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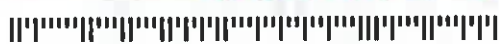


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BEST PRACTICES IN TRADE SHOW MARKETING

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On The Road

Faced with a dramatic dip in trade show attendance, three companies turn to mobile exhibits to reconnect with existing clients and prospect for new ones.

By Charles Pappas

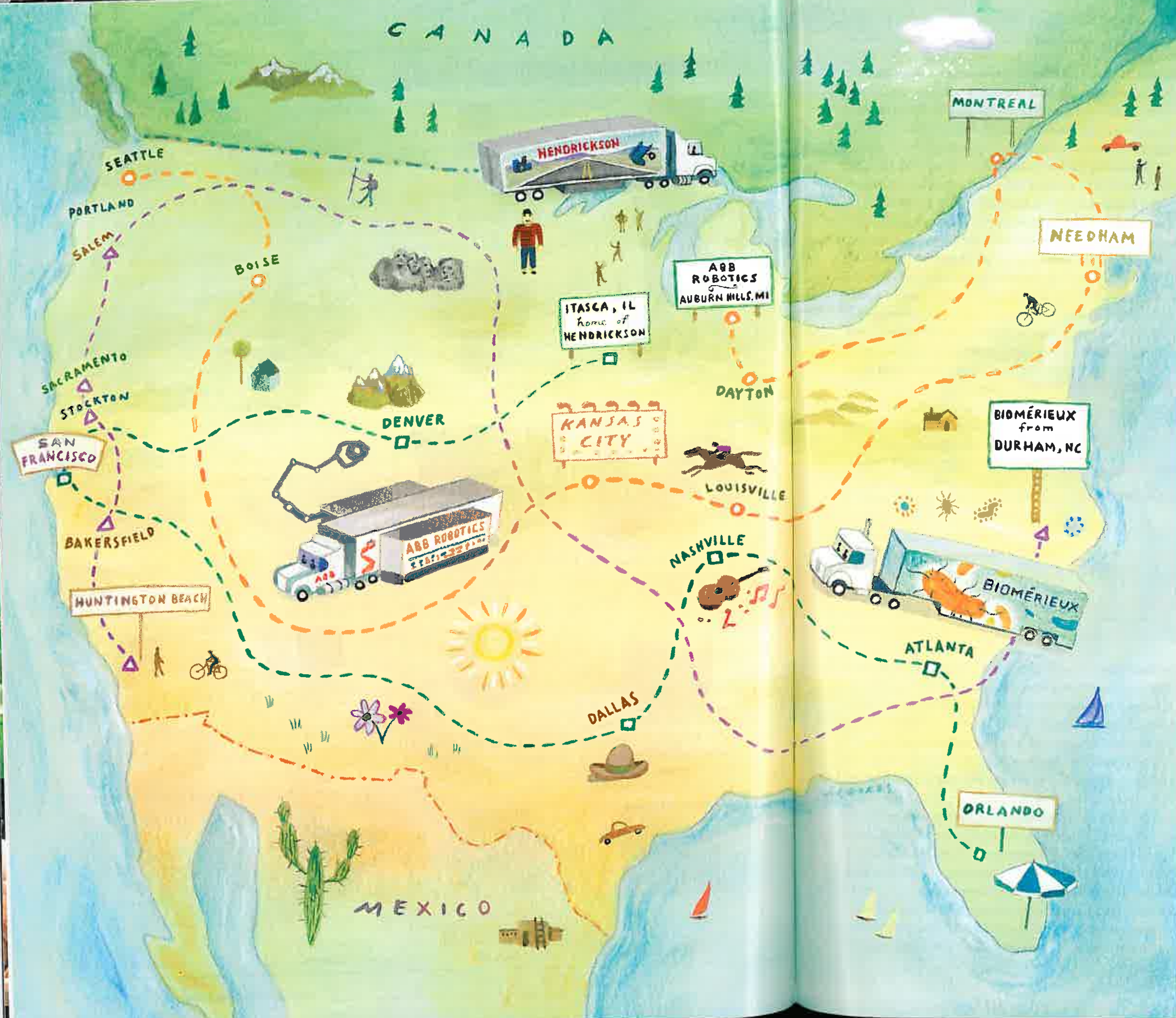
Ever since the original Oscar Mayer Wienermobile hit the open road in 1936, mobile marketing programs have become an indispensable vehicle for business. Whether it's an 18-wheel, 32-ton tractor-trailer or a light pickup truck, these customized rigs bring your company's products or services to the customer — setting up anywhere from rodeos and state fairs to college campuses and Wal-Marts. Typically managed by a small, highly trained, and full-time staff that's often assisted by regional sales reps, these road shows deepen the relationship with customers via the intimacy of face-to-face experiences.

