

TRADE SHOW STRATEGY GUIDE

How to Stop Wasting Money and Make the Most of a Trade Show



Introduction: Why Most CPG Brands Waste Their Trade Show Investment

Let's be honest — you're about to drop \$25K, \$75K, or even \$250K on three days of marketing at your next trade show. And half of the companies going don't know why they are even going.

"Because we did last year" or "because we have to" isn't a good reason. Where else would you spend that kind of money without a target audience, a communication objective, and a goal?

This guide provides practical strategies that work. I've seen countless brands blow their budgets on flashy booths that generate zero sales, while others with modest setups walk away with game-changing retail partnerships.

The difference? Knowing exactly what you're doing and why you're doing it.

1. Know Why You Are Going

Before booking that booth, start with the most critical question: Does this trade show align with your business goals?

Trade shows are versatile tools that can serve multiple business objectives, but they're expensive tools that demand strategic justification. That investment needs to connect directly to your broader business strategy, not just be another marketing expense.

First, evaluate alignment with your current business objectives:

- Are you actively seeking new retail partnerships?
- Do you need to expand distribution in specific regions?
- Are you fundraising and looking to connect with potential investors?
- Are you trying to raise or maintain your reputation as a leader in the natural industry?

If the show doesn't clearly advance at least one of your current strategic priorities, seriously reconsider your participation. There's nothing wrong with sitting out a show cycle if it doesn't align with where your business needs to focus.

If you do see alignment, then drill deeper. The more specific your objective, the more effective your strategy will be. "To land Whole Foods" creates a much clearer action plan than "to get more stores." "To find a West Coast distributor" drives different decisions than "to expand our broker network."

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Know Your Target & What They Need

Who is your target audience? Put yourself in their shoes.

- Why are they coming to the show? What are they looking to discover?
- How much time will they realistically spend at your booth?
- What will they need to remember about you after seeing hundreds of brands?
- What three essential things must they know/feel about your brand?

Make it easier for them to get what they need and have fun while doing it. Think about how they are likely to engage, for how long, with whom, and what will entice them to stay longer or remember you after the show.

Build a plan that includes pre, during, and post-show communications. It doesn't matter if it's only personal outreach or an omni-channel paid media plan — answer your target's questions, solve their needs, and bring it to life in a way that truly reflects you and your brand.

2. What Matters, Where to Focus Your Time

Decisions, Decisions, Decisions. Rent or buy, splurge or save, less or more?

Here's my take on what REALLY matters when it comes to trade show success:

Your Package:

- Make it accessible, make it inviting, and encourage people to get up close and check it out
- Put your display out front and always have extras
- Take the time to select perfect packages from production or spend the money for multiple beautiful comp packages. Nothing is worse than explaining what it SHOULD look like to a buyer or investor

Your Product:

- You want people to experience your food, not sample it. If you wouldn't serve it at a party at your home, don't serve it at a trade show
- Go for quality over quantity. Serve your product as it is meant to be enjoyed with accompaniments that accent, not overpower it
- Choose serving utensils that support your brand, are sustainable and premium

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Your Story:

- To stand out, share your why and how, not just what you make
- Spend the money getting the big stuff right before the smaller discovery elements and nice to-dos. Can your brand be identified from 20+ feet away in the midst of a hungry crowd? All the buzz you create elsewhere will be lost if they can't find you
- Communicate your story. Keep it simple; keep it consistent. Connect what the booth says, to what your sales materials say, to what your team says

3. Sell Sheets That Won't End Up in The Trash

Don't take yourself too seriously, you are only making trash. But if done well, it can be informative, persuasive, and memorable trash. My tips for sales materials aka trash that might just make it back to the buyer's desk:

Consider your target audience:

- Expertise: What do they already know? What new information will help them understand your brand's value?
- Needs & Decision Criteria: What problem are they trying to solve, or what's missing in their current product lineup? What brought them to the show?

