gaining a better understanding of exhibit booth audiences through data

An exhibitor's guide to audience segmentation and persona development
Trade show exhibits, by their very nature, need an audience.

Every booth experience, giveaway, and piece of content is designed to be consumed by a market, in the hopes that they'll buy what you're selling. It sounds simple, but surprisingly, it's where many exhibitors stumble.

Why? Because they fail to emphasize the #1 rule of marketing (and exhibiting is an important function of marketing): Know your audience.

Exhibitors, though, have myriad things to worry about leading up to a trade show, from shipping and material handling to booth design and email marketing, and many may forget why they are exhibiting in the first place: to engage face to face with their target audience.

Audiences, however, are not a monolith, and one size fits all is for mittens, not messaging.

Think about how you consume products or services. Are your needs, habits, and motivations the same as your neighbor's? Your coworker's? Your uncle's?

While you may already have a grasp on who your audiences are, every exhibitor can benefit from gaining a deeper understanding of what their audiences want. By first figuring out who you want to talk to and how you need to talk to them, your efforts will resonate with the people who will benefit from what you have to say. And the better you understand your audiences, their goals, and their concerns, the more likely you are to achieve your exhibit objectives and desired outcomes.

How to do this? Audience segmentation.
How Segmentation Can Help Grow Your Audience

For a trade show exhibit to be effective, it has to speak to the audience’s unique needs. But how will you know what each audience needs if you don’t have a clear picture of who they are?

Knowing everything about each group you’re targeting is not only vital to developing your booth strategy, it’s crucial to understanding how your exhibit should evolve over time. To stay relevant, you must continually identify where business is going and what communities should be targeted to ensure maximum ROI for your exhibit investments. Focusing on priority audiences or new target markets and their unique needs gives you guideposts along this journey, so you can evolve without alienating the very people you wish to attract and engage.

Segmenting your audiences also enables you to:

- Meet the unique content and experiential needs of each segment
- Develop marketing messages tailored to each segment
- Prioritize the level of investment and focus you place on attracting each segment based on their importance to the overall success of the event
- Develop robust personas to inform your marketing and experience design approach for maximum engagement

Good news!

Audience segmentation studies don’t need to be performed annually. Instead, consider completing one every 2-5 years, depending on your industry and the velocity of change within your business.
A Fresh Look At Your Audience

Audience segmentation is a multi-step process, going well beyond superficial characterizations. It’s not enough to say your audience is doctors or manufacturers. Instead, dig into all the data you’ve been collecting to identify the lines that divide your audiences:

Demographics: Data like age and gender are relatively easy to collect. But while they’re important factors to describe your audience, they only scratch the surface of insightful information. Continue to collect this data, but don’t stop there.

Generational: This is technically still demographic data, but it digs a little deeper to provide another piece of the puzzle. After all, a 42-year-old and a 50-year-old may fall into different age categories, but as Gen Xers, they may have more in common than you think. Examples: Baby Boomer, Gen X, Millennials, Gen Z.
Want to know what it takes to engage younger audiences?

Check out VidCon.
Cultural: Data on cultural attitudes can be an enormous boon to your marketing efforts. Is your audience mostly conservative thinkers or progressive? How do they view the world? What core beliefs drive their decision-making? And when you go global, this has even deeper ramifications, as you will need to consider cultural preferences such as dietary restrictions; time of day, month, and year; worship needs; and beyond. Examples: conservative, liberal, religion.

Geographic: Knowing where your audience lives (and works!) provides useful insights not only for marketing your event but also for planning the event in a way to maximize engagement and attendance. Will you need to set up hotel blocks for out-of-town visitors, or will you need discounted parking for local attendees? Will you need to provide translators for international travelers who may not speak the native language? Examples: state/province, country, region.

Psychographic: This is the deep dive into the needs, hopes, concerns, and aspirations that underlie every motivation and every action your attendees take. Understanding what makes these people tick is key to making sure your event and your marketing address their pain points. Examples: lifestyle choices, personality traits, values, hopes, aspirations.

Interests: Like psychographic data, this is vital information to know. If the audience you have in mind just isn't interested in what you have to offer, it's time to take a good look at the people who are interested and how you can speak to them instead. Examples: running, education, travel.
There IS such a thing as over-segmentation.

Be sure to pick a few categories that are most meaningful to your company! Sometimes, less is more.

Industry: If your event aims to attract businesses (as opposed to consumers), it’s important to know which types of businesses your attendees belong to. Some events clearly target a specific vertical, while others (office technology, for example) may attract a wide range of potential customers. So, where do your attendees work? Examples: healthcare, technology, manufacturing.

Other segmentation ideas:

- **Life stages:** Such as young professional, getting married, having children, close to retirement, etc.
- **Seasonal:** What are their concerns at different times of the year? For example, many companies focus on budgeting in the fall.
- **Brand affinity:** How much do they like your brand compared to another? How can you use that information to your advantage?

