People, Partnerships, and Communities

The purpose of the People, Partnerships, and Communities series is to assist The Conservation Partnership to build capacity by transferring information about social science related topics.

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service

National Science & Technology Consortium

Social Sciences Institute

Locations:

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Exhibiting

A Tool to Achieve Technology Transfer

What are the benefits of exhibiting?

A compelling exhibit can be an indispensable outreach or marketing tool for your watershed group or conservation district. The main goal of an exhibit is to promote awareness of the agency, council, or district and/or your products and services. With a powerful exhibit, effective booth workers, and products and services appropriate for the target audience, you can create or strengthen a network of customers and partners, solidify your internal team, and develop a positive agency or staff self-image, while raising community awareness.

Who can use this information?

This information can be used by anyone in The Conservation Partnership who wants to reach current or new customers at county fairs, field days, annual RC&D meetings, state conservation partnership meetings, and at other local, state, and national meetings and conferences.

Issue 31

What are my communication goals?

The following factors need to be considered before you design an exhibit at will be an effective tool to reach new and old customers:

- the target audience you want to reach
- the goals and objectives you want to accomplish
- the key messages you want to communicate, such as promotion of a particular program(s) or service(s) or the mission and vision of the agency or organization
- the budget for developing an exhibit

Developing a design

Once you have decided on your message and have determined your budget, you are ready to develop your design. Your Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) State or Regional Public Affairs Specialist can be a valuable resource when creating the exhibit. “This Way to Successful Exhibits and Events” is a helpful publication available from the National Association of Conservation Districts (1-800-825-5547).

You usually have only seconds to capture participant or audience attention. With this in mind, the exhibit should be visually stimulating and attention getting. It should draw in the audience for further marketing of your products and services.

Some design tips:

- Use colorful displays and signage, but do not allow the exhibit itself to overshadow products or services.
- Have one or more tables for information and promotional tools. A rotating literature rack(s) is also effective.
- Balance booth space and exhibit size relative to the amount of products or services that you are promoting.
- Use enhancements as appropriate for appeal (example, lighting).
- Develop an exhibit that can visually reach culturally diverse audiences.
- All elements should support the main idea(s) you want to convey. “A picture is worth a thousand words.”
- For use of USDA NRCS logos and placement of the agency/department name, follow the guidelines available at http://www.nrcs.usda.gov, select “NRCS Employees,” select “NRCS Logo and Usage.”

Promotional tools

You may want to use promotional tools before and during your exhibit. They provide “free advertising” and give your customer a lasting impression of your agency/organization. Promotional tools can raise product familiarity by as much as 70 percent. (Hughes, 1996).

The most frequently used:

“Pre-show” mailings

A “pre-show” letter or postcard could be mailed to key participants or leaders inviting them to visit your exhibit. For example, an RC&D might send a postcard to key leaders in the council area inviting them to visit the exhibit to see a new product or project demonstration. In addition, local leaders could be provided an opportunity to meet informally with council leaders and staff.

Interactive sites

Set up a computer(s) to allow participants to see your Web site(s) or computer software.

Visual, multimedia presentations

A “visual” can capture the attention of participants passing by the exhibit. A short videotape, a PowerPoint presentation, a continuous slide show, or a live demonstration about your product or service can promote the interest of attendees.

Scott Peterson, Director, National Plants Data Center explaining the function of the PLANTS Database at the National Mitigation Banking Conference.

Give-aways

Give-aways are an effective way to gain “free publicity.” Participants can be a “walking advertisement” if they carry a bag with your name on it to hold materials from your exhibit. A gift will draw people into your booth. Examples of common give-aways are pens, caps, tote bags, key chains, pencils, candy, water bottles, and mugs. Cost can vary from less than a dollar to as much as 15 dollars per item. (*See bookmark below.*)

A promotional bookmark

Exhibit Staff

A significant appeal of your exhibit will be the people who staff it. Marketing goals, key messages, staff professionalism, and product knowledge are some of the factors to consider when selecting or training employees or volunteers. Some staffing "dos and don'ts" relating to successful exhibiting include:

Do

• Training

This is an important aspect of staffing. Everyone who will staff the exhibit should have a detailed understanding of all aspects of the exhibit. For example, a resource conservationist or council member helping to staff an RC&D exhibit should be familiar with the RC&D Council's products and services.

