



The art of high-impact events

Events are one of the main ways B2B startups build pipeline today, and are only becoming more effective, and more critical, each year.

Turning an event, regardless of whether it is a local field event or paid mega-sponsorship, into a true growth engine—one that delivers hard ROI—takes far more than just sending a logo and showing up.

Too often, companies pour money into events without a unique strategy, hoping visibility alone will translate into results. In reality, the difference between an event that drains budget and one that drives revenue comes down to effort, creativity, and precision.

Tradeshows

Trade shows present an opportunity to generate pipeline and brand recognition, but not all approaches deliver equal results. Companies that see success typically follow one of two winning strategies:

1. Becoming the **standout sponsor** that everyone remembers
2. Hosting a **side activation** that saves sponsorship dollars while creating a unique experience for prospects

Both approaches can deliver strong ROI, but execution is everything.

Approach 1

Making sponsorships count

Simply sponsoring a trade show isn't enough—success comes from strategic planning and bold execution. Commit the following rules to memory.

BEST PRACTICES

- **Sponsorship alone doesn't drive results:** Just having your logo on a booth often means you're supporting the event's success, not necessarily your own. To truly stand out, you need an activation that makes attendees remember you.
- **Pre-event preparation determines success:** The majority of effort should happen before the event, including identifying key attendees and securing meetings in advance. If you aren't 100% certain the event will be successful before you arrive, you haven't done enough pre-work.
- **Your activation must stand out:** If attendees don't remember your brand as one of the top one or two from the event, your ROI will be extremely limited.
- **Measuring success by badge scans is a mistake:** While scanning badges can be useful for gathering contacts and setting up meetings for future events, relying on this metric alone often leads to wasted spend.
- **Winning sponsorships require outsized effort:** When event sponsorships drive results, it's almost always because marketing went all-in with bold activations and high-impact execution. This means concentrating the budget to ensure a win versus spreading it around multiple events.
- **Follow-up is critical:** Post-event, marketing must ensure that every meeting is followed up on and every lead is reviewed. Without a structured follow-up process, even the best trade show efforts will fall flat.

Case study 1

How Commsor dominated a trade show without a single demo



Startups often struggle to stand out at trade shows, especially when competing against bigger, more established brands. Commsor took a bold, unconventional approach at the Pavilion GTM Summit by ditching the traditional booth setup entirely and hosting a chicken wing eating contest instead.

THE STRATEGY

- **No demos, just engagement:** Instead of trying to pitch attendees in a crowded booth space, Commsor created a fun, memorable experience that naturally attracted people.
- **Pre-booking attendees:** They didn't just hope people would stop by—they actively lined up attendees ahead of time, ensuring a steady flow of engagement.
- **FOMO and word-of-mouth:** As the contest gained traction, more attendees wanted to participate, generating a buzz that lasted beyond booth hours.

THE RESULTS

- **One of the most talked-about booths at the event:** Commsor secured a significant percentage of the entire attendee list, outperforming competitors who relied on traditional sponsorship tactics.
- **Sustained engagement:** Even after the trade show officially ended, people were still waiting to visit their booth.
- **Brand awareness and differentiation:** By doing something unique, Commsor left a lasting impression on attendees, ensuring their brand stood out long after the event.

This case study proves that winning at trade shows isn't about who has the biggest booth or the flashiest sponsorship—it's about creating an experience that people actually want to be part of.

For more unconventional, highly successful trade show strategies, see below:



The Transaction
Startup stunts & loving your customers
WITH KYLE PORTER

Watch episode on YouTube



Case study 2

How Anaplan used iconic branding to drive event engagement



Anaplan combined account-based marketing with event strategy to create an activation that generated buzz, engaged prospects, and delivered strong ROI—all through the power of an iconic brand.

THE STRATEGY

Anaplan knew exactly which companies and roles were most likely to buy. To attract the right people at multiple trade shows, they leveraged a universally recognized luxury brand: Tiffany & Co.

Their booth was stacked with large Tiffany blue boxes, instantly drawing attention. Attendees couldn't help but stop and ask: "How do I get one?"

The answer: book a meeting and complete a demo.

- **Existing customers** saw new product features.
- **Prospects** on Anaplan's account list received their first demo.
- **Pre-event and live marketing** reinforced the exclusivity of the giveaway.

THE RESULTS

- **High booth traffic** and demo volume, as attendees actively sought out the experience.
- **Strong engagement from target accounts**, ensuring quality leads.
- **Massive event buzz**, with the giveaway itself becoming a talking point.

The key takeaway? A highly recognizable, desirable gift can turn an event activation into a viral moment. Other successful variations of this strategy have included Montblanc notepads, equally iconic and appealing.

