THE AI EXHIBITOR EDGE

How to Use **AI** and **ChatGPT**
Before, During and After the Trade Show



Richard Erschik

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THE AI EXHIBITOR EDGE

How to Use AI and ChatGPT Before, During and After the Trade Show

Richard Erschik
50+ Years of Trade Show Experience -- AI in Plain English.

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INTRODUCTION

Meet the Newest Member of Your Trade Show Team

It Doesn't Need a Badge, a Hotel Room, or a Per Diem

If you've managed trade shows for any length of time, you already know the job description is a little misleading. You're not just managing a trade show. You're managing deadlines, budgets, vendors, exhibit houses, shipping, drayage, hotels, travel, booth staff, graphics, presentations, promotions, meetings, lead retrieval, salespeople, executives, last-minute changes, and occasionally something that was supposedly handled three weeks ago but suddenly isn't. Then the show opens. Now you're managing visitors, booth traffic, staff schedules, questions, competitors, demonstrations, social media, meetings, lead collection, and whatever crisis happens to walk into the booth wearing a badge.

Then the show closes. You pack everything up, get everybody home, deal with the bills, and start thinking about the next show. Oh, yes. And somebody eventually asks:

"What happened to the leads?"

Welcome to exhibit management. I've been around this industry for more than 50 years, and although the technology has changed enormously, much of the job hasn't. There are still too many things to do and never enough time to do them. But something very different has arrived. Artificial intelligence. More specifically, tools such as ChatGPT that ordinary people can use simply by talking to them in plain English.

You may already have tried ChatGPT. Maybe you asked it to write an email. Maybe you had it rewrite something you'd written. Maybe someone in your company demonstrated it and you thought, That's

interesting. Then you went back to work. I understand. But here's what I want you to consider.

What if AI isn't another technology you have to learn?

What if it's an assistant that can help you do the job you already have?

That's where this gets interesting. Imagine uploading a 60-page exhibitor manual and asking AI to identify every deadline, required form, advance-order date, shipping requirement, and potential penalty—and organize them chronologically. Imagine asking it to research the audience attending an upcoming show and help identify the types of prospects your booth staff should be looking for. It could help you develop bo oth messaging. Write pre-show invitations. Create appointment-setting emails. Develop booth-staff training. Suggest qualification questions. Turn rough notes into a management report. Summarize what your staff learned during the first day of the show.

After the show, it could help analyze information collected from prospects, create follow-up communications, nurture prospects who aren't ready to buy, and help make sense of the numbers when management asks whether the show paid. Those aren't futuristic ideas. They're examples of the kinds of things today's AI tools can already help you do. And you don't have to become an AI expert to do them.

I Didn't Grow Up With This Stuff Either

I learned artificial intelligence at 80. That sentence still makes me smile. I didn't learn it because I wanted another career. I learned it because I became curious. It reminded me of the first time I sat in front of a personal computer in the early 1980s. I saw it do something and asked myself, Can it do this? It could. So I asked another question. What about this? One question led to another. That's pretty much how I learned AI. And eventually I started teaching it. Today I teach AI and ChatGPT to beginners, seniors, executives, and business professionals. The more I taught it, the more I began looking at my old trade show world through new eyes.

And one day the obvious question hit me:

What could an exhibit manager do with this?

That's where this book came from.

AI Doesn't Know Trade Shows. You Do.

This is an important distinction. AI doesn't have your experience. It hasn't stood in an empty booth the night before a show wondering where the graphics are. It hasn't discovered that someone forgot to order electricity. It hasn't dealt with an unhappy executive who wants to know why the booth isn't busier. And it hasn't watched hundreds of names collected at a trade show get handed to Sales, only to disappear into a CRM with very little meaningful follow-up.

I have experienced enough of that world to understand something AI cannot learn merely by generating an answer:

The tool isn't the process.

AI can help you do things faster. It can help you think, research, write, analyze, organize, brainstorm, summarize, and prepare. But it still needs someone who understands what successful exhibiting is supposed to accomplish. That's you. The real opportunity isn't replacing the Exhibit Manager with AI. It's giving a good Exhibit Manager AI.

That's What This Book Is About

We're going to start with the basics. I'll explain what AI and ChatGPT actually are without burying you in terminology you don't need. Then I'll show you how to communicate with AI so you get useful answers instead of generic nonsense. From there, we're going to put it to work before the show, during the show, after the show, and finally where all of this should eventually lead—the payoff.

