New Technology Briefing

Digital exhibition spaces

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Abstract

Exhibitions have for a long time constituted a regular component in the marketing mix for many organisations. They represent an opportunity for direct interface between a brand and potential consumers, and often become an integral part of brand activation and product launch activity.

The advent of the internet and its increasing penetration worldwide have removed many of the geographical boundaries to sales and offered many organisations easy routes to new markets which until recently were associated with high development costs. It has also highlighted the opportunities available in respect of exhibitions, trade shows and face-to-face marketing available through the internet.

This paper looks at the impact of the internet on trade exhibitions, and specifically at one company's work which enabled it to engage with a wider audience through internet support for its physical presence at a trade show. The company is RM plc, a leading provider of technology and related infrastructure and services to UK schools and education, and the exhibition was BETT 2005, a key education trade show which attracts nearly 25,000 purchasers from every level of UK education.

Trade shows such as BETT are undoubtedly of critical importance to companies actively engaged in marketing to those verticals, but it is increasingly apparent that the audiences actually attending are a small fraction of the overall market.

This paper looks at what the internet can offer to reach and convert audiences who may not consider or be able to attend a live event.

Keywords: digital direct marketing, trade shows, exhibitions, lead generation, RM, BETT, rich media

Context

Most marketing campaigns feature some sort of trade event or exhibition as part of the annual activity. In the UK there are some obvious examples, such as the Motorshow, Clothes Show Live and, for marketers, the International Direct Marketing Fair.

Major events and exhibitions such as these present brands that operate in those industries with a number of opportunities, broadly outlined as follows:

- an opportunity to activate and promote the overall brand direct to the audience
- a chance to launch and promote new products and services
- 'coal-face' dialogue with customers and prospects.

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Obviously within each vertical, and within each company concerned, objectives will vary, but there is one that it may be reasonably assumed is common to all: to sell more.

Whether these sales are directly attributable to the actual exhibition or not, they are indeed a large part of the underlying objectives for the majority of exhibitors. But one of the main features of trade shows and exhibitions is that the promotion of the event to the target audience is usually undertaken by the event organisers themselves, leaving limited scope for the individual exhibitor to reach a wider audience.

For a variety of reasons it is not practical for many organisations to diminish their presence at such events. Instead, ways are being sought which will optimise the actual spend on such activity, by utilising such spend across other channels. The growth of the internet in terms of penetration and accessibility, as well as the commercial leverage exploited by many brands worldwide, means that this has the potential to become the main route for companies wishing to widen the appeal and maximise the budget spend on annual exhibitions and trade shows.

This paper looks at several elements in respect of virtual exhibitions, their planning and execution. It considers:

- the target market
- aims and objectives for online exhibitions
- best practice guidelines for effective site design and content.

Finally it includes a case study of one such virtual exhibition built for RM plc.

Target audience and demographics

A key question which has to be asked at the planning stage of any digital exhibition or trade show has to concern the target audience and the penetration of digital communications within that audience. Each audience will differ in respect of its accessibility to e-mail and the web, but the general trend is such that whatever the current penetration of digital channels it will inevitably be increasing.

Perhaps a more important consideration is purely anecdotal — how will your target audience respond to the availability of a digital representation of your trade show or exhibition presence? This should be a key consideration, and one that is debated early on in the planning process. In most cases it is unlikely that any ‘virtual’ exhibition will detract from actual attendance at a physical event, although if there are concerns about potential conflict, providing these are discussed early, they can be briefed as part of the site development and addressed through what is made available online and what is only made available at the actual exhibition itself.

What can be achieved by a ‘virtual’ exhibition?

There are a number of highly desirable benefits from an online exhibition stand or trade show.

Firstly, not everyone can physically attend an exhibition, but a virtual

Working the budget harder

Planning

Reach and accessibility

equivalent can be 'attended' anywhere there is internet access. This is particularly relevant for business-to-business marketing, where even exhibitions spanning several days or weeks conflict with the diaries of a majority of the target audience. Other barriers to attendance include geography, time constraints, cost and effort.