It’s not enough to know who your audience segments are; you also need to know how best to reach them. One of the benefits of segmentation work is that you can also develop a road map that aligns to each audience’s specific communication preferences and platforms. Where do they go to look for information? What social media platforms (if any) do they use? What media sources do they read or listen to?

This information will enable you to streamline your communication strategy, so you can be everywhere you need to be, without wasting time and budget trying to build a presence in channels your target audience doesn’t use.
Getting Started With Audience Segmentation and Persona Development

Knowing everything there is to know about your audiences is the crucial first step. Next, it’s time to figure out who they are and which of them are most important to your success.

To segment an audience, you divide the audience into groups that share similar characteristics. Identifying these groups, prioritizing them, and then fleshing them out into insightful audience personas is a significant undertaking, but can help you reap significant rewards.

There is a wealth of data sources you can use for audience segmentation. Here are just a few examples.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Audience attraction</strong></th>
<th><strong>On-site engagement</strong></th>
<th><strong>Post-show follow-up</strong></th>
<th><strong>Auxiliary data</strong></th>
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<tr>
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<td>BEACON</td>
<td>SURVEYS</td>
<td>SOCIAL MEDIA CONTENT</td>
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<td>EMAIL</td>
<td>LEAD RETRIEVAL</td>
<td>OVERALL SHOW ASSESSMENT</td>
<td>Trending topics, attendee and sponsor satisfaction, attendee interests and behaviors</td>
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Who visited, length of stay, and platforms

Click-through, open, and bounce rates

Level and reach of Facebook, LinkedIn, and other social media interaction

Context-aware messaging and offers

Level of interest and location in the buying cycle

Attendee activities and behaviors

Sentiments, opinions, and trends

Event experience, and marketing and business impact results

Trending topics, attendee and sponsor satisfaction, attendee interests and behaviors
Review the data and begin sorting people into groups. For example, after performing this exercise for an event that targets the marketing industry, you might see that your exhibit attracts the following groups:

- Marketing agency owners in their 40s and 50s who work with a lot of B2B clients, live in midsized to larger cities, are progressive thinkers, and are trying to grow their business and achieve success for their clients.
- One-person in-house marketing specialists who are in their 20s, work for midsized companies, are active on social media, and whose marketing knowledge is still entry level.
- Individual representatives for marketing software companies who are exhibiting at the event, who you may be interested in partnering with or who may be competition.

From there, you can set basic milestones: What audience groups come to your exhibit, what percentage of the audience does each segment make up, and how high a priority is each segment to the success of your exhibit?

At this point, many exhibitors call it a job well done. And if this is all you've done, kudos to you! You are likely ahead of many of your competitors. But there is so much more to know about these segments! Uncovering this information can help amplify your success.

But it doesn’t have to be scary. Here, the process is broken down into bite-sized, manageable chunks using the fictional Awesome Marketing Technology Company as an example.

**Step 1 Data Review**

As marketing manager at Awesome Marketing Technology Company, it’s your job to organize your exhibit booth at a large marketing conference every year. You have data about your past booth visitors, so now it’s time to start looking for patterns.

This is a great opportunity to take a closer look at any survey data you have.

After all, there is no better way to get to know your audiences better than to hear directly from them.
Step 2 Persona Development

Rather than stopping at Step 1, dive deep into your personas to figure out what makes them tick. Gathering data around what they do, how old they are, and what media they consume will tell you who they are, but what about figuring out what they want?

Gather as much information as possible, whether it's internal information that you already have or new research and interviews with these groups, to find the answers to the following broad questions, or brainstorm a list more specific to your organization:

- Has their attendance gone up or down?
- How engaged are they?
- What are their barriers to attending?
- What are their pain points related to the event?
- What are they looking for in an event?
- What might encourage them to attend?
Step 3 Messaging

Armed with information or ideas about what influences their decision-making process, you can now flesh out your audience segments into full-fledged buyer personas. A buyer persona is a semi-fictional representation of a typical member of an audience segment.

Using the information gathered in Steps 1 and 2, write a story for each persona. Your story should detail things like:

- Job role
- Age
- Top professional challenges
- What success looks like to them
- How they access new information
- What they want from your event
- What might stop them from coming
- What they wish you’d do differently
- Who they’d love to meet or see

Write this all out not as a bullet list, but as a narrative for each persona representing a specific segment. (For example, “Agency Angela is 53 and owns a 20-person marketing agency in Des Moines…”)

Make sure you identify the messages and value propositions that each persona needs to hear.

Once you have a good handle on your primary personas, you can explore splitting each persona category into subgroups. (For example, Agency Angela may visit your booth year after year, while Agency Adam may be attending the show for the very first time — how will you attract him to your booth?)
Applying Your Personas To Your Event

The insights you gain from your buyer personas should shape your entire brand experience strategy. Start by setting a measurable objective for each persona, and build a targeted strategy to achieve the objective.