Along the way, I'll give you actual examples and prompts you can try yourself. You don't have to memorize them. In fact, one of the things I want you to learn is that there isn't some secret language required to use AI effectively. You talk to it. You explain what you're trying to accomplish. You give it the information it needs. And if the first answer isn't quite right, you keep talking to it. Most importantly, I'm going to show you where AI fits into something I've spent much of my career teaching:

A complete exhibiting process.

Because the objective isn't to use AI. The objective is to produce better trade show results. Those are two very different things. So meet the newest member of your trade show team. It doesn't need a badge.

It doesn't need airfare. It doesn't need a hotel room. And it never complains about drayage. Now let's put it to work.



Reduce your workload by adapting to AI.



CHAPTER 1

AI Is Coming to Your Trade Show Program

And That's Probably a Good Thing

If you've been in the trade show business long enough, you've seen technology arrive before. Some of it changed the industry. Some of it simply gave us new ways to do old things. We went from paper lead forms and stapled business cards to badge scanners and lead retrieval apps. Printed exhibitor manuals became websites and downloadable PDFs. Rolodexes became databases and then CRMs. Fax machines disappeared. Email changed how we communicate with prospects. Social media gave us another way to promote our presence before, during, and after a show.

Each time something new arrived, there was a period when people wondered whether they really needed it. Then one day it wasn't new anymore. It was simply how things were done. I believe artificial intelligence is going to follow a similar path, except considerably faster. AI isn't going to eliminate trade shows. It's not going to replace face-to-face conversations. And it's certainly not going to make the exhibit manager unnecessary. But it is going to change how much one person can accomplish before, during, and after a trade show.

That's why I think exhibit managers need to understand it now. Not because AI is fashionable. Because it's useful.

You Already Have Enough to Do

Let's begin with the reality of the job. Most exhibit managers aren't sitting around wondering how to fill their day. Quite the opposite. Depending on the company, you may be responsible for everything from selecting shows and managing budgets to working with the exhibit house, ordering services, coordinating shipping, arranging staff travel, reviewing graphics, scheduling meetings, training booth

personnel, managing lead retrieval, communicating with Sales, and producing the final report.

And that may only be part of your job. You may also have responsibility for advertising, digital marketing, corporate events, sales support, communications, or half a dozen other things that have nothing to do with trade shows. In some companies, "Trade Show Manager" isn't even someone's actual title. It's just the job that landed on their desk.

"Congratulations, Susan. You're handling the trade shows now."

"Great. What do I do?"

"Ask Bob."

"Who's Bob?"

"He left."

If that sounds slightly familiar, AI may become one of your better friends. Not because it knows everything. It doesn't. Not because it can make every decision for you. It can't. But because a surprising amount of an exhibit manager's workload involves information. Finding it. Reading it. Organizing it. Comparing it. Summarizing it. Writing about it. Turning it into checklists. Turning checklists into schedules. Turning ideas into communications. Turning notes into reports. Those are exactly the kinds of tasks where today's AI tools can be extraordinarily useful.

Think Assistant, Not Robot

One of the problems with the term artificial intelligence is that it sounds much more intimidating than using it actually is. People hear AI and imagine robots, computer programmers, complicated algorithms, or machines eventually taking over everyone's jobs. That's not what we're talking about in this book. I want you to think about AI differently. Think of it as a very capable assistant sitting next to you. You can hand that assistant something to read. You can ask it a question. You can give it a writing assignment. You can ask it to organize information. You can ask it for ten ideas. You can reject nine and keep one.

You can show it something you've written and say, "Make this clearer." You can tell it, "That's too formal. Make it sound more conversational." You can give it a complicated document and say, "Explain this to me in plain English." You can even disagree with it. I

do that all the time. The important thing is that you remain the exhibit manager. AI is the assistant. That distinction matters.

Imagine Monday Morning

Let's make this practical. You're exhibiting at a major industry show three months from now. The organizer sends you the exhibitor manual. It's 73 pages. Somewhere inside are move-in dates, shipping instructions, electrical-order deadlines, internet information, insurance requirements, labor rules, advance warehouse dates, catering rules, hanging-sign regulations, registration instructions, lead retrieval information, and a collection of other things you need to know. You could sit down with a cup of coffee, a yellow highlighter, and the next hour or two of your life.