Until recently, mobile programs have sometimes been viewed as an optional add-on to companies' more traditional marketing efforts. But now that attitude may be changing, as trade show attendance, dinged by the recession, is forcing some exhibitors to think outside the booth. According to the Dallas-based Center for Exhibition Industry Research (CEIR), the exhibition industry declined 3.1 percent overall, with attendance skidding downward 4 percent in 2008. And while CEIR won't release this year's figures for a few months, it predicts attendance may have tumbled an additional 12.5 percent in 2009.

Faced with fewer customers and the collateral need to discover new prospects, the following three companies turned to mobile marketing — not to replace their exhibits, but rather to enhance them. Using so-called road-show programs, these companies increased sales, raised brand awareness, and secured new clients on the long and winding road to success.

PIGGYBACK RIDER: THE ODYSSEY TOUR

Normally, E. coli doesn't attract customers — just ask a cruise director. But people come in droves when BioMérieux Inc. shows up armed with technology to battle E. coli, salmonella, listeria, and other bacteria. That's because for more than three years, BioMérieux, a maker of diagnostic equipment for health-care, pharma, food, and other industries, has peddled its products during a road show to hospitals, clinics, businesses — and trade shows.



The Durham, NC-headquartered company had traditionally shown its full line of products in only the largest of the 140 shows at which it appears annually, such as the Interscience Conference on Antimicrobial Agents and Chemotherapy (ICAAC) and the American Association for Clinical Chemistry Annual Meeting. But in 2008, it noticed an ominous 25- to 33-percent plunge in booth traffic at those exhibitions. Attendees, it discovered, were not staying home, but were migrating to smaller, regional trade shows, including the Southern California American Society for Microbiology (SCASM) Annual Meeting.

While the company usually exhibited successfully at SCASM and other regional shows, there were limitations to that success: Its typical 10-by-10-foot booths, not to mention the cost of shipping and drayage for products that weigh 300 to 400 pounds apiece, prevented it from showing more than one or two of its wares at any given

show. "We debated what to do and finally concluded the answer was to somehow combine the best of the road show and the trade show worlds," says Allan Mohess, BioMérieux's director of marketing communications. "So we decided to use a mobile exhibit that piggybacked on those regional shows."

BioMérieux didn't have to start from scratch. Like a common household bacteria that evolves into a super bug, the company already had a

mobile exhibiting program it could expand into something bigger and more powerful. In May 2006, it launched a 45-foot-long bus that displayed four types of lab diagnostic equipment at medical facilities and businesses such as Tyson Foods Inc. The bus traveled to 54 cities that year on what BioMérieux called the "Innovation in Motion" tour.

Expanded for 2007, the tour hit 75 more cities, but sluggish turnout suggested its novelty had worn off. And in early 2008, when attendance at larger shows dipped, BioMérieux decided it wouldn't abandon the road shows or the trade shows, but would instead create a symbiotic relationship where one fed off the other.

In May 2008, BioMérieux dispatched an 85-foot tractor-trailer on what it called the "Odyssey Tour: Advancing Diagnostics to Improve Public Health." With Milwaukee-based Derse Exhibits Inc. designing the trailer's interior

and Exhibit Trailers Inc. of Las Vegas operating the tour, the Odyssey was slated to make 50 stops the first year. The tour appeared at hospitals and clinics like the now-defunct "Innovation in Motion" tour had, but this time around, it also stopped at trade shows. The reason was simple — it was cost effective.

While BioMérieux kept its standard 10-by-10-foot booth space on the show floor, it sidestepped shipping and drayage costs by not putting any of its equipment on display in its exhibit. Instead, the company got permission from show management to park its tractor-trailer outside the exhibit hall, and directed booth visitors to venture out for a look at the equipment and a more in-depth demo. The related shipping and drayage savings from just one show more than covered the bill for six months of the mobile tour. Plus, the company had, in effect, two exhibits — one outdoor, one indoor — providing twice the exposure and

more space to display its large, heavy products.