DRIVING DEMAND AND VIRAL BUZZ

As more attendees walked around carrying the recognizable blue boxes, interest skyrocketed. People flocked to the booth, eager to secure a meeting in exchange for their own Tiffany gift.

The secret to making this work was creating the perception of luxury at a reasonable cost. Each box contained a set of Tiffany wine glasses, priced at under \$150—a small investment for the level of brand engagement and lead generation it drove.

Case study 3

How Apttus turned a sweepstakes into a high-impact revenue driver

APTTUS

Nearly a decade ago, Apttus executed one of the most revenue-generating B2B sweepstakes activations in event marketing history. The success of this campaign wasn't just about giving away a high-end car—it was about strategically driving engagement, ensuring qualified buyers interacted with the brand, and creating a moment of excitement that translated into tangible business results.

THE STRATEGY

To qualify for the giveaway, attendees had to meet three criteria:

1. Be a **qualified buyer**.
2. **Watch** a product demo.
3. **Attend** a large-scale session where the company presented its value proposition.

This structure ensured that every participant was a potential customer who had meaningful exposure to Apttus before the final drawing.

DRIVING ATTENDANCE WITH SCARCITY AND EXCITEMENT

The brilliance of the campaign lay in how Apttus drove attendance for the giveaway event. The key messaging focused on exclusivity: a 1 in 1,000 chance to win a high-end car—unheard-of odds in a typical sweepstakes. This created urgency and excitement, compelling attendees to participate.

But the real magic happened in the final stretch. The day before the giveaway, the marketing and sales teams personally called all 1,000 qualified participants in the sweepstakes. The message was simple, but powerful:

“Only one of the 1,000 attendees will walk away with the car—but you must be in the room to win.”

This last-minute push created a frenzy, ensuring maximum attendance at the final session.

THE RESULTS

- **Over 1,000 top prospects** saw a full demo of Apttus' product.
- **The general session was packed** with engaged attendees, all eager to learn more about the company.
- The event ensured **Apttus' highest-potential leads** were fully immersed in the brand's messaging.

This case study remains a gold standard in event marketing, showcasing how a well-planned activation—**rooted in exclusivity, engagement, and a coordinated sales and marketing effort**—can drive massive ROI.



Approach 2

Winning with side activations

Not every brand needs to invest in official sponsorships to win at trade shows. Some of the most successful companies sidestep the noise by creating unique, invite-only experiences. Here's how to execute this strategy effectively.

BEST PRACTICES

- **People want unique experiences:** Attendees travel for events and are eager for experiences that make their trip more memorable—especially if those experiences also help them achieve business goals.
- **Proximity matters:** After a long day at a trade show, attendees don't want to travel far. Hosting breakfasts, dinners, or other activations near the primary event location significantly increases attendance.
- **Curate the right audience:** Allow anyone to express interest in attending, but use the sales team to vet attendees and send invitations only to high-potential prospects. Politely inform non-prospects that the event is at capacity.
- **VIP treatment for customers is essential:** Competitors at the event will go out of their way to make your customers feel special—if you don't do the same, you risk losing them.

Both sponsorships and side activations can drive significant ROI, but neither works without careful planning, strategic execution, and rigorous follow-up. The brands that win at trade shows aren't just present—they are unforgettable.

Events are dead, but the event at the event is what's working.

MEAGAN EISENBERG
CMO OF SAMARA

Case study 4

How CHEQ leveraged nostalgia to create a must-attend Dreamforce event

CHEQ

At major conferences like Salesforce's Dreamforce, standing out from the crowd is a challenge—especially for brands competing against massive sponsorship budgets. Rather than relying on a traditional trade show booth, Amy Holtzman, CMO of CHEQ, tapped into nostalgia and exclusivity to create an unmissable experience.

THE STRATEGY

CHEQ hosted a private event at **The Tonga Room**, a legendary tiki bar that had been a staple of early Dreamforce conferences. The venue's **history, exclusivity, and popularity** made it the perfect setting for an event that attendees would prioritize over other competing activities.

- **Tapping into nostalgia & familiarity:** By choosing a venue that many longtime Dreamforce attendees already had a connection with, CHEQ ensured strong interest and attendance.
- **Curating a premium experience:** The event wasn't just a gathering—it featured local entertainment and special experiences that elevated it beyond a typical networking happy hour.
- **Driving sales engagement naturally:** Instead of forcing structured meetings, sales reps used the event to facilitate quick check-ins and face-to-face interactions with top prospects.
- **Creating exclusivity & FOMO:** The coveted venue, limited guest list, and high-value attendees made the event feel VIP, ensuring those who didn't attend felt like they missed out.

