

# Your Roadmap to B2B Trade Show Success



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Trade shows are one of the most common ways business-to-business (B2B) companies showcase their products and services to potential customers and industry leaders. The shows are often sponsored by trade associations that see the events as a way to improve the overall industry, not just by connecting consumers with products and businesses with clients, but by facilitating an exchange of ideas among people with common interests and expertise.

Their ability to reach a large, targeted customer group in a relatively short period of time explains why B2B marketers invest nearly 40% of their marketing budget in exhibitions, more than any other marketing channel, according to a study from the Center for Exhibition Industry Research entitled “*The Spend Decision: Analyzing How Exhibits Fit into The Overall Marketing Budget.*”

Trade shows not only provide your business with a platform to model your product or service, but also allow you to create an important first impression in the minds of your consumers—the “*2016 Changing Environment of Exhibitions*” report conducted by the Center for Exhibition Industry Research found that 90% of trade show exhibitors surveyed said exhibitions “build or expand brand awareness”; 85% also said they received new sales leads.

While there is no doubt that exhibiting at a trade show has its benefits, to get the most out of one, you have to set measurable objectives, pick the right trade show, and go through extensive planning and strategizing, among other activities.





## Risks and Rewards of Trade Shows

Bolstering awareness of your brand and your products, learning more about the industry you are competing in and generating leads for strategic alliances and potential customers are among the many benefits of attending a trade show. The downside, of course, is that those rewards are accompanied by costs and risks. For starters, attending a trade show can cost you three—five days of work. In addition, your participation could backfire if your marketing effort is disorganized, lackluster and unprofessional.

Decisions to attend a trade show must always be made with as much knowledge about the cost and benefits as possible. Does the cost outweigh the potential benefits of building relationships with industry professionals, discovering new prospects and earning media mentions? Would that money be better spent on other lead generation such as search engine marketing, email campaigns, webinars, etc.?

If your overall marketing budget is limited such that attending a trade show would prevent you from pursuing a robust inbound and outbound marketing strategy then it might not make sense to invest a large chunk of your annual budget on one event. On the other hand, if your average price per unit sale is high (in the thousands of dollars range or more) and you know that buyers will be attending a trade show then it makes much more sense to take the risk.


The question of whether or not to attend a trade show is indeed of critical importance to an organization. But if the 6th annual “B2B Content Marketing: 2016 Benchmarks, Budgets and Trends--North America” of the Content Marketing Institute is any indicator, 75% of over 1,500 B2B marketing professionals surveyed said that in-person events are the most effective lead generation tactic for their organizations for the past six years.



## Picking the Right Trade Show


### Go local

Trade shows range from tabletop expos to major international events and vary in cost and audience turn out. Tabletop expos, which are usually geared towards a local market, offer the cheapest opportunity for you to exhibit your products. While you won't be able to get a targeted audience at these expos, you will gain additional exposure to members of the organization sponsoring the event.



Regional shows are a step up from tabletop expos but are still smaller and more budget-conscious versions of national trade shows. The audience at these events will be broader than that at tabletop expos, but most of the attendees will still be coming from within driving distance of the event. Many regional shows offer seminars but relatively few will include networking events, so they're generally not ideal opportunities to expand your network.

### Go big or go home




If you are searching for a multitude of activities and business-to-business opportunities, a national trade show is likely the best choice for you. Organizations from across the country flock to national trade expos in hopes of showcasing their products as well as learning from the educational seminars, networking events, presentations of industry awards, and keynote speakers by industry leaders.

Of course, if you're seeking to expand your business globally, international trade shows are a valuable means to build relationships with players from around the world that can help you grow outside of the U.S.

### Don't forget virtual options

Finally, just as all other parts of business are increasingly digitizing, many trade shows are going online as well. The convenience and cost-savings of virtual trade shows are hard to dispute, but they lack the personal interaction that forms the basis of contact in most traditional trade shows, leading most customers and businesses to prefer the traditional route.



Depending on your goals, seeking out the biggest trade show may not always be your best bet, largely because it will usually end up being the most costly option. Thus, if you're looking to get started on choosing the right trade show for you, perhaps this [trade show list](#) will help to get you going. These spaces have to be booked in advance, so make sure you don't wait for too long to get started!



