



Marketing Management

Elixir Marketing Mgmt. 91 (2016) 38236-38242

Elixir
ISSN: 2229-712X

Strategic Role of Trade Shows to Participating Firms in Ghana: A Study of the Twelfth (12th) Ghana International Trade Fair

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 12 August 2015;

Received in revised form:

9 February 2016;

Accepted: 17 February 2016;

Keywords

Trade shows,
Sleeping giant,
Exhibitors/attendees,
Effectiveness,
Products/services,
Ghana.

ABSTRACT

Firms over the years have sought for ways of marketing their products to enable them achieve their marketing objectives, including sales and profits. As a result, they have experimented with various marketing strategies over the years. All these marketing strategies have had varying degrees of success. However, until recently, trade shows, which was practiced hundreds of years ago was not part of the tools, even though it holds the key to the success of industry. Trade shows have been identified as a cost-effective tool for promoting products of all kinds and origins. Trade shows bring both sellers and buyers together under one roof to transact business. This way, firms interact with their prospective customers or dealers more directly at a relatively cheaper cost. In recent times, there has been the proliferation of trade shows in Ghana. Researchers identified potential benefits firms could derive from participating in such exhibitions as the motive behind such a move. The outcome of the research conducted has shown that indeed positive results are derived from participating in such fairs. These have been discussed thoroughly. Other issues that cropped up in the study included evaluating performance or effectiveness of participation, preparations firms made towards participating and challenges exhibitors faced during the participation of such fairs.

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Introduction

Marketers have been looking for better ways of marketing their products and services in the face of keen competition in order to grow and accentuate their strength to fill the marketing gap (between producers and consumers), the global marketing place has been made real for firms that customers now have purchasing options that go beyond their community or nation (Richardson, 1996). The customer now is seen as a global customer, having knowledge about the existence of every products and services in the world with the help of technology.

Aggressive competitive practices aimed at gaining market for products and services have radically changed the market place. Backed by internal (management) and external (competition, globalization of customers) factors, firms have taken steps to promote their brand of goods using various promotional strategies. Consequently, Levinson's (1989) hundred promotional devices were developed as packages which firms at different time periods used to market their wares. These strategies or devices which he called "guerrilla weapons" included advertising, personal selling, product quality, price, public relations, and the precious of all, trade shows.

Trade show is reputed to be a powerful marketing tool" (Rothschild, 1987) for selling a firm's products. It has been realized that when people read direct mails or see adverts on television spots etc. they may not be in buying mood (Levinson, 1989). Tradeshow therefore is believed to hold the key to building long term relationships with their customers (Jebkins, 1995) and partnerships (Richardson, 1996) between firms and their agents or customers.

Heskett (1976) described Trade Shows as a gathering of sellers and buyers for the purpose of displaying and surveying respectively, new products, processes or services. He went on to

say that trade shows serve as a central market place where trade members, making a single trip to the show grounds, view many products and discuss industry trends with other professionals." In supporting this view, Bovee and Arens (1989) opined that exhibitors expose their products to both new as well as old customers at the same time as they meet dealers for them. In confirming the superiority of trade shows within the promotional mix, Levinson (1989) said "those clients who employed trade shows as a strategy saw it to their delight and profitability" (pp. 335).

Ghana as one of the countries with serious business practices, have recognized and accepted the challenge posed by trade shows and are using it regularly to market her products and services. This explains its proliferation in the country. Ghana as a late starter has joined the world to market its products through organized trade shows and exhibitions. As a humble beginner, over one hundred (100) fairs are organized in a typical year at national, regional and district levels. It is hoped that firms in the country would take advantage of this wind of change to derive maximum benefit(s) from it, as indicated by Paliwoda (1993).

Literature Review

Trade Show has assumed centre-stage by firms wanting to market their products locally and internationally. Its impact has been phenomenal. Various researches have been conducted into how Trade shows are held. This section therefore critically examined and reviewed relevant works and theories by various authors on the issue.

