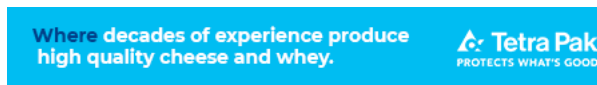


[Home](#)[Our Publications](#)[Markets](#)[News](#)[Resources](#)[Subscription / Advertising](#)

CMN article search

Guest Columns

Perspective:
Trade Show Strategies

Redefining trade show success: Why winning starts long before the show

Chris Eastwood

Chris Eastwood is a business development manager for the California Milk Advisory Board, Tracy, California, where he focuses on expanding partnerships, vendor strategies and driving the national retail and foodservice growth of Real California Milk dairy products.

For many brands in specialty food and consumer packaged goods, trade show participation becomes a kind of institutional habit. The booth gets reserved, the materials get ordered, the team shows up because “it’s what we do.” But the companies that consistently see real returns aren’t operating on autopilot — they’re approaching each show with clear intent, defined goals and a plan that starts months before anyone steps foot in the convention hall.

Trade shows can drive leads, increase brand visibility, deliver competitive intelligence and build relationships — but not if success is left to chance. Below are practical ways to rethink trade show strategy and build an organizational approach that produces measurable results.

- Before the show: where success really begins
- Define your goals (before you do anything else)

Every show should have a specific purpose. Are you there for lead generation? Brand awareness? Market intelligence? Relationship-building? These goals determine your preparation, your booth behavior, your collateral — everything.

If your objective is raw lead generation, you need systems in place for capturing contacts efficiently and messaging crafted for discovery conversations. If you’re focused on brand awareness, your visuals, demos and talking points shift toward storytelling and sampling strategy.

The biggest pitfall for mature brands is inertia. Costs get baked in, attendance becomes a default decision and no one stops to ask why the brand is there. Savvier companies choose intention over tradition.

- Research and plan with purpose

Months before the show, review the exhibitor list and floor plan. Understand who will be near you. Proximity to competitors isn’t a negative — those booths often attract the same buyer profiles, which increases your chance of meaningful interactions.

Identify high-value contacts and buyers. Published retailer lists rarely include specifics, so in the months leading up to the show, ask your existing customers whether they’ll attend and which team members will be on-site. Use this information to secure even a brief meeting window. Some buyers resist booking tight schedules because they want flexibility, but a truly new product, compelling program or smartly chosen swag can justify a quick appointment — and even a “sometime after 1 p.m. Monday” commitment can put you ahead of the pack.

- Promote your attendance

Your show presence shouldn’t be a secret. Use social channels, email newsletters and your website to share booth details, new product teases and what buyers can expect. All of this can be scheduled well in advance.

- Master your elevator pitch — all three versions

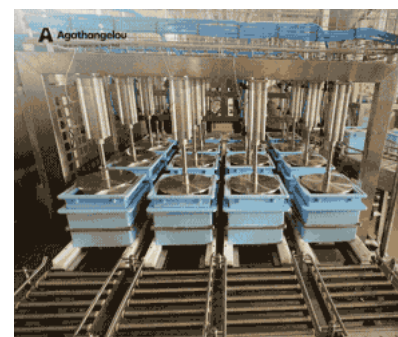
A strong elevator pitch is one of the most underrated trade show tools. Prepare three tiers:

1. The 1-2 sentence attention grab
2. The 30-second sample-table pitch
3. The 5-minute value proposition for genuinely interested buyers

When I trained new salespeople, I encouraged them to practice the shortest version with every sampling interaction — not to sound scripted, but to make it effortless. A simple “Do you like it? Here’s why it’s special”



LinkedIn



becomes second nature and sets up every deeper conversation.

- During the show: Focus on what you can control
- You can't control your booth size, but you can control engagement

Booth size, layout and design are often locked in long before you get involved — and yes, they can be major expenses. But the most powerful levers for success cost nothing:

- Smile, make eye contact and greet people proactively.
- Avoid phone distractions; your inbox will not stop for the show, but customers deserve attention while the floor is open.
- Never let a buyer sample unattended. It happens more often than we want to admit.
- Offer real value (not just samples)

If you use swag, make sure it's relevant, branded and actually serves as a conversation starter. Anyone working your booth needs to understand product fundamentals: pack sizes, temperature requirements, Ti/Hi, distribution pathways and, at minimum, a sensible suggested retail price.

Pricing specifics can come later, but basic product literacy should never be optional.

- Make the entire show your booth

Attend seminars, even outside your category; the insights and networking opportunities are often surprising. Walk the floor to observe competition and identify potential collaborators. The specialty food world is small — relationships matter, and information flows among trusted peers.

You never need to share sensitive details, but even small exchanges ("I saw Retailer X yesterday") help open conversations and keep partnerships warm.

- After the show: where ROI is won or lost
- Follow up promptly — twice

Some argue for immediate follow-up, others prefer waiting until buyers catch up on their inboxes. I recommend a hybrid approach:

1. Send a brief, personalized same-day or next-morning note recapping your conversation and promising fuller details.
2. Follow up later in the week with a more complete email, including sell sheets, decks and, if appropriate, a proposed promotional calendar.

This two-step rhythm keeps your brand top-of-mind without overwhelming the buyer.

- Analyze, debrief and document

Every trade show deserves a post-show review with both sales and marketing. Evaluate contacts, costs, engagement quality and goal alignment. True ROI is rarely immediate, but documented conversations and outcomes become invaluable months later during budget reviews.

Smart teams treat trade shows as part of an ongoing learning cycle — not isolated events but evolving opportunities that sharpen strategy year after year.

- Final thought: intentionality wins

Success at trade shows doesn't hinge on the biggest booth or flashiest display. It comes from planning with purpose, engaging with discipline and following up with clarity. When companies shift from showing up out of habit to showing up with strategy, trade shows transform from cost centers into growth drivers. Heading to New York for Summer Fancy Food? Come engage with us at booth #536.

CMN

The views expressed by CMN's guest columnists are their own opinions and do not necessarily reflect those of Cheese Market News®.