## Planning for your trade show exhibition

### Create a budget

Before you start making purchases for your booth or booking flights and lodging for the show, be sure to create a budget for your exhibition. You will need to decide whether you want to spend more to create a crowd-stopping booth or prefer instead to get your message across in a more simple, yet effective manner. Here are just some of the spending categories you will have to account for when planning your trade show budget:

- Exhibit rental fee
- Booth design and build out
- Staffing (internal and outsourced)
- Booth & product shipping to / from trade show
- Product prototype demo
- Staff travel, lodging, food & drinks
- Client entertainment spending
- Marketing assets (printed marketing collateral, giveaways like pens or stress balls, candy or bottles of water, etc.)

Generally, your exhibit space (rent, build-out, logistics) will take up about 25% to 35% of your event budget, while your staffing, collateral and brand asset expenditures make up most of the rest. When setting your budget, always build in a margin of error on the high-side as you will usually have to make changes and spend more to arrive at a finished product.

### Project manager

First, you should always appoint a project manager to guide the process and be held accountable for moving the project forward toward a successful completion. The larger your company, the more likely you will need a committee representing various departments: marketing, product group, communications, etc. It is vital that a project manager or committee gain buy-in from the various departments responsible for contributing to the trade show on everything from the big picture strategy to the budget. Weekly status meetings and email updates will serve to ensure your organization stays on track with the timeline and budget.





## Creative Partners

While you may be tempted to cut costs by using internal resources for your trade show, you may be better served by bringing on outside experts to help you with strategizing, planning and executing your trade show. There are plenty of boutique agencies who can add a flexible resource to your team and not cost an arm and a leg. On the other hand, if your marketing team is maxed out and not familiar with how to plan and manage a top-notch trade show booth, then it makes more sense to engage an agency with enough experience and staffing to help you pull off a successful event. More often than not your creative partner will charge you based on the project, although a monthly retainer over a three to six month period is often seen as a way to smooth out the investment.

Bottom-line: outsourcing activities like booth design, collateral messaging and design, booth staffing and media outreach could actually end up saving you a lot of time and money if you are not currently equipped for such an undertaking. Moreover, by getting an experienced third party to help out, you inherit their years of experience and increase your chances of achieving your goals at the trade show.

## Staffing Requirements

As for the rest of your team, it is essential that they are well-versed on the product features and benefits as well as the company's mission/vision before they even set foot in the event space. A poorly trained representative who struggles to communicate the value proposition of a brand new product can do untold damage to a company's reputation if a booth visitor decides to share the gaffe on social media or a journalist writes an article filled with improper facts.

Be sure to pick employees who are outgoing and capable of exuding your positive organizational culture. It will leave a lasting impression of your business in the minds of all the visitors that they interact with. They have to be willing to walk around the event space and converse with visitors they come across and maintain the highest level of professionalism 24/7. They should also exercise good judgement when it comes to enjoying some adult beverages during after-hours networking events. The last thing a company wants is an inebriated employee involved with an important customer opportunity.

Lastly, you will also need executives who can act as good spokespersons to keep the message on track during the trade show itself. More on that under Media Strategy below.

## Marketing Collateral

Studies suggest you only have about 6.5 seconds to catch the attention of visitors and make your brand matter (FCB). Also, with the average time that each visitor spends at each booth averaging about 5-15 minutes, it is essential to not only quickly grab the attention of your booth visitors but also to keep them engaged (CEIR). To help, consider setting up video displays, interactive screens, iPad kiosks, or even raffle draws. If you want to give out marketing collateral, make sure that they stand out from those of your competitors through the use of easy-to-fold formats, bright colors and eye-catching visuals. While you may be itching to use a myriad of collateral types, you should ensure that all of them help communicate an overarching narrative. If sustainability is a core brand value then any collateral you bring had better be printed on recycled paper. In other words, marketing collateral should work with, not against, the rest of the booth's branding and messaging and be consistent with your company's core brand values.

## Less is More

You may be tempted to showcase all of the products that your company has to offer, but keep in mind that a trade show is not meant to be a historical display of all of your products and offerings. Instead, limit yourself to three key products/services that you want your booth visitors to remember. If you feel the need to talk about more than just these few products, you could set up a digital display where booth visitors can find out more. Also, your staff at the booth can always share their insights on the other products or services that your company has to offer with interested visitors.