Exhibit staff should know:

1. How to articulate the agency or group's mission
2. The products or services offered
3. How to provide exceptional customer service and communicate effectively with the participants visiting the exhibit
4. Where everything is located in your exhibit booth area and how to set up and breakdown the exhibit.

• Know the goals and objectives of the exhibit

Employees staffing the exhibit should know what you plan to achieve with the exhibit. For example, they need to know if your goal is to market a new product or service, educate participants about an aspect of the Farm Bill or a Farm Bill program, or to create a new customer base. For the purpose of evaluation after the exhibit, quantify the goals, such as number of contacts or product distributed. *(See "Follow-up after the meeting/conference" in this fact sheet.)*

• Keep exhibit staff and product information up-to-date

Keep exhibit staff updated and aware of any changes. Attendees expect exhibit staff to be the experts in the discipline areas of materials provided at the booth.

• Teach the key messages

The key messages are those concepts you most want to convey to the visitors at your exhibit booth. Employees should know the mission and vision for the agency/organization so that they can communicate more effectively regarding products and services. For example, if a field office displays an exhibit at the county fair about the use of buffers in a watershed, the exhibit staff should be able to talk about buffer program goals as well as answer questions about buffers.

• Leave literature and handouts in plain view

It is not necessary to make your expensive literature readily available to everyone. Create an inexpensive handout if you want every visitor to have your information. Provide other literature to prospects as appropriate, including sending literature as part of a follow-up contact.

• Supply adequate staff

When staffing the exhibit, think about the number of participants who may be attending the meeting, conference, or other event. If necessary, call the fair, trade show, or conference you will be attending and ask about the number of attendees expected. Provide adequate staffing so visitors at your exhibit do not have to wait in line to talk with you or other staff.

• Allow breaks and rotate staff

Rotate people so they do not become overly tired. A two-hour block of time for each staff member is ideal.

Wendall Oakes, center, provided TechReg training for NRCS California representatives prior to staffing the NRCS exhibit at the recent National Mitigation Banking Conference.

Don't

• Allow sitting

Sitting at the exhibit should be minimal because it gives a negative impression. Exhibit staff should be standing when greeting and introducing themselves to customers and potential customers. If a staff person becomes tired, rotation and breaks serve as refreshers.

• Allow unprofessional appearance

When selecting people to staff the exhibit, there should be an emphasis on appearance. Well-groomed and presentable appearances will enhance the image of your agency/organization.

• Allow phones

The exhibit should not have a phone for exhibit staff unless there is a need for it to demonstrate a product or service. A phone can cause distractions and negative attention.

• Allow new or inexperienced staff or volunteers to wait on participants

If you have a new employee or volunteer at the exhibit, their primary task should be to keep everything running smoothly behind the scenes. At the same time, they should observe and learn from the experienced staff.

Communicating with different cultures

Do not assume that another person thinks, perceives, reasons, and judges the way that you do. By using your personal cultural norms, you may fail to communicate effectively with people from other cultures. Show respect for the individuals and their cultures when people from different cultures visit your exhibit. Tolerate ambiguity and do not show discomfort in certain situations that may be normal for them. Relate to the visitors and do not be judgmental. Ask for clarification when you do not understand, display empathy, and be patient and willing to listen, learn, and compromise. Lastly, technology transfer is not easy. Sometimes our services may not be wanted and NRCS staff members that are too persistent about follow-up could be perceived as intruders and resented.

June Hogg, Southeast Regional Volunteer Coordinator, provides potential volunteers information at the Earth Team exhibit.

The NRCS Wildlife Habitat Management Institute created a mini theater as part of a wildlife habitat display intended to promote cooperative NRCS wildlife habitat efforts. The exhibit included a vertical banner explaining the show, a continuously playing high definition show with surround sound, and a color booklet (on accordion display rack) that details wildlife habitat accomplishments in the United States. The canopy darkens the "theater" and supports speakers for the show, which is available on DVD.

Follow-up after the meeting/conference

When the exhibition is over, there are essential tasks to complete.

• Pack **the exhibit and remaining materials** appropriately for **return** so they arrive without damage. Keep copies of any shipping receipts so that containers can be traced if necessary.

• Promptly **send customers information** about a product or service they requested. The longer you wait to provide the information, the smaller the chance the person will use that product or service. By promptly responding to customer requests, you show interest in your constituents.