Black (1986) defined Trade Shows as an "event that bring together, in a single location, a group of suppliers who set up physical exhibits of their products and services from a given

industry or discipline'. Czinkota and Ronkainer's (1988) also defined Trade Shows as "typically an event which firms, distributors and vendors display their products or describe their services to current and prospective suppliers, buyers and other business associates and the press."

The principal purpose of exhibitions is bringing buyers and sellers together for the purpose of trade. Trade fairs are organized periodically, occurring within specific days and period. The days' ranges from a minimum of one day to a maximum of two weeks, depending on the nature of products and services on display.

Evolution of trade shows

The search for an effective way of marketing [products and services] has not been a recent development. Various strategies have, over the years evolved, all aimed at arriving at the best possible way of marketing. One of such approaches was the introduction of the barter system that was Trade Show in disguise.

In Czinkota and Ronkainer's (1988) view, Trade Show is an age old European tradition, practiced over 1200 years ago. Since then, it has assumed a global dimension as a "powerful marketing tool" (Levison, 1989). It is estimated that over six hundred (600) types of fairs are organized annually in over seventy countries (Hennessey, 1995).

Germany has been at the forefront of hosting international trade show. Germany organizes over one hundred fairs annually with exhibitors and attendees coming from around the globe. Among the big Trade shows she has hosted are the Grand Expo (2000), the Hanover and Cologne Fairs and the one held in Handicraft bazaar (Berlin 2002), which over 500 exhibitors from sixty countries attended. Other countries who have played host to major international Trade Shows are China (e.g. Canton Fair), Italy (e.g. Milan Fair), Spain (e.g. Barcelona Fair), Britain (London Fair) and France (Bordeaux Fair). African Countries in the sub - Sahara region are involved in using Trade show as a promotional tool. Large successful Fairs have been hosted in Burkina Faso, Egypt, (8th African Trade Fair (2002) and Nigeria (Handicraft from Anglophone West Africa, 2001).

Classification of Trade Shows

Griffins (1993) classified fairs either as horizontal or vertical.

Horizontal fairs involve the display of many different product categories that have broad audience appeal. A horizontal fair is the ideal choice for products that require public approval and acceptance. An example is the Hanover Fair (in Germany) where over 20 major product categories were exhibited. Horizontal fairs are also called General Fairs. Vertical fair, on the other hand, is also called specific fair. This type concentrates on specific segments or industries attracting limited exhibitor and visitor participation. Mostly, a single product category is displayed. Examples include Tokyo (Japan) International Professional Photo Fair, (March 1990), the Aerospace Fair in Bordeaux (France) and InfoTech (2001) in Ghana.

Organisation of Trade Shows

The question usually asked is: "whose responsibility is it to organize exhibitions"? In some countries, the onus lays with the government whose interest lies in promoting trade or by trade associations wishing to provide a forum for their members to come into contact with interest buyers. The organizers responsibilities include allocating booths or space for rentals, providing security to the exhibitors and their products, provision of social amenities and facilities (like recreational grounds, places of convenience, car parks, entertainment spots), and security to both humans and products exhibited.

They are also responsible for fixing dates and themes for the fairs. In doing so, seminars, press briefings, etc. for the participants and the press respectively are organized. On the said date of the Trade Show, opening ceremonies are held with Government officials giving a keynote address to open it. The organizers are also responsible for the promotion of the exhibition to create the awareness of the impending Trade Show and products on display. Various marketing communication tools (television advertisements, publicity, floats, hoisting of banners, mounting of billboards, radio and television talk shows etc.) are employed to give it the required publicity.

Sponsorship packages are made available to some participating firms. According to Paliwoda (1993), the U.K and German Governments usually sponsor first time exhibitors or new entrant firms as an incentive to encourage them to participate in the event. Other sponsorship packages are received from major industries, corporate bodies, media houses, interested groups and individuals.