## Booth Signage

Don't scrimp when it comes to signage. Invest in high-quality appealing signage that your visitors wouldn't mind taking a picture of. As mentioned earlier, you could even consider hiring a reputable booth design company to help your booth stand out from the crowd. With numerous competing companies vying for the attention of a finite number of customers, cheap signage rarely translates into higher foot traffic. Moreover, by investing in higher-quality materials, you can keep the signage and reuse it at subsequent events. It takes a sense of willingness to step out of the box and try something different; when done well, these calculated risks result in high returns.

*"Most trade shows have an agenda along with workshops and sessions scheduled weeks or months in advance. It's wise to review that schedule well ahead of your trip. That way you can buy your session tickets or RSVP (if needed) and plan your day around the events that appeal to you most."*

— ROBERT GILBREATH,  
VP OF MARKETING,  
SHIPSTATION.COM



### *Spying on the 'enemy'*

While sending in an undercover agent to find out if your competition is going for a video booth or plush red carpet at the upcoming tradeshow is never warranted, there is no harm in conducting some background research into how they've set up their booths at previous events. Don't try to copy their presentation. Rather, you should try to identify strengths in their strategy and work to harness those strengths in a way that is unique to your brand and products.

### **Pre-Show Marketing Outreach**


While this could be included in the planning section above it really deserves a section of its own. You have two ways to alert your customers and prospects about your attendance at a trade show: pre-show marketing and media outreach (addressed below). Not doing one or both will diminish the impact you can potentially have at a trade show.



### *If you build it they may not come (unless you tell them)*

Unlike the famous quote from the movie *Field of Dreams*, you can't really be sure that if you show up at a trade show that you will get all the traffic and attention you dreamed of getting. That's why you must create and execute a specific pre-show marketing campaign. The purpose is to let your customers and prospects know you are going and where to find you as well as give them a taste of what to expect and build anticipation for more. This is best accomplished through a coordinated, multi-touch campaign involving emails, social media and blogging.

### *Emails still rule*



An email campaign should begin up to three months in advance in order to make your customers and prospects aware of your plans and drive their interest in attending the show as well. Try not to over-communicate too early, although as the trade show date approaches weekly updates can be used to send out reminders such as signing up for a Happy Hour you are hosting or reserving a one-on-one demo of a new product. Each email should contain information about your trade show booth location and any important events you have planned. You can capture RSVPs for various events by creating a dedicated landing page (more on that below) to help you plan for resource requirements.





### *Be social*

Plan on incorporating the trade show—your plans, key dates, product announcements—into your trade show social media strategy (much more on that below as well). Before the trade show, social media can be a valuable way to get your brand in front of more prospects and influencers. Anytime there is a post on Twitter, LinkedIn or even Facebook you can repost it to your network and use the official hashtags to generate even more views. Be a cheerleader for the trade show by sharing liberal amounts of information about it—key stats on attendance, importance to overall industry, past trade show facts, etc. You can sprinkle information about your own company's plans and product announcement teasers to gain some early interest among media and influencers whose job it is to cover the trade show. Take advantage of LinkedIn Pulse, which has become a great way to build a following and drive clicks to your website, by having senior executives post articles about the trade show—how to get the most out of a trade show visit, how to network with other professionals, what important trends to pay attention to, how regulations or legal hurdles are impacting the industry, etc.



### *Tell the story*

Blogging has always been a valuable way to drive traffic to your website and drive engagement with customers and prospects. You would be wise to complement your social media (especially LinkedIn Pulse) and email campaign with blogs that allow you to do a deeper dive on topics of interest to trade show attendees and influencers. Make your blogs engaging with graphics, pictures, large sub-headings, shorter paragraphs and current facts and statistics. While you are at it, don't forget to build in keywords that support your SEO strategy and help your post show up on search engine queries. Make your blog a weekly activity and do your best to build anticipation for what you plan to do at the trade show.

### *Lead Capture*

Your sales funnel strategy is something you should have buttoned down before you step foot on the trade show floor. How will you handle online inquiries during and after the trade show? Will you have a microsite supporting the announcement of a new product or just a special landing page (a single web page) for trade show attendees (and those not able to attend)? For those companies who do not have in-house graphic design resources there are a few landing page services available for a





fairly low monthly subscription including Unbounce and Instapage. If you use Wordpress or another flexible website development platform, then you can always set up your own landing page. The advantage of going with a subscription-based service is the ability to easily design and deploy a landing page with drag-and-drop graphics and text, contact forms and A/B testing. The services also allow you to download new leads so you can upload them into your CRM of choice, measure site statistics and rapidly test call-to-action messages.