Or you could give the manual to an AI tool that can work with documents and say:

> *"I'm the exhibit manager responsible for our company's participation in this trade show. Review this exhibitor manual and create a chronological checklist of every deadline, required form, advance-order date, shipping requirement, and action I need to take. Include the page where you found each item so I can verify it."*

Now we're getting somewhere. Notice what AI didn't do. It didn't decide whether you should exhibit. It didn't establish your marketing objectives. It didn't decide how much booth space you need. It didn't negotiate with your exhibit house. And you certainly shouldn't blindly assume that every deadline it extracted is correct without checking important information against the original manual. What it did was help with the grunt work. That's the distinction I want you to remember throughout this book.

AI doesn't have to run your trade show program to make your job considerably easier.

Give Yourself Back Some Time

This may ultimately be one of AI's biggest contributions to exhibit management. Time. Think about how many hours you spend doing work that is necessary but doesn't particularly require your experience. Rewriting an email. Summarizing a meeting. Creating the first draft of a staff memo. Reviewing a long document. Turning notes into a report. Developing a checklist. Researching an unfamiliar

market. Brainstorming headline ideas. Preparing frequently asked questions. Writing three versions of an invitation. Taking a complicated paragraph and making it understandable. None of those tasks is beneath you. They simply don't all require you. There's a difference. If AI saves you twenty minutes here, forty minutes there, and an hour somewhere else, those savings begin to accumulate.

And what can you do with that time? You can spend it on the things AI can't do very well. Talk with Sales. Work with your exhibit team. Understand your customers. Think about strategy. Prepare your booth staff. Build relationships. Solve problems. And maybe, just maybe, get through a trade show week without answering email at midnight. I make no guarantees on that last one.

This Isn't About Doing More AI

There's another trap I want to avoid. Once people discover AI, they sometimes start looking for reasons to use it everywhere. That's backwards. You don't need an AI strategy for making coffee. You need a business reason to use the tool. Throughout this book, we're going to start with the exhibit manager's job and then ask:

Could AI help with this?

Sometimes the answer will be yes. Sometimes it will be no. Sometimes the answer will be, "Yes, but a human needs to make the final decision." That's perfectly fine. The goal isn't to become the exhibit manager who uses the most AI. The goal is to become a better exhibit manager.

Your Experience Just Became More Valuable

There's an interesting thing happening as AI becomes more capable. Experience isn't becoming less important. In many situations, it's becoming more important. Suppose you ask AI to develop five qualification questions for your booth staff. It can do that. But how do you know whether they're good questions? Experience. Suppose AI reviews your pre-show invitation and recommends a different message. Should you use it? Maybe. Who decides? You do. Suppose it analyzes the information from your leads and suggests which prospects deserve immediate attention. Useful? Absolutely. Would I turn over a million-dollar sales opportunity to an algorithm and go play golf? No. AI can generate possibilities remarkably quickly.

Experience helps you determine which possibilities make sense. That's why I don't see AI as a threat to experienced exhibit professionals. I see it as leverage. Put a powerful tool in the hands of someone who understands exhibiting, and you haven't diminished their experience. You've multiplied what they can do with it.

The Advantage Won't Last Forever

Right now, knowing how to use AI effectively can give an exhibit manager an edge. That's part of the reason for the title of this book. But I don't think that advantage will last forever. Eventually, using AI for many routine business tasks will probably become as ordinary as using email, spreadsheets, search engines, and smartphones. Nobody puts "knows how to use email" on a résumé anymore. There was a time when that actually meant something. AI is still early enough that learning how to use it well can separate you from someone who hasn't bothered.

Eventually, I suspect the question won't be:

"Do you use AI?"

It will be:

"How are you using it?"

That's the question I want this book to help you answer. And before we start applying AI to your next trade show, we need to clear up something important. We need to understand what AI and ChatGPT actually are. Not the technical explanation. The useful one. That's next.



CHAPTER 2

What AI and ChatGPT Actually Are

Plain English. No Tech Jargon. No Hype.