Promotion of Trade Show Activities

Promotion has been defined as "the co-ordination of all seller - initiated efforts to set up channels of information and persuasion to sell goods and services or promote an idea" (Belch and Belch, 1995). They include sales promotion, trade shows, public relations, publicity and direct marketing. These tools are integrated to communicate with their customers. Three stages of promotional activities are considered: pre-show, during - show and post-show. This could be centrally organized by the organizers on behalf of its members or decentralized

Cost Incurred During Trade Shows

As trade show grows, so does its expenditure. Rosson and Seringhaus (1989) asserted that the problem with fairs has been its high cost. In the opinion of Kotler (2000), firms spend about 35% of their annual promotions on Trade Shows alone. Generally, budgets for Trade Shows rank second to advertising (in the marketing communications budget) in most countries. In the U.S a research undertaken by Jacobsen (1990) revealed that one-fifth (20%) of all promotional budgets goes into Trade shows, ranking second largest expenditure only to personal selling and ahead of print advertising and direct mail. He estimated that in 1984 alone, about \$9 billion was budgeted for trade shows. By 1992, it has gone up to \$12 billion. In agreeing with the figure for 1992, Hardoy et al. (1993) has said that budgets have been increasing at an annual rate of 65%. The costs are incurred on travels, labour, promotions, space rentals and exhibitor costs, among others.

The story is not different in Europe. Most European countries spend about a fourth (25%) of their promotional budgets on Trade Fairs. In the U.K. substantial amounts of money are devoted to exhibitions. In 1995 alone, over £1,016 million was spent (on official/ government and privately held fairs), which is doubled, the amount spent on outdoor and transport advertisements, according to a report in Marketing Pocket Book, (1997).

Individual participating firms as well as visitors also incur costs. Skolinik (1987) revealed that in 1978, large firms could spend over £73,000 in participating in a major fair in the United Kingdom. Skolinik said that this has gone up to £212,000 in recent years. According to Exhibition Industry Federation (1994), small firms spent an average of £30,500 per exhibitor on trade and public exhibitions in 1993. These costs were absorbed in transportation, space rentals, advertisements, training and allowances of personnel and entertainment.

Table 1

Product categories	Frequency	Percentage
Food & Beverage	5	18.2
Medicine	1	4.5
Building materials	2	9.1
Transport equipment	1	4.5
Fire-fighting equipment	1	4.5
Household goods	1	4.5
Personal effects	5	27.2
Services	2	9.1
Handicrafts	1	4.5
Cosmetics	1	4.5
Agro-products	2	9.1
Total	22	100%

Source: Survey Data (2015)

Table 2

Description	Frequency	Percentage
Not met	1	4.5
Met to some extent	18	81.8
Fully met	1	4.5
Non response	2	9.1
Total	22	100

Source: Survey Data (2015)

Table 3

Description	Respondents	Percentage
Poor sales	12	28
Lack of facilities	7	16
High overall cost	10	23
Poor attendance	9	21
Others	3	7
No response	2	4.7
Total response	43	100

Source: Survey Data (2015)

Table 4

Description	Frequency	Percentage
Below expectation	9	41
Just as expected	11	50
Beyond expectation	1	4.5
Non response	1	4.5
Total	22	100

Source: Survey Data (2015)

Table 5

	Frequency	Percentage
Introduce new/modified products	5	23
Meet potential buyers	7	32
Promote products	4	18
Selling products	2	9
Seek opinion about products	1	5
Study trends in the industry	3	14
Total	22	100

Source: Survey Data (2015)

Table 6

Description	Frequency	Percentage
Help price products	1	23
Help promote products	6	27
Improve negotiations with customers	2	9
Improved selling abilities	8	36
Increased confidence in product	1	5
Total	22	100

Source: Survey Data (2015)

Table 7

Description	Frequency	Percentage
Reasonable charges	5	23
More foreign participation	3	14
Improved facilities	6	27
Adequate ground preparation	3	14
Fairness /equity	4	18
No response	1	5
Total	22	100

