

articles and tips

Our Approach to Industry Relations

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Year after year many suppliers to specific industries spend thousands of dollars and even hundreds of thousands of dollars paying for traditional advertising, exhibiting their products and services as well as bringing their sales forces to trade shows for weeks at a time. Could they have done a better job? You bet!

While there are a good handful of longtime suppliers to the industry that do some of the things I am about to talk about, most exhibitors at trade shows don't set up a strategic industry marketing platform before trying for the hard sell either at the booth or after the show. Suppliers need to become goodwill ambassadors for the industry before they seek to market their goods and services aggressively.

What specifically is the meaning of industry relations? Simply put, it means developing a plan of action that entrenches your company and you personally-- if it is done correctly. The plan identifies your company and you personally as a team player when you are actively supporting trade groups and institutions important to the success of the industry in general and specifically to build a positive name ID for your company.

Why do so many companies fail to get involved? Most figure that they need all their available dollars to advertise and market in traditional ways. Given the above definition of industry relations, if they had become an entrenched industry "player," a good part of those marketing dollars could have been saved, as many sales opportunities would have opened up via the good citizen name ID that would come with support for the industry.

The old saying of taking care of your own can be applied to the way most industries responds to good corporate citizens: They think more highly of them and tend to buy more from them.

What's an even better way of doing industry relations? Companies that have begun to figure out that an effective industry-relations campaign is needed to cement their corporate name into the minds of industry opinion leaders and trade groups should find some outside help in truly zeroing in on which events and which sponsorships they really needed to do. So many groups in the industry ask for support from the supplier community. It's obvious that companies cannot respond favorably to every single request.

Get some expert help. Do a private dinner. Get someone who's already got great contacts and relationships to do some one-on-one introductions at industry dinners or conferences. Get an ambassador!

Enlist the assistance of someone who has worked in an industry trade group, on a trade publication or as an industry relations executive. Be careful to get objective advice.

With every marketing dollar becoming harder to find, be sure you have the necessary footing in this "community" before mounting just a traditional marketing campaign. The saying that "we are all in this together" is very applicable to this theory of doing the best job possible in industry relations. Operators look to those among their suppliers who have worked with them to protect, educate and promote their businesses. If you are visibly absent from strategic conferences, trade association events and industry public-relations campaigns, you will lose opportunities to build significant goodwill in the marketplace.

For a relatively small investment, compared with total advertising and exhibit costs, suppliers should look for ways to become active and supportive team players in the industry that is their bread and butter. The more successful your customers become, the better for you. As a decision maker, realize that you, and only you, need to see the larger picture of taking an active role in supporting your customer's collective interests -- alongside them in their meetings, events and trade group initiatives and projects.

Those companies that have done a good job at industry relations know who they are. More important, decision makers at large chain companies and leading independents know who those companies are, too. They are engaged actively in industry public-relations campaigns, show up at trade group Board meetings that they are appointed to, and realize the positive end result of being goodwill ambassadors to the industry to which they market. In simplest of terms, it makes supplier marketing executive jobs much easier; the doors open much wider when you are perceived as part of a team. It's hard to say no to someone who just kicked in a sizable investment into a new industry campaign and to someone who has given valuable time to industry efforts and initiatives!

Before next year's trade shows in your industry, do some planning and get active in industry affairs; you'll be pleasantly surprised at the long-term benefits your company will have.

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