A good digital exhibition extends brand visibility to a much wider audience by offering a comparable experience from a desk in the office or a home PC. Extending the reach in this way may also provide additional benefits, such as enhanced brand perception through sound and vision, immediacy and information. 'Taking the trouble' to cater for this whole audience, as opposed to the fragment able to attend the event, has a highly beneficial effect on brand attitudes.

Objective setting

Any digital exhibition stand or trade show is subject to the same considerations as any website or microsite built on behalf of a brand. Foremost among these considerations should be the objectives.

Objectives are important for two reasons — firstly, they shape the creative process that will subsequently deliver the site, and secondly, they provide a crucial benchmark against which to measure the success of the activity.

Typical objectives for a digital exhibition stand or trade show are likely to include:

- prospect acquisition
- lead generation/direct sales
- traffic metrics
- breadcrumb tracking.

These objectives warrant further explanation.

Prospect acquisition

The creation and hosting of a site that both attracts and receives a substantial volume of traffic represent a good opportunity to grow a prospect database. Opportunities should be sought and created to capture data from site visitors. It should be noted that in terms of the 'digital information exchange' (capturing data in exchange for giving information), there will be an acceptance if not a willingness on the part of site visitors to provide some means of further contact. It goes without saying that the most valuable data to capture are e-mail address and salutation, and, particularly within the context of business-to-business marketing, job title and company name also. Depending on how the request for data is positioned, it may also be possible to capture telephone and postal contact details, along with some basic profiling information.

The exact objective that is set in respect of prospect acquisition should consider two key factors:

- likely site traffic (taking into consideration activity taking place to promote the digital exhibition space)

Information 'fair trade'

- the offer (what can be offered in exchange for datacapture — eg information or an incentive.)

Lead generation and direct sales

The positioning of the virtual exhibition space should be considered alongside any objective to use such a site to generate either qualified sales leads or actual sales.

The AIDA model is crucial here.

Digital AIDA

- Awareness — once site traffic is generated, traditional digital information architecture (signposting) drives that traffic to the appropriate product or service information.
- Interest — the site content of the particular section should aim to manipulate the interest generated into the next stage.
- Desire — good web-based collateral can (depending, of course, on the nature of the product or service being exhibited) leverage interest into desire.
- Action — the web is a perfect vehicle for converting desire into action in the form of downloading product information, a request for contact, participation in a prize draw or an actual e-commerce transaction.

Planning lead generation as part of the original brief is essential. It is not the sort of thing which can be shoehorned into a project halfway through a site's development — it relies heavily on the whole creative look and feel of the site, and if lead generation or direct selling are important objectives, journey planning is equally so: where do visitors arrive, how can you get them to the relevant points of the site from where a lead might be generated, etc?

Targets in respect of lead generation rely not only on the performance of the site design and mechanics, but also on the activity that drives traffic to the site. Good planning of this activity should consider not just the volume of traffic required, but also the type of visitor. It is important that activity is focused on a very specific target audience, not just volume.

Traffic metrics

Site traffic

Metrics based on traffic are the most common objectives set in respect of any web activity, and act as a common benchmark for a digital exhibition space. The meaning of traffic volumes and their breakdowns should be understood well if they are to form a useful part of the set objectives and measurement for a digital stand or show. Be warned: they tell only part of the story, and those based purely on volume are heavily dependent on the ability of the advertising and marketing to drive quality traffic to your digital stand or show.

Reporting tools attached to digital exhibition sites must be able to distinguish between page hits and unique visitors, and it is generally a good idea also to measure these metrics against particular site sections separately.

Also consider the potential of your digital exhibition to reach other

countries through the internet. Most web reporting tools can track visits by country of origin.

Breadcrumb tracking

Reporting based on the actual breadcrumb paths taken by visitors through a website are of high value when it comes to understanding how effective the site design and content have been. They effectively track and show the paths site visitors take, eg from the homepage to a video clip, to the product demonstration pages, to the request for further information pages.