Source: Survey Data (2015)

Table 8

Position	Frequency	Percentage
Sales/Marketing Officers	11	50
Production /Project Officers	3	14
Managing Directors	5	23
Promotions Officer	1	5
Customer Relations Officers	2	9
Total	22	100

Source: Survey Data (2015)

Research Methodology

Primary sources: Primary data refers to data gathered from original sources, especially to answer research questions. The methods include personal observation, personal interviews and the administration of questionnaires which were self-administered

Secondary data enabled the researcher to redefine his area of study and interest and further suggested the general acceptable research methodology to follow. The sources include the review of journals, reports, newsletters, documentaries, library materials, newspapers, magazines as well as the internet. A sample size of twenty five was selected consisting of local and foreign firms, which exhibited variety of products during the international fair. Also, views were solicited from the trade fair company as the organizers on the relevance of trade shows to the socio-economic development of the country.

Meanwhile, time, financial constraints and the shortness of the duration (12 days) of the trade show compelled the researchers to limit sample size to twenty-five firms selected randomly, yet, twenty two were returned.

Results and Discussions

Thorough analysis of the findings has been discussed below.

Products or services exhibited

The products exhibited by participating firms were randomly selected as shown below:

As evidenced from Table 1, 27.2% of the respondents were dealers in personal effects (including clothing, sportswear and footwear) whilst 18.2% were displaying food and beverages (Coca-cola, bottled drinks and starkist tuna). Together, they dominated products and services on display. Building materials (roofing tiles and paints), services (banking) and agro products also obtained 9.1% each. The other products that had 4.5% of the responses each were medicine, transport facilities, firefighting equipment, handicraft and cosmetic products.

The evidence revealed that the Show was a general type (of fair) where different product lines were exhibited.

Achieving set objectives

The question was asked because every exhibitor is expected to have an objective to direct his or her actions whilst participating in the show.

The above table shows that 81.8% of firms interviewed said that they were able to meet their objective somehow whilst 9.1% did not respond to the question. 4.5% said they were able to

meet their objective fully whilst another person said he regretted attending the show. Some of the objectives adduced included promoting their wares to new customers, reminding them that their products are still around, introducing modified products to the attendees, seek opinion about their products, meet potential buyers, look for opportunities and make direct sales.

Problems encountered

The following are the problems that were encountered during the event. Evidence from the table above reveals the numerous problems firms encountered at the fair.

Poor sales: From the table, 28% complained about poor sales, which they attributed to the general economic situation in the country where income levels are very low, thus, affecting the purchasing power of the attendees. Another attribution was the high gate fees charged which prevented many visitors from coming in to buy.

High overhead cost: 23% of the respondents complained about the high application fee charged, cost incurred in acquiring booths and other incidentals. Participants paid between \$250 and \$300 depending on the booth allocated. Foreign firms were not spared either, as they also paid \$1,000 for a sizeable booth. Aside this, they paid for utilities as well as the cost in recruiting and training staff, transportation, preparation of exhibits and others.

Poor attendance: 21% of the participants also complained of poor attendance due to inadequate promotion by the organizers (even though were billed for that), high gate fees and wrong opening hours which were not worker - friendly. This assertion was supported by the fact that business went on briskly during the weekends.

Lack of social amenities: 16% of the participants complained about the lack of exhibitors lounge, parking lots, and place of convenience. Other amenities lacking included entertainment spots, good lighting system, telephone and running water. The few places of convenience could not meet the growing demand and were even in deplorable state. Most of the telephone booths were down thereby hindering effective communication.

Others: This attracted a 7% response rate. Items mentioned here included the absence of insurance cover for participating firms, poor electrical fittings, and absence of firefighting facilities at the fairgrounds, ineffective preparation for the show (there was evidence of construction going on in some of the

booths three days into the show) and partial distribution of booths to participants.