The downside of using a hosted landing page service is that you sacrifice customization and SEO value. If you want to create a special look-and-feel that doesn't feel canned then using a service with its template approach is not the way to go. The most freedom and ability to design an engaging landing page or microsite (short of designing a website from the ground up) always comes with a customized design on a Wordpress or similar website development platform. What's more, traffic generated by your landing page will come to your website domain and will support your company's SEO strategy. It may not make sense to spend the time and money developing a native landing page or microsite but if your company continues investing in trade shows and values continuous improvement in message design and search engine rankings it will become a must-have asset.

## Media Strategy

Work on your media strategy should start as early as three months before the trade show to give you ample time to discover the key media, begin assembling your media list, craft your key messages, train your spokesperson(s) and plan out your go-to-media tactics. Below are more specific steps to take as you look to create a high-impact media strategy.

### Research

Remember the saying "The sincerest form of flattery is imitation?" Your first action when determining an effective media strategy is to research past media coverage of the trade show you are planning to attend. Figure out which companies that stood out the most and why. What was the nature of their news, what quotes did they provide to the media, how detailed were the articles about the news? While you cannot possibly match every success, especially ones from the largest player(s) in your particular industry, following the blueprint of their past media strategy will improve your chances of getting valuable coverage.



### Media list

If you are planning to make an important announcement at the trade show, get a hold of the media list from the trade show organizer and identify media outlets that would be most likely to cover your brand and products. If the trade show doesn't have one, then do your own research by looking up trade publications that cover your industry. When you do your research above and start reading up on past trade show media coverage you should take note of journalists and media outlets and add them to your list. Try to include influential bloggers and opinion leaders in your industry as well since they will be able to amplify your key message beyond the initial media coverage, especially in the form of live tweets during the trade show.

Social media should be part of your media list building. When possible, follow the Twitter accounts of key journalists and media outlets and start building relationships by posting their content to Twitter and LinkedIn, making sure to reference their names with a 'hat tip.' Do your best to keep abreast of their work and make a genuine effort at sharing their work. Whatever you do, avoid sharing overt pitches or tagging them in posts about your products at this stage. They will quickly see through your ruse and be less inclined to pay attention to you when you have actual hard news to share.

*"Media outreach at trade shows is often part of an effective branding strategy for 3D printing technology innovators like Materialise. Having respected media outlets inform customers, prospects and influencers about your latest innovations and accomplishments lends credibility to your company in a way that is not possible with paid media."*

— VIRGINIA GOBLE,  
VP OF MARKETING,

### Message design:

Early on in your media strategy you should begin developing the key messages that will perfectly describe the products you plan to show at the trade show. One way to organize your ideas is to lay out the key messages, supporting proof points and quotes in an easy-to-read 'message map'. If you are a publicly traded company you may need additional input from legal/shareholder relations to determine what you can say or not say with respect to financial disclosure regulations.

Message design should always be geared toward what the media will find most appealing. This means dialing down the fluff and hyperbole that would normally be included in product literature designed for customers and prospects. Be sure to obtain any supporting documentation to share with the media including product fact sheets, product pictures, videos, etc. Part of this process should also include the design and deployment of a landing page or product microsite to which you can drive traffic and lead conversion.



### *Spokesperson(s) training*

Make sure you designate one or two spokespersons whose responsibility it is to communicate with the media. A common mistake many companies make when going to trade shows is either not appointing a spokesperson or failing to provide proper spokesperson training. The person(s) who usually fills the role of spokesperson is a high-level executive or person of some authority when it comes to product management and marketing. Spokesperson training will ensure your representative can succinctly address your company's key news announcement in a way that echoes the agreed-upon message. The last thing you want is a conflicting message about your revolutionary new product to start circulating in the media. Spokesperson training will also get your representative comfortable handling tricky questions—one designed to find out about a past product lawsuit, for example. Finally, make sure the representative practices before the trade show with somebody from your communications team or an outside expert to make sure he or she is ready for the "limelight."

### *Press release*

For communications professionals, it's called a news release. For the rest of the world, it's a press release. What is it exactly? It's a 1-2 page written piece that follows a tried-and-true formula in terms of layout, key subject matter, company description and contact information. The news release should encapsulate your message concisely and incorporate quotes from your key executive(s) and, on occasion, 3rd party validators like customers or industry analysts. The release should be about the facts and exclude any descriptors that cannot be substantiated by some independent measure—think words like best, fastest, revolutionary, etc. It should include your contact information so that journalists can reach out for more information, as well as links to additional information where you can share product data sheets, pictures, videos, etc. Finally, if your news is truly a major step forward for the industry (or at least your company) then you might consider issuing a wire release through a 3rd party wire service, which simply means you will blast it out to newsrooms of interest in your target industry and/or geography.