• Recognize and appropriately **reward employees and volunteers** who staffed the exhibit. Provide constructive ideas as necessary to modify future performances.

• **Evaluate what you accomplished**. Review the goals and objectives you set before the exhibit and compare them to the actual results. Evaluation factors might include: the number of contacts made by staff; how many of each of the materials were distributed; feed back provided by others; and future business that has been generated. An example of future business would be an invitation to develop a conservation plan for a farmer, make a presentation, or participate in another meeting.

• Look ahead to **future opportunities to exhibit.** Maintain a customer meeting calendar that includes meeting/event dates for the entire year. Start thinking about what to do to improve future exhibits. Review past budgets and try to set realistic future budgets.

Additional Tips

• **Promote your exhibit on your Web site.**

•**Take a picture of your exhibit.** This will facilitate set up at your next exhibit. In addition, you can see your customers' view of your exhibit. If other staff might be borrowing the exhibit and have not seen it, consider keeping an extra copy or two of the photo to share.

•**Plan ahead for your exhibit.** If possible, allow six months to a year for pre-exhibit planning. This time allows for design and development of an exhibit and products for distribution. Also, pre-exhibit planning will help to obtain the best possible location in the exhibit hall. Usually, the earlier you commit the better the exhibit space you will obtain.

•**Provide sign-up sheets.** Sign-up sheets at your exhibit will allow you to track contacts made and will provide a base customer list for future reference. Make sure you detail the information you want, such as name, address, phone, and any special data for statistics or that will support your follow-up. Understand that some people may not want to provide this information.

•**Keep the exhibit organized and up-to-date.** Avoid cluttering your exhibit with materials so that customers can focus better on your key message. Distribute new products along with information about upcoming products and services.

•**Coordinate the exhibit with your audience.** The atmosphere of your exhibit should reflect the audience that will be present. For example, at some events a stand-alone exhibit may be more appropriate than a tabletop.

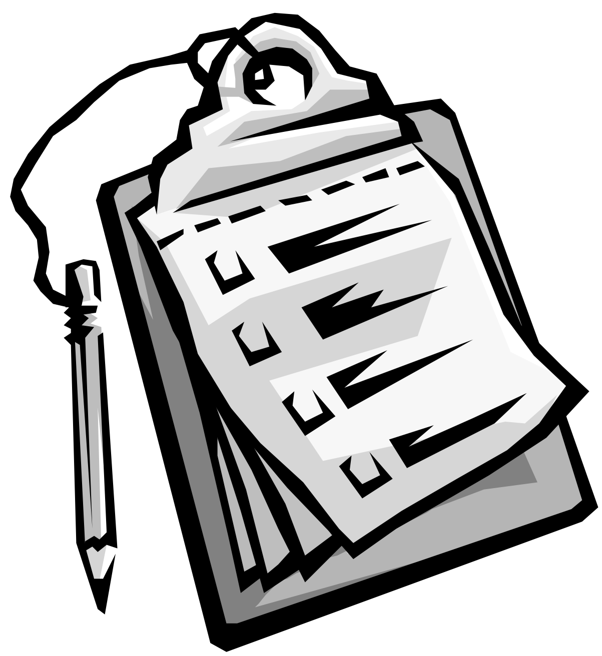
•**Coordinate the materials with your audience.** Your exhibit, products, and services should be of interest to the target audience who will visit your booth. Consider the meeting's theme when selecting products for distribution or demonstration.

•**Engage the visitors to your exhibit**. "You don't get a second chance to make a first impression." Be friendly and non-threatening so that visitors are comfortable and want to spend time with you/other staff. Ask open-ended questions, such as "How familiar are you with our watershed organization?"

•**Target the leaders.** You want the leadership of the agency, the host organization, and other leaders in attendance to become familiar with your products and services. Leaders in the host organizations usually wear ribbons with their nametags, which provide you with a way to identify them.

•**Bring your business cards!** Make sure your contact information is current and printed correctly, i.e. spelling, format, etc.

•**Be sensitive to a participant with a disability.** Do not avoid or stare at a person with a disability. Respect a wheelchair or other aids as extensions of personal space. Speak directly with the participant before touching or speaking to the guide dog or interacting with personal aides.



Where do I find more information?

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