Before we start putting AI to work on your trade show program, we should spend a few minutes talking about what it actually is. I said a few minutes. I mean it. You don't need a lesson in computer science to use artificial intelligence any more than you need to understand an internal combustion engine to drive a car. You need to know what the controls do, what the machine can do for you, and where you shouldn't trust it without checking.

That's about the level we're going for here. Artificial intelligence has actually been around for years. You've probably been using some form of it without thinking much about it. When Netflix recommends something you might want to watch, when your phone recognizes your face, when your email program identifies spam, or when an online store recommends something based on what you've previously purchased, some form of artificial intelligence may be working behind the scenes.

What changed for most of us was the arrival of something called generative AI. That's when AI stopped being something primarily happening behind the curtain and became something ordinary people could sit down and talk to. ChatGPT is one of the best-known examples. And that's where things got interesting.

Google Finds. ChatGPT Responds.

When I teach AI to beginners, I usually start with something familiar. Google. If you know how to use Google, you already understand the basic mechanics of using ChatGPT. You type something into a box. You press Enter. Something comes back. But what comes back is very different. Traditionally, when you ask a search engine a question, it helps you find places where the answer might exist.

You search:

> *"What are some good ways to attract more qualified visitors to a trade show booth?"*

A search engine may give you articles, videos, websites, advertisements, and other sources you can explore. You then start reading. ChatGPT works differently. You can ask:

> *"We're exhibiting at a medical-device trade show. Our primary audience is hospital purchasing executives. Give me ten ideas for attracting qualified purchasing executives to our booth without using gimmicks or giveaways."*

Instead of simply giving you places to look, it generates a response to your specific request. Then you can continue the conversation.

> *"I don't like ideas 2, 4, or 7. Give me replacements."*

Then:

> *"Make the ideas appropriate for a 20-by-20-foot exhibit."*

Then:

> *"Our budget is limited. Eliminate anything likely to cost more than $2,000."*

Then:

> *"Turn the three best ideas into something I can send to my boss."*

That's the part many people don't understand until they actually use it.

You're not limited to one question and one answer.

You can have a conversation. And that conversation is where AI becomes particularly useful.

So What Is ChatGPT Doing?

Here's the plain-English version. ChatGPT is a type of artificial intelligence called a large language model. You don't need to remember that term. What matters is that it has been trained on enormous amounts of information and language so it has learned patterns in how words, ideas, concepts, and information relate to one another. When you ask it a question, it generates a response based on those patterns and the instructions and context you provide.

It doesn't think exactly the way you think. It doesn't understand your company the way you do. It hasn't attended your planning meetings. It doesn't automatically know your sales objectives, your customers, your booth, your budget, your corporate politics, or why your vice president absolutely refuses to use the orange graphics. Unless you tell it. That last sentence is important.

Unless you tell it.

The more useful information you give AI about what you're trying to accomplish, the more useful its response can become. That's why learning to communicate with AI matters more than learning a bunch of technical terminology.

It Can Work With More Than Questions

One of the biggest mistakes beginners make is thinking ChatGPT is simply a question-and-answer machine. It's much more useful than that. Depending on the AI tool and features you're using, you may be able to give it documents, spreadsheets, photographs, screenshots, PDFs, and other information to work with. That opens an entirely different door for an exhibit manager. Instead of asking:

> *"What is usually included in an exhibitor manual?"*

you may be able to give it your actual exhibitor manual and say:

> *"Read this and tell me what I need to do."*

Instead of asking:

> *"How should I analyze trade show leads?"*

you may be able to give it appropriate non-sensitive data and ask it to help identify patterns. Instead of describing a chart, you can sometimes show it the chart. Instead of retyping a complicated email from a vendor, you can give it the email and ask:

> *"Explain exactly what they're asking me to do."*

That changes AI from something you occasionally ask questions into something much closer to the assistant we talked about in Chapter 1.

It Writes, But Writing Isn't the Point

Most people's first experience with ChatGPT involves writing.

> *"Write an email."*

"Write a LinkedIn post."

"Rewrite this paragraph."

That's useful. I use it for writing myself. But if that's all you use AI for, you're missing much of its value. AI can help you brainstorm. It can summarize. It can compare. It can organize. It can classify information. It can help you analyze. It can explain something you don't understand. It can challenge an idea. It can create a first draft. It can look at information from different perspectives. It can take something complicated and make it simpler. For an exhibit manager, that means the question isn't:

"What can AI write for me?"