Keep it focused:

- For retailers: Highlight hard metrics like profit margin, sales velocity, and what buyer pain points you solve
- For consumers: Connect to both emotional drivers (how your product makes them feel) and functional benefits (what problem it solves)
- Connect your brand's why with the retailer's why through compelling storytelling that shows shared values and aligned business goals
- Use this narrative to create a memorable connection that goes beyond transactions to build lasting partnerships

A few watch-outs I have been guilty of:

- Repeating Yourself: Stating a few things once will be more effective than a cluttered page repeating elements
- Too Big: Ideal is 5x7 with a QR code to a show-specific landing page with downloadable materials. Only one piece, plus a business card

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- Wrong Information (Believe it or Not): Ensure the information is right. Nothing kills momentum like following up to correct details, not closing the deal. Sales and marketing has to share accountability for this information
- Jargon: Be cautious of overly specific industry language or metrics. If you have to explain an acronym or a chart, you lose valuable time with a prospect

4. Selling Your Story

You've spent the money, you've done the work; don't let it fall apart when it counts.

Don't Take For Granted Your Team Knows The Story

Have a printed information sheet of everything the team needs to know in the booth. Team members will be reluctant to ask about or clarify something that they should know, but I promise you everyone will learn something new about the business from that sheet if you cover all your bases.

Practice the Pitch

Make this a learning experience for the team on the 30-second elevator pitch; rarely do teams have the opportunity to pitch all together. Encourage the team to practice the pitch on vendors, exhibitor staff, and one another before the show begins. You never know if your big fish will choose your booth first! Plus, it is a low-pressure way to exchange ideas on how to craft the best pitch.

Engage With Your Booth, Your Samples, and Your Product

You have spent a lot of time and money curating a great experience; weave those elements into your conversation, mention the video showing the farmers you sustainably source from, share your favorite sample to taste, and encourage customers to touch and feel the packaging redesign you just finished. You were intentional about incorporating all these things; don't assume people will notice them.

Show You Are A Team

For many teams, this is all hands on deck, so leverage the entire team's expertise. If a customer is wondering about ingredient sourcing, pull in your R&D lead or consumer trends, invite your marketing team into the conversation. Seeing your team interact and adding more people will build credibility for your team and create a more conversational feel.

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5. Maximizing Pre and Post-Show Impact

Trade shows don't start when the doors open and don't end when they close. The real ROI comes from what you do before and after.

Pre-Show Strategy:

- Identify your top 20 targets and contact them 3-4 weeks before the show
- Schedule specific meeting times with high-priority prospects
- Create buzz about what you'll be showcasing (without giving everything away)
- Brief your team on who will be attending and priority conversations

During-Show Documentation:

- Categorize leads as A (follow up within 2 weeks), B (follow up within month), C (add to general marketing)
- Take notes on specific conversations - what resonated, what questions came up
- Photograph business cards alongside notes for easy reference
- Identify patterns in feedback and questions to improve future communications

Post-Show Follow-Through:

- Take time to rest and recharge after the show - quality follow-up is better than rushed follow-up
- Send personalized follow-ups to A leads within 1-2 weeks
- Include specific references to your conversation
- Send agreed-upon materials with clear next steps
- Schedule debrief with your team to evaluate what worked and what didn't

Strategic Integration:

- Update your sales materials based on common questions received
- Refine your pitch based on what resonated most with visitors
- Use captured content in marketing materials for next 3-6 months
- Begin planning for next show, incorporating lessons learned

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Final Thoughts: Making the Investment Count

Trade shows can be expensive, exhausting, and often frustrating. But they're also one of the few opportunities where the entire industry gathers in one place with the explicit purpose of discovering what's next.

The difference between wasting money and making a breakthrough comes down to intentionality. Knowing exactly why you're there, who you're there for, and what success looks like before you even start designing your booth.

Remember, at the end of the day, people buy from people. Your product might get them to stop at your booth, but it's your story, your purpose, and your authentic engagement that will get them to place an order.

So before you book your next show, ask yourself the hard questions in this guide. Define success on your terms. And create a trade show experience that builds not just sales but lasting relationships that drive growth long after the booth is packed away.

Want to connect before your next event or show?

If you found this guide valuable, I'd love to help you implement these strategies for your specific brand challenges. As a strategic advisor with more than 20 years of experience working with purpose-driven founders, I help CPG companies transform their approach to everything from trade shows to retail strategy to consumer communication.

Reach out to book a 30 Min Intro email me, Kathryn, kt@kathryntuttle.com.