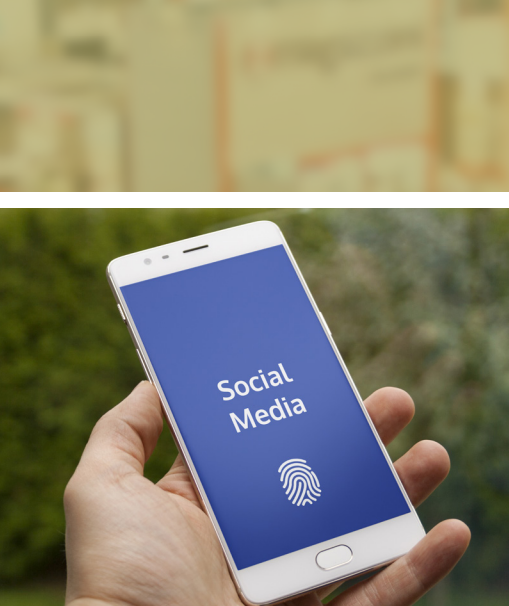
## Timing

In the world of media outreach timing is everything. If the news you share is not fresh then don't count on the media's excitement about covering it. A new product launch at a trade show should take place the first day of the trade show as it is the first day it is widely available to the public. Prior to announcing, however, you would be best served by reaching out to trade media outlets and schedule meetings with journalists and/or editors at your trade show booth. If you are making a major announcement, then you may consider sharing your news release 1-2 weeks before on what is commonly known as "embargo," a technical term that simply means you get the media's agreement to not publish the news until you make the official announcement at the trade show. Getting organized with the media beforehand will save you time and prevent you from missing out on interviews with important media during the hustle and bustle of the trade show.

## Reporting



An important activity related to your media strategy is tracking which media cover your key announcement. Executives and marketing decision-makers are keenly aware of the importance of key metrics like website traffic, conversions and lead acquisition. While media coverage is not classically known to be a marketing activity for a company it inevitably gets compared to other digital marketing activities. That means reporting which media covered your news and how much website traffic it drove is essential. You may need to use a "clipping" tool to automate the work; one such tool is Coveragebook, which is affordable and easy to use. You would also be wise to work with your company's webmaster or SEO expert to devise a way to discover the source of traffic to the product's landing page or microsite so you can measure the media's impact. Keep in mind, however, that this does not measure traffic visits from direct searches influenced by media coverage, but at least you will have some valuable metrics to develop benchmarks for future product announcements.



## Social Media Strategy

A social media strategy is essential when going into a trade show because it helps promote your booth as well as reach a broader audience. Rather than going off half-cocked, it's important that your social media tactics reflect your key messages, utilize the social platforms used by your customers and prospects, and are managed in a professional manner. Below is a brief overview of what steps should be taken to make sure you're creating an engaging social media strategy.

### *Plan plan plan*

Most trade show work happens during the planning process prior to the event, and planning the social media strategy is no exception. Determine which platforms you're going to use, what type of messaging you want and what kind of posts would best represent your booth. It's highly recommended you put all of this into a succinct content plan. To ensure consistency in your messaging style and posts, assign a single person to manage your social media accounts during the trade show. This person should be capable of posting live tweets, posts to the LinkedIn company page, Facebook status updates and/or pictures and videos on Instagram. You should also be planning for any important announcements or events at the show that you know will need a social media post to go along with it.

### *Platforms of choice*

When choosing which platforms to use for your booth, keep in mind the audience you want to reach as well as the message you want to get across. For the weeks leading up to the show consider using Twitter to promote the event using the event hashtag. This will help reach people who may not be following you and let them know how to find you at the trade show. It will also keep your customers and partners informed about your plans for the trade show and help build some anticipation. LinkedIn is also a great tool for B2B companies wishing to reach out to customers and vendors before the show who you may want to inform about your booth. Ways to share include posts to Groups, the Company page, posts from executives to their personal accounts and also sponsored posts.