The better question is:

> *"What part of my job involves information, ideas, analysis, organization, or communication that AI might help me with?"*

That's a much bigger question.

AI Doesn't Know Everything

Now we get to one of the most important things you need to understand. AI can be wrong. Not slightly confused. Wrong. And sometimes it can be wrong while sounding remarkably confident. It may give you an answer that is beautifully written, logically presented, and completely believable. And still contain a mistake. That's why I don't want you treating ChatGPT like an electronic oracle. Treat it like a very bright assistant. If your assistant gave you the deadline for ordering electrical service at a trade show, would you risk several thousand dollars without checking the exhibitor manual?

I hope not. Same rule here. If AI gives you an idea for booth messaging, that's one thing. If it tells you your freight must arrive at the advance warehouse by Tuesday at 4:30 p.m., that's something else.

The more important the fact, the more important the verification.

We'll talk much more about this later because knowing when not to trust AI is every bit as important as knowing when to use it.

AI Doesn't Replace Your Judgment

Suppose you ask ChatGPT to create ten possible headlines for your exhibit. It gives you ten. Are they good? AI can't make that decision for

you. It can help. It can explain why one might be stronger than another. It can suggest alternatives. But somebody who understands the company, audience, product, objective, brand, and show still needs to make the decision. That's you and your team. The same thing applies to lead qualification. AI may eventually help you analyze information and identify which prospects appear to deserve attention first. But if your largest customer walks into the booth and mentions a major expansion project, I don't need AI to tell me somebody should follow up.

Human judgment hasn't suddenly become obsolete. In fact, as AI makes it easier to generate enormous amounts of information and recommendations, good judgment may become even more valuable.

Don't Be Intimidated by the Terminology

You're going to hear a lot of words associated with AI. Large language models. Machine learning. Neural networks. Generative AI. Tokens. Algorithms. Training data. Multimodal models. Agents. And probably another dozen terms that will become fashionable before this book has been sitting on your shelf for a year. Learn them if you're interested. You don't need them to get started. I've taught thousands of people complicated subjects over the years, and I've learned something important. People sometimes confuse knowing the vocabulary with knowing how to use the thing. They aren't the same. You can learn every technical term associated with artificial intelligence and still have no idea how to use ChatGPT to save yourself an hour preparing for next month's trade show.

I'd rather teach you the second one.

You Already Know How to Start

If you've never used ChatGPT before, your first conversation doesn't need to be impressive. Try something simple. Tell it:

> *"I'm responsible for managing my company's trade show program. Give me ten ways you could help me with my job before, during, and after a trade show."*

Read what comes back. Something in that answer will probably make you curious. Ask about it. Then ask another question. If the answer is too complicated, say:

"Explain that more simply."

If it's too long:

"Make it shorter."

If it's too generic:

> *"Ask me five questions about our trade show program before you answer."*

If you don't like the answer:

> *"That's not what I'm looking for. Let's try again."*

You can't hurt its feelings. That alone gives AI an advantage over a few people I've worked with. The point is to start talking to it. Because once you understand that AI isn't something you have to program, the barrier starts disappearing. And once that barrier disappears, the next question becomes much more important:

How do you get AI to give you better answers?

That's where we're going next.



Learning how to use and adapt AI now is critical to future success.



CHAPTER 3

The Secret Is Knowing What to Ask

Better Instructions Produce Better Results

One of the first things people discover when they begin using ChatGPT is that sometimes the answer is terrific. And sometimes it isn't. They ask a question, read the response, shrug, and think, I don't see what all the fuss is about. Quite often, the problem isn't AI. It's the question. If I walked into your office and said, "Write me an email," what would you ask me? Probably something like:

"An email to whom?"

"About what?"

"What are you trying to accomplish?"

"How long should it be?"

"What do you want them to do after they read it?"

Without that information, you could certainly write me an email. It probably wouldn't be the email I wanted. ChatGPT works much the same way. Give it a vague assignment and you may get a vague answer. Give it useful information, explain what you're trying to accomplish, and tell it what you want the result to look like, and the quality can improve dramatically. That's prompting. And despite what you may have heard, you don't need a degree in prompt engineering to do it.