THE RESULTS

- **High attendance from both top customers and target prospects,** maximizing relationship-building opportunities.
- **A premium, memorable experience that resonated with attendees,** strengthening brand association and goodwill.
- **Strategic sales impact,** with reps securing key conversations that might have been difficult to land in a traditional booth setting.
- This case study highlights that **sometimes, the best trade show play isn't at the trade show itself**—but in creating an exclusive, high-value experience that people truly want to attend.

Summits & micro-events

Rather than sponsoring a trade show, many brands choose to create their own events, ranging from small conferences and summits to intimate roundtables, private dinners, or unique activations. The biggest advantage? Full control over the experience. Unlike a trade show, where attention is divided among multiple sponsors, a brand-hosted event ensures 100% of the benefit stays with the company.

However, simply hosting an event isn't enough. The success of summits and micro-events depends on careful planning, strategic execution, and a deep understanding of what attendees value.

BEST PRACTICES

- **Strong ABM & targeted invitations:** Success starts with the right attendees. A carefully curated guest list ensures the event is filled with high-value prospects and customers.
- **Social proof to drive attendance:** Early confirmations from well-known attendees can significantly boost interest. Highlighting key participants in invitations helps create FOMO and encourages others to RSVP.
- **Content that prioritizes attendee interests:** While brands may want to highlight their product, attendees typically care more about industry trends, challenges, and peer discussions. Structuring the event around relevant topics—not just a sales pitch—ensures engagement.
- **Flexible & manageable experiences:** People want to network and engage on their own terms. Avoid high-commitment experiences, like boat trips or long tours, that make attendees feel “trapped” if they aren't enjoying themselves.
- **Memorable, unique experiences:** A well-executed event should feel like an exclusive opportunity, whether it's a high-end dinner, a VIP gathering at a major conference, or a behind-the-scenes experience in the host city.
- **Structured networking:** Networking can be hard, and attendees often appreciate structured introductions. Help break the ice by introducing guests to one another, or have everyone introduce themselves at the start of the event. When appropriate, share attendees' contact information post-event (with their approval) so they can continue conversations and build valuable connections.
- **Making attendance easy:** Logistics can make or break attendance. Long drives, bad weather, and competing events can lead to no-shows. Make it easy for guests to attend by selecting convenient locations and minimizing travel hassles. Additionally, reinforce their importance—mentioning a personalized item or a special introduction waiting for them can encourage commitment.
- **Personalized follow-up & relationship building:** The event itself is just the start. Send follow-ups with photos, key takeaways, and meaningful next steps. Personalized outreach from sales or executives thanking attendees for coming helps solidify relationships and keeps the conversation going. Also, pending the attendees approve, share contact info so everyone can keep the conversation going.
- **Amplification through social media & founder branding:** Great events don't end when the last guest leaves. Capturing high-quality photos and sharing insights on social media—especially from a founder's LinkedIn account—extends the event's impact far beyond those in attendance.
- **Extending event value through content & thought leadership:** If the event includes meaningful discussions, capture insights and repurpose them into blogs, LinkedIn posts, or even short video clips. This positions the brand as a thought leader while also extending the event's reach beyond just those who attended.

Done right, **brand-owned events create lasting connections, stronger relationships, and significantly higher ROI** than many traditional sponsorships. The key is treating them as more than just an event—they're a strategic GTM motion.

Case study 5

How ActiveCampaign scaled community events to drive rapid growth

ActiveCampaign ➤

ActiveCampaign took a bold approach to events—rather than focusing on a few large conferences, they launched an ambitious initiative to host 200 community events in a single year for an underserved small-business market. The gamble paid off, delivering rapid brand growth, strong advocacy, a 90-day payback period, and 100% year-over-year customer growth.

THE STRATEGY

To make this scale possible, execution had to be flawless. It took six months to plan, but the payoff was huge. The team focused on:

- **Creating highly repeatable, high-quality event experiences:** They developed a structured program that ensured every event had valuable content, strong attendee engagement, and top-tier locations.
- **Building an internal execution model:** A dedicated education team and certified partners made it possible for any company leader to confidently run an event while maintaining a high standard.
- **Focusing on relevant content:** Instead of pushing a product agenda, the events were designed around what prospects and customers actually wanted to learn, increasing engagement and attendance.

THE RESULTS

- **Massive brand impact:** The program rapidly built brand trust and awareness in underserved, high-growth regions.
- **90-day payback period:** The initiative delivered near-immediate ROI, proving its effectiveness.
- **A thriving community of advocates:** By directly engaging with customers and prospects in their own cities, ActiveCampaign sparked organic brand evangelism, turning attendees into vocal supporters.

This case study showcases how **community-driven, repeatable micro-events can be a powerful alternative to traditional trade shows**—building stronger relationships, igniting word-of-mouth, and accelerating brand momentum.