They are useful not only to assess site performance within a given project, but also to inform future iterations of digital marketing initiatives for brands. Breadcrumb tracking is useful to identify discrepancies between intended user paths and those actually taken by site visitors.

Site design guidelines

It is important to differentiate between a 'typical' website and a virtual exhibition. Virtual exhibitions set different expectations for visitors, and the key to building a successful alternative to an actual exhibition presence is to align the expectations of the target audience with the objectives of the brand. Consequently virtual show visitors should be regarded as very close to actual exhibition visitors, as follows:

Visitor expectations

- seeking an 'experience' — more likely to trade time against reward
- information hungry — it is important to consider the need for additional information outside of the digital exhibition itself (eg PDF downloads and postal fulfilment)
- happy to provide information in exchange for something offered (not necessarily an incentive)
- wanting 'good service' — interaction and dialogue is important, in much the same way as someone visiting a stand at an industry event would want the opportunity for extended dialogue, and this needs to be factored into any similar virtual exhibition.

Two elements are critical to the delivery of the above: site design, particularly the signposting of information and content (information architecture), and effective site navigation.

There will be two main audience types for virtual exhibitions: those seeking quick access to information, for whom good, clear and concise information architecture will be invaluable, and those for whom the visit needs to offer more of an experience. The latter will be more likely to engage with the interactive elements of the site, and more receptive to the creative elements of site content and navigation. Indeed, site navigation can prove a useful tool to encourage engagement with those seeking more of an experience. 3D models of an actual stand, asking users to browse their way 'virtually' through a stand, serve to encourage a longer site visit, which in turn means better engagement between brand and visitor and ultimately more chance of conversion to the site's objectives.

Case study: RM plc and virtual BETT

The annual BETT event is an exhibition held in London, designed to bring together key decision makers from UK education with providers of ICT (technology) specifically for educational establishments. RM is a leading provider of ICT and associated services to UK education. It is also one of the largest exhibitors at the BETT show.

Towards the end of 2004, Squeeze Digital and RM discussed the benefits of replicating the RM stand at BETT online. The virtual stand was intended to serve two purposes: firstly, to encourage people already going to the BETT show to spend time on the RM stand itself, and secondly, to reach those targets unable to attend the show in person and provide them with a web-based representation of the whole RM@BETT experience.

Objectives

The original site objectives were:

- attract and receive 3,000 visitors to the site
- provide and compel readership/viewing of information concerning up to 20 discrete products (achieving 500 hits across all products)
- generate 100 qualified leads
- capture 350 new prospects.

The virtual RM@BETT site

A demonstration of RM's 'Virtual BETT' website may be viewed at www.squeezedigital.com/uk/demo/rm/bett/.

Proposition

The single-minded proposition adopted for the site was identified and agreed as 'Experience RM at BETT from the comfort of your own PC'. While the site objectives were ambitious in terms of actual provision of information, it was still felt that the site had to remain true to its purpose and represent an 'experience' for site visitors.

Navigation

It was decided that the site would offer static navigation alongside a richer, more interactive interface providing visitors with an experience not unlike visiting the RM stand at BETT itself. This was achieved using a Flash navigation bar across which visitors could scroll left and right, panning the stand as they did so. The navigation area was populated by virtual versions of actual RM staff who would talk to the visitors when they 'moused over' the individual images (Figure 1). Each member of staff would present the visitor with a small amount of dialogue, effectively inviting them further into the site as appropriate. For example, Fiona McCorquodale, primary sales consultant, stands next to a sub-stand showing the RM One, a revolutionary new PC designed especially for schools. When she is moused over, her voiceover is activated (including subtitles) as follows: 'Hello there, have you seen the new RM One? It's

Single-minded proposition

Figure 1: Rich site navigation

RM's PC that has been specifically designed for use in schools and colleges. Click me and I'll show you.'

