



Great Scale Model Train and Railroad Collectors Show

Vendor Selling Tips

IN GENERAL:

A buying public numbering in the thousands, and concentrated in one place, offers intriguing sales opportunities. But it carries with it some unique challenges, as well. Selling in a show venue is different than selling from a store or with "e-commerce." We talked with vendors to learn their tips, ideas and suggestions for improving sales. Much of what we report below might seem familiar. There's a good reason, for that: ***you probably told us***. Here in one place arranged as topics, is what vendors told us about show selling.

If they can't see it, they can't buy it. Let's face it, table real estate is a valuable asset. But what do you do if you have more product than space allows you to display? Buyers who know what they want won't be defeated by open cartons containing columns of rail car boxes with only the label end exposed - "library" style. But remember that your prospective customers include those who are just getting started, looking to add to their inventory, looking for a gift, or just waiting for inspiration. Anything you can do to expose the actual product increases the chance of a sale. Looking up and down the show aisles, you'll see some clever adaptations:

- Angled display racks slope up from the back of a table. These may be pre-populated with product, so that display and product ship as a flat unit - a handy advantage in a vehicle with limited space
- PVC pipe structures in imaginative configurations to produce shelving. Can be disassembled for convenient transportation.
- Cardboard boxes, arranged so that one nests at an angle in the other, (a "dump" display) placed so as to peek out from under a table - an expansion of your selling area created by using the floor!
- Peg board mounted in a frame which clamps to the edge of a table. Otherwise, two frames hinged to make a "suitcase" which is easily transported and set up
- Spin racks (sometimes available at no cost from stores who have disposed of them). Free standing, and with a small footprint, they are an effective space multiplier.

No matter what method or means you deploy, do as much as you can to put as much of your product as possible in view.

The best and the worst place in the show: Where is the best place to be? Or the worst. Or does it really matter? The truth? They are all good, and they are all bad. As many vendors will attest, most buyers spend about an hour walking up and down the aisles, either scanning for a type of product, or just developing an overall impression. Later, buyers return to the areas which interest them the most, or else to a particular vendor they like. This strategy makes perfect sense, and does much to over-come what looks like a "backwater" location on the show floor plan. One very successful vendor maintains over 20 tables in a location which seems to be off the beaten path. However, the table configuration and best use of wall space result in a virtual "show within the show" - a productive adaptation. By contrast, locations with an apparent "front and center" appeal may also be passed by in the early minutes because of the momentum of crowd flow. What all this means is that your format and adaptation to space count for at least as much as the physical location:

- Visibility can be as important as location. A banner elevated above your tables, and visible at a distance, effectively moves you closer to those who are entering the hall. Your banner should not only identify you, but also briefly indicate what you sell, in lettering big enough to be read at a distance.

- Configuration and format, while not necessarily immediately in view, have value in terms of persistence in the buyer's memory and a call to action. Many sellers who offer just one or two lines of product (such as literature or themed clothing) wisely deploy their products on a long row of tables, or a stand alone island. Buyers can easily scan titles and trademarks, and don't trip over one another when they step in for a closer examination. By contrast, the precision scale structure builder may benefit from a more intimate arrangement, in which the buyer is drawn in to the space. Thus, the way in which you use space is as important as the space, itself. Don't be a victim of analysis paralysis, about this, but give it some thought.
- First Impressions Matter: Bear in mind that most buyers want to cover the entire show. Whether they see you in the first several minutes, or after an hour of looking around, sooner or later, they'll pass by your tables. The impression they receive when they do is at least as important as your location. A high index of interest, or a sense of disappointment, is as likely to occur no matter where you are.
- Familiar Faces: While vendors see hundreds -maybe thousands- of faces in the course of a show, most become aware that some buyers appear again, and again, even though they don't say anything or appear to have an interest. That's usually a good sign, because you're now part of a selection process. Thus you should take note if the same people seem to keep popping up, and maybe encourage some conversation.