Expectations of participating firms

Responses generated show that 50% of respondents were of the view that they experienced what they expected. These were based on the objectives they set for participating and their previous experience at such trade shows. 41% could not realize their expectations as a result of pertinent challenges they were confronted with some of which have been discussed above. This gave a negative perception about trade shows to them. The organizers, confirming the assertion by some said that trade shows are boon-diggles. It was only one respondent (4.5%) who had his expectation beyond measure. To him, he was able to achieve his objectives of attending.

Reasons for future participation

Views gathered from respondents (table 5 above) shows that 32% representing seven firms said they would participate in future fairs to meet potential buyers because such avenues receive more visitors who can be potential customers for a firm's products and services. 23% also said they would use the forum to introduce new products into the market since they can receive instant feedback from the attendees whilst 18% said they would attend to promote their products because they would meet prospective buyers there. One respondent said he would attend to seek opinion about his products because such an occasion is a fertile ground for effective marketing research.

Impact of experience on firms activities

From the above table, it can be deduced that 36% of responding firms said their experience at the fair has improved their selling abilities. This stems from their encounter with all manner of visitors to the fair which has made them come to terms with realism of the market place whilst 27% also said, after knowing the extent of the competition, they know how to promote their products whilst 23% also were of the view that they would be able to price their products better, taking into consideration, the prices of their competitors.

Expected improvements

Majority (27%) were of the view that facilities at the fairgrounds should be standardized. Facilities mentioned included modern places of convenience with running water, more telephone booths, bigger booth spaces, uninterrupted electricity supply, old electrical fittings replaced and provision of parking lots for the exhibitors. 23% also called for a reduction in the fees charged.

18% called for fairness in the allocation of booths. This stemmed from the experience they had when they paid to be housed in the pavilions yet were located elsewhere. Other concerns raised were that the grounds should be prepared well in advance before the fair is held. This view was held by 14% of the respondents. It was common thing seeing some exhibitors putting their booths in shape days into the show. Others called for more foreign participation (14%).

Profile of respondents

The above table shows the calibre of personnel who responded to the interview. These were men and women who were knowledgeable, adept in their fields and relatively educated. It therefore added a dimension to the research to make it credible, reflecting on the objectivity of their responses. Fifty percent of them were sales or marketing officers of their firms whilst 23% are owners of the holdings (managing directors). It presupposes that firms need to take their best personnel to represent them at the show because they would be meeting people of all shades who must be received with the best of the firm.

Conclusion

It was deduced from the study that trade fairs records the highest number of participants as well as visitors during the event. In all, about six hundred local firms and fifty-five foreign firms participated in a typical trade shows in Ghana. Thousands of visitors also thronged the place as holiday makers.

It was on record that this trade show was a vast improvement over previous ones in terms of organisation, promotion, provision of facilities and security, among others. To the organizers, it was a big success of judging from the number of visitors that took part as well as the volume of sales made, running into billions of cedis. Participating firms also were able to achieve their collective objectives of taking part in this show.

Participants were of the view that if measures are taken to effectively address the problems outlined, then the future holds great for Ghana in being the gateway to the West African market. This means the government's goal of golden age for business would be realized.

Recommendations

In today's highly competitive business environment, corporate bodies all over the world are adopting effective marketing strategies to stay ahead of competition as well as post favourable returns. As a result, most firms both in Ghana and the rest of the world have adopted trade show as one of their integrated marketing communication tools. To ensure the effectiveness of trade shows, the following has been suggested.