While BioMérieux lured its target audience of lab managers and technicians with pre-tour direct mail, e-mail, and bi-monthly newsletters with promises of training and education on the company's advanced diagnostic hardware, what really intrigued customers was the larger-than-life bugs on the side of the truck, including a 20-foot-long E.coli bacterium that

looked like a hairy hot dog. A movie-screen-size graphic of a bacterium that resembled a furry wiener might have been as subtle as a flatulence joke on Fox's animated series, "Family Guy," but it added a touch of lab-geek humor to BioMérieux's corporate branding that could just as easily have been corporate blandness.

Staffed by up to 10 sales reps and technical consultants from the regional offices who had worked on the smaller 2006 version of the mobile exhibit, the Odyssey trailer parked outside convention facilities in, for example, Fort Worth, TX, for the Southwestern Association of Clinical Microbiology (SWACM) annual meeting. When attendees strolled in — many were directed there by booth personnel on the show floor — the BioMérieux staff collected their contact info, and then escorted them to the galley for coffee, soda, or a meal of toasted sandwiches, pizza, or sliders.

"We debated what to do and finally concluded the answer was to somehow combine the best of the road show and the trade show worlds, so we decided to use a mobile exhibit."



Since the road show targets clients and prospects who may not attend the shows where ABB exhibits, the mobile strategy allows the company to meet with buyers and influencers it wouldn't otherwise see face to face.



After the repast, visitors could watch presentations on 50-inch screens regarding the BioMérieux hardware that verifies that production processes for vaccines, insulin, and intravenous fluids are safe. Then they could observe staff demonstrating the Odyssey's 10 different pieces of equipment, including BioMérieux's new Tempo and Vidas technology that ensure food safety, as well as microbe-mapping devices that analyze a bacteria's DNA to sleuth out where it originated. The staff also built awareness among visitors about how BioMérieux technology can help prevent the spread of the multidrug-resistant organisms (MDRO) — or super bugs — that affect more than 1.7 million Americans each year.

But to really capture an audience, you not only have to give them what they want — you also have to give them what they need. Knowing that many of its current clients pursue Professional Achievement in Continuing Education (PACE) certification in the field of medical technology, the tour offered training and presentations in a slide-out, 15-by-20-foot classroom that could host up to 18 visitors at a time. As those visitors spent time soaking up the company's key messages, they attended educational sessions about the antibiotic stewardship, microbial genotyping, and molecular testing fields.

The result was as large as bacteria are small. In cities where the trailer stopped at clinics, labs, or hospitals, the tour received an average of 70 or more visitors. But when it piggybacked on the company's trade shows, that number mushroomed, "Andromeda Strain"-like, to upwards of 300 or 400. The length of the visits ranged from 15 to 30 minutes or more, which is up to six times the average stay in one of the company's more traditional booths. Plus, the ROI for the tour exceeded 10 times the cost — a healthy figure in a sick economy — which surpassed expectations by about 50 percent.

While the tour is slated to stop at 70 to 90 cities this year, its metrics, like bacteria themselves, have grown and changed with time. Instead of merely counting attendees, the company now tabulates how many different institutions those visitors represent, finding a direct correlation between the number of well-represented institutions and

the likelihood of related sales. The "hairy hot dog" has become so synonymous with BioMérieux that the company has used the trailer on the trade show floor in place of its booth around a dozen times since 2008, drawing crowds and buzz — and extending its key messages outside the show floor and to cities across America.

ROBO STOP: ROBOTICS ON THE MOVE

Trade shows are a vital link between ABB Robotics Inc. and its customers. Attending up to 10 exhibitions a year (such as the International Robots, Vision & Motion Control Show and Conference), the Auburn Hills, MI-based manufacturer of industrial robots depends heavily on trade shows. Without car-dealership-like showrooms around the country for its customers to see, feel, and interact with the automatons (whose price tags generally start at an industry norm of approximately \$30,000 and rocket to more than \$1 million), trade shows become an indispensable, hands-on

link in a sales cycle that can take years to complete.