Perhaps you decide you want to increase sales revenue from Agency Angela. Great! Because you understand Agency Angela so fully, you can now create campaigns that speak precisely to her needs and motivations, with messaging that will resonate, and in channels that she’ll engage in.

Additionally, use these persona insights to think through the typical audience experience in your booth. If Agency Angela is your top-priority attendee, is your exhibit meeting her needs? She is already very familiar with your company, so why is she visiting? What can you offer her? Where can you improve? How can you personalize it to her?

Let’s say Agency Angela is visiting your booth hoping to return with ideas on how her small agency can compete for clients in a crowded marketplace.
Think through the entire process for Angela:

**MESSAGING**
Engage her with messaging that addresses how your marketing technology can help with her concerns around competition and landing clients as a small business.

**CHANNELS**
As the owner of the agency, she’s limited on time, so she wants to receive information as succinctly as possible. As a small business owner, she wants the same level of respect as some of the larger agencies.

Although Angela has visited your booth in the past, the new booth structure caught her eye, and she stops by to see what’s new. When she approaches your booth, you immediately pull up your CEO/CMO slides that you’ve prepared, offering insights into the three key differentiators of your products. This short-and-sweet deck encourages Angela to have a quick demo of your newest offering; then arrange a time for her to come back and have a customized VIP Q&A with your CEO.

**RESULTS**
Angela felt the demo was interesting, but probably too in the weeds for someone at her level. After meeting with the CEO, however, she scheduled an in-depth virtual demo for two members of her team and is reviewing pricing structures that were emailed to her later that afternoon.

**DATA**
Before visiting the booth, Angela rarely opened your marketing emails. Now, she is opening and clicking through to your website, exploring the section geared specifically toward small business owners. She spent a total of 38 minutes in your booth, members of her team have participated in one of your webinars, and your business development manager is in the final stages of closing the deal.

**IMPROVEMENT**
Focusing on the key differentiators was a great tactic to quickly engage this multitasker. The one-on-one with the CEO proved to be a great value-add and is a practice that should be replicated as often as possible. Reconsider product demos for Agency Angela in the future, and think about other ways to preview your product without getting too in depth.
Exhibitors can also work with the organizers of the trade shows they participate in to get supplemental information about the attendee audience. Looking at the whole picture surrounding your audiences can help set up success when it comes to exhibit booth measurement.

"Know your audience" may sound like a marketing cliché, but it is one of the most powerful tools you can use to make your exhibit marketing and the booth itself more effective and more efficient.

By understanding and identifying your audience segments and fleshing them out into individual personas, you'll be able to speak to the right people in the right way, resulting in maximized budget and a more engaged audience for every trade show where you plan to exhibit.
Your Turn: Audience Segmentation Worksheet
Audience Group 1
Select three or more ways you want to group your audience from the list below. Jot down the specific characteristics you seek on the blank line.

Demographics:_________ Interests:_________
Generational:_________ Industry:_________
Cultural:_________ Life Stages:_________
Geographic:_________ Seasonal:_________
Psychographic:_________ Brand Affinity:_________

Use the box below to make note of any specific communication preferences this audience has.

Jot down a few ideas around this segment's relationship to your event
(ex: repeat attendee, non-attendee)

Name your audience (ex: Agency Angela)

Now it's time to get creative! Develop a narrative for this persona segment. Have fun with it!

Audience Group 2
Select three or more ways you want to group your audience from the list below. Jot down the specific characteristics you seek on the blank line.

Demographics:_________ Interests:_________
Generational:_________ Industry:_________
Cultural:_________ Life Stages:_________
Geographic:_________ Seasonal:_________
Psychographic:_________ Brand Affinity:_________

Use the box below to make note of any specific communication preferences this audience has.

Jot down a few ideas around this segment's relationship to your event
(ex: repeat attendee, non-attendee)

Name your audience (ex: Agency Angela)

Now it's time to get creative! Develop a narrative for this persona segment. Have fun with it!

Audience Group 3
Select three or more ways you want to group your audience from the list below. Jot down the specific characteristics you seek on the blank line.

Demographics:_________ Interests:_________
Generational:_________ Industry:_________
Cultural:_________ Life Stages:_________
Geographic:_________ Seasonal:_________
Psychographic:_________ Brand Affinity:_________

Use the box below to make note of any specific communication preferences this audience has.

Jot down a few ideas around this segment's relationship to your event
(ex: repeat attendee, non-attendee)

Name your audience (ex: Agency Angela)

Now it's time to get creative! Develop a narrative for this persona segment. Have fun with it!
want more?

Request a consultation to learn how audience segmentation can help grow your audience.

About Freeman
Freeman is the world’s leading brand experience company. We help our clients design, plan, and deliver immersive experiences for their most important audiences. Through comprehensive solutions including strategy, creative, logistics, digital solutions, and event technology, Freeman helps increase engagement and drive business results.