During the show, Twitter is often the best platform to use when sharing live updates to capture the 'moment.' Twitter allows for pictures, videos and even allows for live-streaming through Periscope for when you want to show a product demo to any customers/prospects following the trade show remotely. Twitter is also a preferred medium for journalists so consider inviting journalists who have not made it by the booth to stop by for a demo of your new product.





Facebook is another platform some may choose to employ but for most B2B companies it provides much less value. Facebook is working to make it more friendly to B2B companies but by and large the social network is optimized for a B2C branding strategy.

Depending on the goals of your social media strategy you might choose to use multiple platforms, or you may stick to one. Either way be sure you are utilizing the tool fully and in the way that best reflects your brand. Take a primer course on the social platform a couple months ahead of time to fully master the latest and greatest tricks and tactics.

### *Coordination*

If you're planning on making a major product announcement during the show be sure to coordinate posts on social media to complement the media outreach. You can use a tool like Hootsuite or Buffer to schedule posts to multiple social networks in advance to match when the announcement goes live.

### *Posting frequency*

In terms of how often you should be posting, it depends on the platform you're using. Twitter is perfect if you want to post multiple times a day and capture events as they unfold—you can tweet upwards of 25-50 times a day during a trade show to engage with other attendees and keep those not in attendance “in the loop.” On other platforms like LinkedIn or Facebook it may only be appropriate to post once or twice a day throughout the duration of the trade show for special announcements or important updates. Instagram can also be used multiple times a day to post photos and videos, but not too frequently. While you want to keep your followers updated, as well as gain new ones, it's important not to overload your audience with content as you may end up alienating them.

### *Keep it going!*

Even once the trade show is over there's still work to be done. If you want to keep the interest you received about your booth and/or product launch alive it's important to follow-up or connect with the people you met.



### Follow-up

It is essential that you not only follow up with journalists and the media, but also with every person that you meet with during the course of the trade show. Every contact you make should be entered into your CRM and organized based on where the lead is in the sales funnel. Hot leads should be assigned to a sales representative for immediate follow-up with a personalized note, a relevant white paper, or any other type of content to further strengthen the relationship. Leads higher in the sales funnel should be added to your drip marketing campaign to receive periodic updates such as newsletters, white paper offers, webinar invitations and product announcements. To avoid angering any new contacts with your follow-up, be sure you ask them whether they want to be added to your contact database.

### Connect

LinkedIn is a great platform to connect with the people you interacted with at the show. By connecting with them, they will be more inclined to follow your business—rather than leaving them to do it on their own. While LinkedIn and Twitter remain appropriate platforms to use when reaching out to your prospects and booth visitors, it is better to shy away from Facebook as a general rule. Becoming Facebook friends crosses the line of a professional relationship and short of finding a best friend in somebody that you meet at the trade show, it's not worth the added effort and hassle.

### Share media coverage

It is definitely okay to be proud of your accomplishments at the trade show and even boast about them on your various marketing platforms. To do that, be sure to track all media placements and share them on your company website and/or blog. Include social media in the mix with tweets, pins, or maybe even an Instagram post! You want your audience to see what you accomplished at the trade show as well as strengthen your brand's image through 3rd party media coverage.

*“We are big believers in doing something special to engage visitors at our booth. One year we had people adopt a cocoa tree of their own, which has been in decline in nature for years. We then sent them email updates in the year that followed with pictures about the adopted tree that included different facts: where it is located, who tends it, etc. This campaign allowed us to enter into a meaningful conversation with our clients and prospects about our cocoa sustainability program.”*

— SOFIE DE LATHOUWER,  
GENERAL MANAGER, BARRY  
CALLEBAUT







## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Dave Manzer** is founder and president of Manzer Communications. Dave is passionate about finding the latest technologies to blend with tried-and-true marketing and communications strategies in order to help grow his clients' brand awareness and revenue.

Manzer Communications has experience helping B2B companies from a diverse range of industries prepare for and excel at trade shows. A case in point is a project we executed for **Materialise** (NASDAQ: MTLN) in 2016 where we supported the 3D printing software company in crafting and delivering its various messages around the RAPID conference.

We can help you creating a winning trade show strategy with any of these services:

- Message design
- Marketing collateral
- Vendor outsourcing and management
- Media strategy and on-site coordination
- Social media strategy and on-site support

Email us today at [info@manzercommunications.com](mailto:info@manzercommunications.com) to start planning your trade show strategy!



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