By 2006, however, the company was still holding its own against the competition with a variety of its robot models — including ones that weld and paint. But its new automatons that could package and palletize items weren't making as big a blip on customers' radars as it hoped. The decline in attendance at trade shows it attends (which ABB started noticing in 2006), piled on

top of the company's rivals, who ABB estimates outspend it in overall marketing by an 8-to-1 margin, meant the chances of connecting with customers were getting as slim as a microprocessor. According to John VanLoon, executive vice president of EEI Global Inc., an experiential marketing agency based in Rochester Hills, MI, "ABB needed a strategy that would give it the same quality face time as trade shows so it could grab customers before the competition did."

The best way to do that, ABB concluded, was to take the trade show experience straight to its customers. With the help of EEI Global, ABB launched the "Robotics on the Move" tour in March of 2006. Packing a 48-foot-long, double-expandable mobile trailer with much of the same equipment trade show attendees would find in its typical 30-by-30-foot booths, ABB scheduled 26 stops for the tour

that first year. In addition to visiting current customers, it also clustered about one-third of its tour stops in the southern part of the country, where there were several untapped markets for robotics technology, including a handful of food-processing plants.

ABB promoted the road-show tour well ahead of its arrival in each destination along the route. Beginning three to four months before the mobile trailer was scheduled to show up at a given company, ABB's sales reps communicated three to six times by e-mail and phone with key influencers at each company. When the tour arrived at one of its stops, two to four area sales reps were present to help prep and staff the exhibit. After a one-hour setup, it was ready, and customers queued to get in, drawn by the pre-show communications, not to mention the 17-foot-high, traffic-cone-orange inflatable robot standing aside the trailer like a Transformer.

Upon entering the trailer, visitors encountered four kiosks that displayed ABB's robotic collections, including a group of the newer palletizers as well as robot that demonstrated its arc-welding abilities. In a small presentation area, the company played short videos on how other manufacturers have used ABB robots. Meanwhile, in a 10-by-15-foot classroom-like space that held a dozen people, ABB reps offered instruction

on how to pick your first robot application and the benefits of buying a pre-owned robot. (These last two parts were especially important for some prospects — including a few food-processing firms — who were still leery of large-scale industrial robots.) If visitors needed a reboot after seeing so many robots, they could chill under the ABB-branded awning outside and enjoy refreshments.

A little more than three years after it began, the tour has made approximately 60 stops, including Boise, ID; Kansas City, KS; Louisville, KY; and Montreal. Welcoming nearly 14,500 visitors in that span, "Robotics on the Move" has earned an astonishing ROI of nearly 1,200 percent. Furthermore, since the road show targets clients and prospects who may not attend the shows where ABB exhibits, the mobile strategy allows the company to meet with buyers and influencers it wouldn't otherwise see face to face.

Energized by that success, ABB is continuing the mobile exhibit by scheduling almost 30 more stops in 2010.

KEEP ON TRUCKIN': THE ROAD SHOW

For years, trade shows drove plenty of traffic to Hendrickson USA LLC's booths. In fact, the list of shows at which the 96-year-old manufacturer of commercial truck, tractor, and trailer suspensions exhibited was almost the length of a tractor-trailer — up to 18 shows a year, including World of Concrete, the Truckload Carriers Association Annual Convention, and even the Oregon Logging Show. With a combined attendance of more than 100,000, the shows transported, well, a truckload of the Itasca, IL-based company's target audience of truck and trailer OEMs, fleet owners, and dealers to its exhibits.

But in late 2001, Hendrickson felt its customers applying the brakes to their trade show appearances. The lingering chill of post-9/11 budget freezes forced many

of its clients and potential customers to stay home, while others reported they were too busy to take the time to attend trade shows. Overall, the company saw trade show attendance slope downward. That's when it decided to hit the road. "Hendrickson thought, 'If they can't come to the show, let's take the show to them,'" says Jody Slingluff, senior account director for Gallo Displays Inc., the

Cuyahoga Heights, OH-based exhibit house that helped design and execute the company's wheeled campaign.

Calling its mobile exhibiting program simply "The Road Show," Hendrickson mapped out an itinerary for a 2002 tour. It would run January through November, and make an estimated five stops per week in client-rich cities such as Atlanta, Dallas, Nashville, TN, and Orlando, FL. A month before the tour would arrive in, say, Denver, its sales team would e-mail and cold-call prospects in that area several times to alert them to the trailer's upcoming arrival.