To participating firms

For exhibitors to enjoy the full benefits of their participation, it is recommended that:

- Objective setting: Participating firms must set specific objectives which are achievable. Unrealistic objectives must be avoided. In doing so, care must be taken to have a criterion for evaluating the effectiveness of their participation.
- Preparation for the fair: Adequate preparation, psychologically, physically, as well as socially must be made towards participation. Psychologically, they must fine-tune their minds of participating to achieve something-be success-minded. Physically, they must recruit the best personnel available rather than relying on family members and close associates who mostly are inexperienced. These personnel should be adequately trained in techniques involved in trade shows, knowledgeable in the products being offered for sale in order to unravel any puzzle that visitors may pose. They should be proficient in specific languages, courteous, cultured and gentle, among others. Socially, must attend seminars and briefings in order to know recent developments in the field.
- Promotion: This is one area exhibitors neglect doing. They rather rely on those offered by the organizers which are not enough. It is therefore recommended that exhibitors do their own promotion before, during and after the show to create the necessary awareness notwithstanding the cost involved.
- Long term effect: Studies have shown that trade shows have long term effects, i.e. the benefits could be enjoyed in the long run. Therefore, when they do not enjoy benefits in the short term, they should not lose hope but do their homework well so that they would succeed in the long run.

To the organizers (GTFC)

As the organizers of such an important event, it behooves on them to do effective long term planning in order to uplift its image to international standards. The recommendations include:

- Social amenities: It is recommended that enough places of convenience should be provided to meet the growing demand for it. Adequate arrangements should be made with the Ghana Water Company so that during fair periods, there would be

uninterrupted flow of water. In addition, overhead containers should be installed to hold water for that purpose.

- There should also be improvements in tele-communication system, firefighting equipment and landscaping. Utility installations that were fitted over thirty years ago should be replaced to avoid the occurrence of fire in subsequent fairs.
- Rehabilitation and building of more pavilions: To allay the fear of roofs collapsing, the two pavilions should be rehabilitated immediately. Additional pavilions fitted with modern facilities should also be built to enhance their tangibility spectrum.
- Allocation of booths: Fairness and equity should be the guiding principle in the allocation of booths during fairs.
- Creation of product category enclaves: Category villages instead of mixing exhibitors with different products together. It would be more appropriate to create product category villages so that at one particular location, one can view all the products of same line exhibited. For instance, a village for handicrafts, clothing/fashion, drugs etc. when this implemented, it would enhance beauty and efficiency.
- Going on the internet with informative programmes: The current information on the internet on the activities of GTFC is scanty and poor. To this end, it is recommended that investment be made in it, a specialist be employed solely to draw and feed programmes on the internet, updating it whenever necessary. This would enhance foreign participation since they would be seeking for such information on the internet.
- Others: Other recommendations include organizing seminars, symposiums and workshops on the need for firms to participate in exhibitions to industry and groups, to create the awareness; providing security at the fairgrounds especially during exhibition periods, providing insurance cover for exhibitors and effectively integrating various communication strategies to promote the fair well ahead of time.

To the Government

- As the sole owner of the company, it is recommended that the private sector is invited to participate in the development of the area since government subvention alone cannot meet the financial requirements.
- Also the government should effectively use the foreign missions to sell impending exhibitions abroad. With the new concept of economic diplomacy and the appointment of marketing officers in diplomatic missions abroad, it is hoped things would turn around favorably.
- Again there should be effective collaboration between the Ghana government through GTFC and the foreign missions in the country so that information could be shared on trade shows. Through this, they would communicate with their home country on impending exhibitions.
- Lastly, it is recommended that there should be an active involvement of the following Ministries - Trade and Industry, Private Sector Development, Foreign Affairs, Agriculture and Tourism in the activities of GTFC to enhance their performance. When these recommendations are co-ordinate and implemented then would the government objectives of Golden age of business, transforming Ghana into major venue for international tourism, promoting Ghana as trade investment gateway to West Africa and a one-stop shop for trade and investment in Ghana would be realistic, rather than a myth.

Recommendations for further research

It is therefore recommend that further research be conducted into the long term sustainability of the benefits to participating firms. When this is meticulously done, it would inspire other firms to take decisions in participating in future fairs and also be glad to participate.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the staff and management of the Trade Fair Centre and all exhibitors who allowed us into their closet. We say God richly Bless You all.

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