Talk to It Like a Person

When I teach beginners how to use ChatGPT, I don't start by giving them complicated prompt formulas. I tell them to talk to it. Suppose you're preparing for a trade show and you type:

"Write an invitation to our trade show."

ChatGPT can do that. But it knows almost nothing about what you actually need. Compare that with this:

> *"I'm the exhibit manager for a company that manufactures commercial packaging equipment. We're exhibiting at Pack Expo in Las Vegas. Our primary audience is plant managers and packaging engineers at food-manufacturing companies. We're introducing a new machine that can reduce packaging changeover time. Write a short pre-show email inviting qualified prospects to visit our booth for a demonstration. Make it professional and conversational, not promotional. The goal is to get them to schedule a 20-minute appointment."*

Now ChatGPT has something to work with. You told it who you are. You told it what you're doing. You described the audience. You explained what's important about the product. You told it what you want written. You described the tone. And, most importantly, you told it what you want the recipient to do. That's not prompt engineering. That's good communication.

Context Changes Everything

There's a word you'll hear frequently when people talk about getting better results from AI.

Context.

Context simply means giving AI enough background to understand the situation. If you ask:

> *"What should our trade show objectives be?"*

AI has to guess. What company? What industry? What show? Why are you exhibiting? Are you introducing a product? Looking for distributors? Meeting existing customers? Generating new sales opportunities? Entering a new market? Recruiting? Building awareness? The answer depends on the situation. So give AI the situation. You might say:

> *"We're a mid-sized industrial equipment manufacturer exhibiting at a national trade show for the first time. Our booth is 20 by 30 feet. Sales wants new business opportunities, management wants measurable ROI, and we're introducing a new product at the show. Help me develop five measurable objectives for our participation. Ask me any questions you need answered before recommending the objectives."*

Notice that last sentence.

Ask me any questions you need answered.

That's one of the simplest ways I've found to improve an AI conversation. You don't have to anticipate everything ChatGPT needs to know. Tell it to ask. Now you're not simply issuing commands. You're having a conversation.

Don't Try to Write the Perfect Prompt

This is where some people make using AI unnecessarily difficult. They believe they have to construct one enormous, perfect prompt that anticipates every possible variable and produces the perfect answer on the first try. You don't. I rarely do. I'll ask for something. I'll look at the answer. Then I'll say:

"That's too long."

Or:

"Make it more conversational."

Or:

"You're concentrating too much on our product. Make this more about the visitor's problem."

Or:

"I like number three. Give me five more ideas like that."

Or simply:

"No. That's not what I mean."

Then I explain what I mean. That's how normal conversations work. Why should this one be different? Think of your first prompt as the beginning of the assignment, not necessarily the end of it.

Give It a Job

Another simple technique is to tell AI what role you want it to play. Suppose you're reviewing plans for an upcoming exhibit. Instead of saying:

"Review this booth plan."

you might say:

> *"Act as an experienced trade show exhibit consultant. I'm going to give you information about our upcoming show, our objectives, our audience, and our booth plan. Review it critically. Don't automatically agree with our ideas. Identify anything that could interfere with visitor engagement, lead qualification, or achieving our objectives."*

You've now given AI a perspective from which to evaluate the information. You can take that further.

> *"Review this as a sales manager."*
>
> *"Now review it as a first-time visitor."*
>
> *"Look at it from the perspective of our largest competitor."*
>
> *"Now act as our CFO and tell me what questions you would ask about this expenditure."*

Same exhibit. Different perspectives. That can be extremely useful when you're trying to see something your own familiarity may be preventing you from seeing.

Give It Something to Work With

AI becomes considerably more useful when you stop making it guess. If you're asking it to help with booth messaging, give it information about your company, product, audience, and objectives. If you're asking it to review an exhibitor manual, give it the manual. If you're asking it to improve an email, give it the email. If you're asking it to summarize a meeting, give it your notes or transcript if appropriate. If you're asking it to help prepare booth staff, explain what the company sells, who attends the show, what you're trying to accomplish, and what a qualified prospect looks like.

The quality of the information going in affects the usefulness of what comes back. That isn't unique to artificial intelligence. We've known it in the computer world forever. Garbage in. Garbage out. AI just produces much better-looking garbage.