Engagement and Style: Understandably, and appropriately, vendors are focused on being ready to sell in the early going: items priced, displays neatly arranged, cash on hand, ready to go; a familiar litany of preparation. Now, as the crowd flows into the show, the focus moves (or should move) to interaction with prospective buyers, those who are "just looking," and those in their company, there just for fun. Do you wait for "something to happen?" Or do you take a more pro-active role? Here is what you've had to say:

- On the whole, whether buyers or sellers, rail modelers tend to be people of character and good will. So, we all enjoy a certain comfort level, which makes buying and selling easier.
- Whether consciously or not, many vendors understand that they serve in a kind of "host" capacity. The smile on your face, evident interest in your customer's needs and challenges, and willingness to spend time reflect positively not just on you - but on every vendor, and the show, itself. The positive and friendly atmosphere you create takes shape as buyer confidence in you and the show, and the material benefit for both buyer and seller which arises from that confidence and level of comfort. Bottom line: YOU are the show.
- Vendors all seem to agree that nine out of ten actual buyers will say "just looking" when asked, "may I help you?" But that's no reason not to ask the question, or otherwise extend some cheerful greeting ("Good morning," "Enjoy the show," etc.). The words you use or the manner of your expression are, and should be, an honest and natural reflection of your own nature; be "yourself." Any departure from this will probably be immediately detected by the customer. At the same time, we should stay aware that face-to-face engagement is very different from impersonal transactions conducted electronically, as so many now are. Most people prefer relaxed, personal contact; therefore freely take the initiative to enable it.
- Odd as it may seem, many buyers at the show (and many buyers anywhere, for that matter) are reluctant to seek opinion or advice because this may portray a certain vulnerability. This is all the more so where the subject matter is technical or complex, and the buyer is a novice or otherwise lacks (or thinks he/she lacks) enough knowledge to make an informed decision. Now, the successful vendor moves from being a host to a helper. There is enough psychology in this process to fill an entire library, so let's reduce it to the key elements you've reported to us:

Determine the buyer's actual need, as best you can. In general, the buyer does not need a "product," but rather an end result. The product may provide the solution, but it is the solution, itself, that is primary. Listen carefully, ask questions, find and focus on the issue.

Don't intimidate the buyer with your own expertise, knowledge or opinions. This is a hobby, it is supposed to be enjoyable. Your target is the buyer's satisfaction -not some idea of what is "correct." Sometimes, sellers win an argument, but lose a sale.

Be accessible for support after the show, if possible. After all, the layout or the issue is probably at the buyer's home; the expected solution might not be the right one. If buyers can contact you later, they will be more disposed to accept your recommendation.

Be fearless in confessing your own lack of knowledge, and ready to suggest alternatives. If you can't explain DCC, then don't try - refer your customer to someone who can. That's not necessarily a lost sale; the DCC expert may sell and install a decoder in a loco that comes from you!

The "Sale Behind the Sale": Although every vendor hopes for a financially successful show, the success is not measured only by new customers gained and sales made at the show, itself. The "sale" may not be measured by an actual purchase at the show, at all, but rather by building a bridge of confident expectation between buyer and seller. Many vendors report (and we know from our own experience) that these bridges pave the way for subsequent transactions in the seller's store, by phone or "electronically." ***Because of the show***, the vendor became the buyer's preferred choice for purchases all the year long. ***Were it not for the show***, this would never have happened. Thus the show may be understood not just as a selling opportunity, but a good promotional tool.

Realizing this possible latent sales opportunity, vendors tell us, allows the seller to make course corrections as they engage their customers. If you find yourself recommending something other than what the buyer needs - simply because you happen to have it handy - you may want to reconsider, and focus on what you can do, later, even if it means a delay. We challenged this notion with the old aphorism about "a bird in the hand," but many of you reminded us that customers are not birds. They are people. Point taken.

In Summary: We have been very gratefully informed by the wisdom and experience of others whose presence here is often measured in years -or even decades. In our opinion, what you have done, and what you know, lies at the core of the show's enduring record of success, and what sets it apart from others. Bringing it all together in one place was the best way we knew to share your expertise, and highlight the best practices which have made the Great Scale Model Train Show a "must" destination for rail hobbyists and fanciers everywhere.

If we didn't speak to you, in particular, about best selling practices, it is probably because of repetition. As we reviewed our discussions, we noticed that many observations, ideas and recommendations appeared over and over again. We admit, we may have missed a gem, here and there, but we did reach a point where the calculus for success was clear. That said, we welcome your additions to this material.

Contact us. By phone to 434-823-4809, or by email to jsgeare@yahoo.com.