove the value of public relations to the bottom line of the organisation.

Exhibiting is about the good reputation of the company. An exhibition would fail miserably if staff were not trained on how to man the stand and if the objectives and benefits of the exhibition are not clearly explained to them.

Here are a few tips and guidelines for selecting staff to man the stand:

- Select staff according to the following criteria; personality, sense of responsibility, knowledge of the company and products, and personal appearance.
- Brief the selected staff on the cleanliness of the stand, punctuality and certain responsibilities.
- Visitors should be welcomed by friendly, helpful, motivated staff. It is suggested that they do not say "What can I do for you?" as this gives an impression of unwillingness to really help. Rather start the conversation with a comment about your product or service, this will get the visitor interested in what you have to offer, eg. "Let me show you, or tell you about ABC."

In conclusion, the role of the public relations practitioner is not merely about communicating. Public relations must have a voice in the decision making process of the organisation and definitely be part of the management team to ensure that the exhibition is a success and all the necessary steps are followed.

ABOUT LARICIA SMIT

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