

Trunk Shows: Everyone Wins and Profits

One of the best ways to differentiate your business from the competition is to sponsor exclusive events for your customers. One such event is the Trunk Show. No matter what your merchandise category, be it hard or soft lines, you can successfully execute a plan which will drive store traffic and sales, as well as excite your customers, staff, and vendors.

Before starting out to plan your event, you must first decide which vendor(s) you want to approach with your idea. Who will be willing to make a personal appearance, possibly fill your store with additional stock on consignment, participate in promotion of the show, and provide additional training for your sales staff? Having sponsored successful trunk shows when I was in the maternity business, I am happy to share some of my tips with you.

Timing: Plan a trunk show just before or early into a selling season. Sometimes, trunk shows consist of samples from which the customer places a special order. In this case, delivery of the actual merchandise might be immediate or several weeks/months down the road. Keep seasonality in mind if you are doing a trunk show this way-the customer may not wish to wait for their purchase. Make sure that the vendor will be able to beef up your inventory for the event-you want your store to be packed with product. When I did trunk shows, I negotiated with the vendor to ship in additional stock on a consignment basis, and allow the merchandise to stay on the selling floor for up to 10 days after the event. I returned what excess inventory that didn't sell, and paid for what did. This was a very profitable way for my store to have additional inventory without the financial liability.

Promotion: I did several things to promote the trunk show-none of which was especially costly to execute. Please note that advertising co-op money from the vendor is often available to defray some of the promotional costs, but you have to ask! First of all, I asked the vendor to supply me with camera-ready artwork. I used the photo(s) to create a postcard. Every customer on the mailing list was sent a card, often with a personal hand written note from the staff. We used any extra cards as "bag stuffers." I also used the same artwork to have full sheet (22"x28") posters made to display throughout the mall, as well as outside the door of my store. A small ad (2 col.x 5") was often placed in the local paper, as well. The cards and posters were circulated about 10 days prior to the show. The mall where my store was located had a public relations agency that sent out press releases to the media. (My mall dues helped pay for this service). On several occasions, we were invited to make television appearances to plug the show. The weekend of the trunk show, we had customer models strolling the mall with hand signs telling shoppers about the event. The models were given store gift certificates for their services. An additional incentive for customers was a drawing every day for an outfit supplied by the vendor.

Store Layout: During the trunk show, it is imperative that all store display windows have the vendor's merchandise and signage. Of course, your floor layout should reflect the event as well. If possible, each display rack should have a sign. (i.e. "from the collection of (vendor's name).") These small signs should not be hand written-either do them yourself on the computer, or else use Kinko's.

Refreshments: ALWAYS have food! We often had bottles of spring water or juice along with healthy snacks. (After all, this was a store for pregnant women!) During one such event, we did opt for sugar cookies emblazoned with the vendor's logo in icing-everyone loved them, even though they broke the "healthy" rule.

Vendor Involvement: Most of the time, the vendor flew in for the show, although if there is a local sales representative, the company might choose to use that person. In any case, the vendor representative should be treated with respect and kindness. The vendor usually paid for the transportation and lodging, but I would pick up the tab for any lunches or dinners. On the day(s) of the show, I also brought in lunch for the sales staff. The vendor had a meeting with the staff each morning, and also made sure that employees coming into work a later shift received personal briefings. The employees loved interacting with the vendors-it was a great morale booster. Customers don't often have the opportunity to speak directly with vendors, so this was a special time for them, as well.

At the end of a successful event, everyone involved becomes a winner: the customer is treated to something fun and exciting; the vendor gains firsthand knowledge of the local customer and receives a major boost in exposure; the sales staff learns more about the product and is able to do a better job selling; and you, the store owner, reaps not only sales increases, but also the knowledge that you have differentiated your store from the competition.

About the author: Nancy Proman's retail career spans over 30 years of department and specialty store soft-lines experience. As a dress and sportswear buyer for Dayton's Department Stores (now Marshall Field's), Nancy regularly traveled to New York and also worked on import product development programs in Asia. She left the corporate life in 1980 and opened her own small chain of maternity clothing stores. Nancy found success as an independent retailer. She was profitable and loved what she did. Nancy can help you do the same.

Nancy is now a partner of Dynamic Experiences Group LLC, a Lexington, MA based retail consulting firm dedicated to helping retailers create unique customer experiences that results in higher sales and profits. Nancy brings a wealth of practical knowledge for the small retailer including buying, merchandising, and advertising. More important, she's a good coach and a good mentor. Learn more at www.dynamicexperiencesgroup.com or call 866-535-6331.