Tell It What the Finished Product Should Look Like

Here's another simple improvement. Don't just tell AI what to do. Tell it how you want the answer delivered. Suppose you upload an exhibitor manual and say:

> *"Find all the important deadlines."*

Useful. But you could say:

> *"Review this exhibitor manual and create a chronological checklist. For each item, give me the deadline, what must be done, who would normally be responsible, whether there appears to be an advance-order discount, and the page number where you found the information. Put the items in date order."*

Now you've described the output. You can do the same thing with almost any assignment.

"Give me the answer in three paragraphs."

"Create a table."

"Make this a one-page executive summary."

"Write this so a salesperson can read it in two minutes."

"Give me the five most important points first."

"Turn this into a checklist I can use during our booth-staff meeting."

The clearer you are about what you want back, the less work you'll usually have to do cleaning it up.

Ask AI to Improve Your Prompt

Here's one that surprises beginners. You can ask ChatGPT to help you ask ChatGPT. Suppose you know what you're trying to accomplish but aren't sure how to explain it. Tell it:

> *"I want you to help me create a booth-staff training plan for an upcoming trade show. Before you create the plan, ask me every question you need answered about the company, show, audience, products, objectives, staff, and lead qualification process. After I answer your questions, build the plan."*

You don't have to know what information belongs in the prompt. You're asking AI to help gather it. This is one reason I don't want you getting hung up on complicated prompt formulas. If you're unsure what AI needs, ask it.

Don't Automatically Accept the First Answer

This may be the most important habit you develop. AI gives you an answer. That doesn't mean the assignment is finished. Read it. Think about it. Challenge it. Ask:

"What are you missing?"

"What assumptions did you make?"

"Give me the argument against this recommendation."

"Which of these ideas would you eliminate and why?"

"What would an experienced exhibit manager question about this?"

"I think you're wrong about number four. Reconsider it."

You are allowed to push back. In fact, you should. The value of AI isn't simply that it can give you answers. Sometimes its greatest value is helping you think through the question.

One Prompt Can Become a Conversation

Let's take a trade show example from beginning to end. You might begin:

"We're exhibiting at a national manufacturing trade show in Chicago. We have a 20-by-20 booth and expect about 2,000 attendees. Help me create a pre-show marketing plan."

AI responds. You read it and continue:

"Our budget for pre-show promotion is only $5,000. Revise it."

Then:

"We don't want giveaways. Remove those ideas."

Then:

"Our main objective is appointments with qualified prospects. Rebuild the plan around that."

Then:

"Give me the three actions most likely to produce appointments."

Then:

"Write the email for action number one."

Then:

"That's too promotional. Make it sound like one businessperson writing to another."

Then:

"Give me three subject lines."

That's not seven different AI assignments. It's one conversation. And every step makes the result more specific to you. Once you understand that, ChatGPT begins to feel much less like software and much more like something you work with.

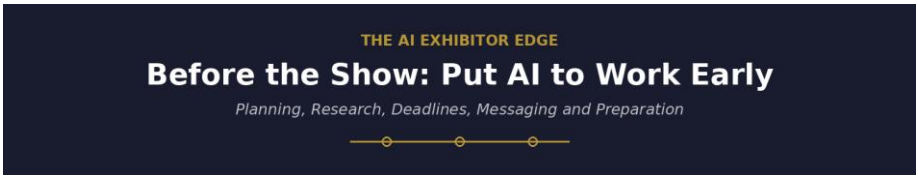
A Simple Formula If You Want One

I said you don't need a formula. You don't. But if you want something easy to remember when you're staring at an empty ChatGPT box, use this: Tell it who you are. Tell it what you're trying to accomplish. Give it the information it needs. Tell it what you want it to do. Tell it what you want the result to look like. Then read the answer and keep talking. That's enough to get started. And now that you know how to ask, we can stop talking about AI in theory. It's time to open the exhibitor manual, look at the calendar, think about the audience, and start preparing for the show.

Because some of the best opportunities to put AI to work happen long before the first visitor ever walks into your booth.



Excerpts for this book were taken from the live webinar.



CHAPTER 4

Before the Show: Put AI to Work Early

Planning, Research, Deadlines, Messaging and Preparation

Long before the first attendee walks into your booth, much of the success or failure of your trade show has already been determined. That's not particularly exciting. Nobody takes pictures of the exhibit manager sitting at a desk three months before the show reviewing deadlines, coordinating staff, researching prospects, working on objectives, approving graphics, and wondering why nobody has responded to the email marked URGENT.