Once the 53-foot trailer parked at a customer's company at around 9 a.m., it took only about an hour for the staff of two — the driver and a local sales rep — to set up. Then for the next four to eight hours (how long the vehicle stayed depended on the size of the company it was visiting), customers, from C-level managers to engineers to

mechanics, stopped in at their convenience. Inside the trailer, they encountered a 500-square-foot environment that held a 50-inch flatscreen for presentations and seven to 12 cut-away models of Hendrickson's suspension systems, as well as graphics and literature. The only difference was Hendrickson simply stocked fewer copies of each model in the trailer than it did at exhibitions.

With yellow stripes painted down the middle of the trailer's gray floor to remind visitors of the highways on which its products earn their keep every day, Hendrickson displayed hands-on training models of its tractor and trailer suspension systems, as well as similar demonstrations available for height-control valves, shocks, and brakes. An audiovisual center allowed visitors to view any of five Hendrickson videos and electronic presentations on product education and technical training.

While heavy crowds and tight schedules in a trade show environment might prevent visitors from trying as many products as they would like for as long as they want, here in the trailer there was no rush. In fact, customers lingered an average of 45 minutes — roughly 125 percent longer than the usual 20-minute visit in Hendrickson's trade show booths. When they were finished, they unwound outside, eating hot dogs and hamburgers under a branded awning.

Initially scheduled for two years, "The Road Show" operated until the middle of 2007. But in a run that lasted almost seven years before pulling over, it averaged 240 stops and reached more than 5,000 visitors annually — about as many as might visit the company's trade show booths in a year. And Hendrickson's anecdotal evidence suggests the tour was a success, thanks to a strategy of reaching out to several levels of influencers who infrequently make it to shows, keeping the trailers open through lunch and sometimes dinner for those who couldn't otherwise get away from their desks, and displaying as many products as customers would find in its booth. In fact, the trailer proved to be so recognizable as a part of the Hendrickson brand that the company might hit the road again in 2010.

What's more, there were other benefits generated along the way that were harder to quantify but no less real. The thousands who had come to know Hendrickson by its road show came to see the trailer as inseparable from the company itself. Hundreds of visitors, many of whom had first encountered the trailer when it visited their company or had heard about it from others, recognized it as you would an old friend. Making sales, shoring up existing clients, and landing new ones, Hendrickson's mobile exhibit took the company on a long and successful journey before it came to the end of the road. ■

RULES OF THE ROAD SHOW

According to Larry Borden, CEO of The Borden Agency Inc., there are common denominators to every successful mobile-exhibiting program. Here are eight of his tried-and-true techniques to help steer your road-show program in the right direction.

1. Brand the tour with a name, such as, "The Road Show," or "Robotics on the Move," that you can use to promote it. A catchy title makes the tour more memorable, separates it from competitors' marketing, and often sums up the exhibit's purpose in one quick sentence. Plus, it gives the tour its own identity.
2. Touch customers three to five times before the tour arrives via a mix of phone calls, e-mails, and face-to-face contact if possible. Those most familiar with customers should be the ones reaching out to them, since clients will likely be more responsive and open to someone with which they have an established relationship.
3. Target not just the usual customers of your product or service, but those in a company who may rarely or never travel to a trade show, such as engineers or middle management. These individuals often unofficially influence purchasing decisions, and by courting them, you increase your chances of a sale.
4. Make sure you get buy in from all of your company's internal departments that have a stake in the tour, such as marketing and sales. Not only will these folks help drive your vision; they might even kick in some money when they realize a mobile tour will be an asset to them.
5. Staff the tour with sales reps or other personnel who are already familiar with your clients and their needs. This will increase customers' ease and allow your staff to more quickly hone in on what attendees need.
6. Introduce new products, when possible, to generate excitement. Also consider live demos of your products or services to prove their benefits and hold customers' attention.
7. Stay open through lunch and dinner to make visiting more convenient for busy attendees. Consider offering refreshments — from snacks to full-on meals — to attract attendees and extend their stay.
8. Develop and monitor key performance indicators on a weekly basis, and make small tweaks from week to week to help grow the effectiveness of the program over time.

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