Product promotion

Products were promoted across the RM virtual stand in two ways: through a menu of 'featured products' (also included within the richer navigation device as detailed above), and through a theatre area. Both the featured products and the RM theatre were virtual reflections of the way the physical RM stand at BETT actually worked.

Featured product pages used a combination of rich media and static HTML text to promote the features and benefits of each product. Where appropriate further information about these products was offered in the form of a link to the RM theatre if there was an associated theatre presentation, or to the fulfilment area of the website, from where PDF product information could be downloaded or hard-copy brochures requested by post.

The RM theatre was surprisingly successful (Figure 2). Again seeking to capitalise on resources that would be in place to support the actual stand at the BETT event, RM 'filmed' each RM product manager presenting the sessions they were running at BETT demonstrating their products and services. The resulting range of video resources was used on the virtual BETT site in the theatre area. These videos lasted between five and eight minutes — a long time on the web — so reporting tools were created to show not just the number of viewers who started watching particular videos but also those who watched them in their entirety.

Video collateral

Figure 2: The virtual theatre area

In an effort to ensure visitors were attracted to the theatre area, and once there willing to watch a complete video, many of the theatre presentations had their viewing incentivised by a prize draw. Questions were based around the content of the videos, meaning the answers were given, but usually not until the end of each video presentation. The prizes on offer were the products detailed in the videos themselves.

Lead generation

While there were hard targets in place for lead generation, it was felt that a degree of prequalification was required. The lead generation requirement was therefore addressed alongside the theatre presentations, when viewers entered the prize draw. A simple data capture element was included towards the end of the form asking the recipient whether they felt they would benefit from meeting an RM sales manager to discuss their requirements in more detail.

Site promotion

The objectives of the site could only be met if sufficient and suitable traffic was generated.

A series of banners were created and placed on the homepage of www.rm.com, the main RM website, which attracts between 350,000 and 400,000 visitors each month. A target click-through rate of 0.5–1.0 per cent — which would provide around 3,000 site visitors — was set for these.

To support the banners the URL of the site was added to all outgoing e-mails sent by RM's 2,000 UK staff, promoting RM's real and virtual presence at BETT.

Results

The results of the virtual RM@BETT site exceeded the objectives considerably. The actual number of site visitors during the 'active period' (January 2005) was over 4,000 against a target of 3,000. Interestingly, much of this traffic arrived from outside of the UK. More than 15 per cent of total site visits came from the USA and more than 50 visitors came from India, the USA and Australia, which serves to prove the point that the reach of a virtual exhibition easily extends further than the audience at an actual event itself.

Actual product interest was measured as the number of unique visitors to each product's information pages (featured products and the theatre presentations). Again, this exceeded target as more than 500 visitors downloaded these pages.

The videos within the theatre presentations were extremely well received, with over 1,700 visitors starting to watch videos and more than 1,400 complete viewings. As a result of the video views, more than 140 requests for direct contact from RM were made, well above the target of 100 leads set for this activity.

The incentivisation of the videos worked well in terms of generating actual prospect data capture also, with 360 prize draw entrants also opting in to receive further communications from RM.

Summary

The activity executed on behalf of RM shows that significant value can be realised through digital exhibitions and events. Most direct marketers will recognise the need to design engaging sites for target audiences, and the creation of an effective virtual exhibition, event or trade show 'stand' must follow this idea. It is essential to recognise that visitors to such a site are looking for an experience akin to actually visiting the site in person. This is expressed best in the creative brief used to develop the site, under the heading 'Objective':

'To produce a microsite which replicates all the "good" things about actually walking onto the RM stand at the BETT 2005 event. This means making sure visitors are "wowed" not only by the experience of visiting the website, but also by the clarity and relevance of the information. They should take the considerable opportunity afforded by the microsite to request further information about RM's products and services.'

RM plc has regarded the virtual representation of RM's presence at BETT 2005 as a success, and plans are already afoot to extend this concept into other areas of RM's face-to-face marketing.