But that's where a lot of the real work happens. And it's also where AI can become extremely useful. Not by running the show for you. By helping with the enormous amount of research, reading, organizing, writing, brainstorming, and preparation that happens before anyone gets on an airplane. This is where your newest assistant can start earning its keep.

Start With the Exhibitor Manual

If you've exhibited before, you know the document. The exhibitor manual. Depending on the show, it may be relatively straightforward or it may contain enough pages, forms, rules, dates, instructions, and warnings to qualify as bedtime reading for someone suffering from insomnia. Unfortunately, somewhere in there are things that can cost you real money if you miss them. Advance-order deadlines. Freight dates. Electrical orders. Internet service. Labor requirements. Insurance certificates. Hanging signs. Cleaning. Catering. Lead retrieval. Move-in times. Move-out rules. Registration. Material handling. The information is important. Finding and organizing it is tedious. That's a perfect example of where AI may help. If the AI system you're using allows you to upload documents, give it the exhibitor manual and explain exactly what you need.

For example:

> *"I am the exhibit manager responsible for our company's participation in this trade show. Review the attached exhibitor manual and create a chronological checklist of every deadline, required form, advance-order date, shipping requirement, registration requirement, and other action we need to take. Include the page number where you found each item so I can verify it against the original document. Flag anything that appears to involve an additional charge if we miss the deadline."*

Think about what just happened. You didn't ask AI to manage your trade show. You gave it a time-consuming reading and organization assignment. That's an important distinction. And notice that I asked for page references. Why? Because AI can make mistakes. I want it to help me find the information. I still want to verify anything important before acting on it. That's a habit worth developing from the beginning.

Turn the Manual Into a Working Calendar

Once you've identified the deadlines, don't stop there. Ask AI to help organize them into a working schedule. You might continue the same conversation:

> *"Now reorganize these deadlines into a project schedule beginning 120 days before the show. Recommend when we should begin each task rather than simply showing the final deadline. Allow extra time for anything involving outside vendors, management approval, design, printing, or shipping."*

Now we're moving from information to planning. The show organizer tells you when something is due. Your real job is deciding when you need to start working on it. Those aren't the same thing. If graphics must be submitted by May 15, May 15 isn't the day to start thinking about graphics. AI can help you work backward. Again, you're making the decisions. AI is helping you see the sequence.

Research the Show Before You Design the Experience

One mistake exhibitors can make is starting with the booth. What should it look like? What graphics should we use? What should we demonstrate? Those are important questions. But I'd rather start somewhere else.

Who are we trying to meet, and what do we want to accomplish when we meet them?

AI can help with that research. Suppose you're considering a show you've never attended. You can ask AI to help you develop a research plan around the event, its audience, the industries represented, likely job titles, common business issues, competing exhibitors, and the types of companies expected to attend. But be careful here. Current show information changes. Exhibitor lists change. Schedules change. Attendance figures change. Speakers change. If you need current information, use an AI tool capable of searching current sources, give it current materials from the organizer, or verify the information yourself.

The point isn't to have AI magically know everything about the show. The point is to use AI to help you make sense of the information you have.

Give AI the Attendee's Chair

Here's an exercise I particularly like. We spend so much time looking at our exhibit from inside the booth that we sometimes forget what it looks like from the aisle. So change chairs. Tell AI about your company, product, audience, and current exhibit message. Then say:

> *"Act as a potential customer walking the trade show floor. You have never heard of our company. You will give our exhibit about five seconds of attention as you walk past. Based on this messaging, what do you think we do, who do you think we help, and why would you stop?"*

That can produce an interesting conversation. Then push harder.

"What is unclear?"

> *"What sounds like marketing language rather than a customer benefit?"*

"What would make you keep walking?"

> *"Rewrite the message so a visitor can understand our value more quickly."*

You don't have to accept the recommendation. That's not the point. The point is to force yourself to look at your exhibit through another set of eyes.

Objectives Before Activities

Ask someone why the company is exhibiting and you'll occasionally hear answers like:

"We've always been there."

Or:

"All our competitors are there."

Or the classic:

"We need exposure."

None of those tells me what success looks like. AI can help you think through objectives, but don't ask it simply to give you "trade show objectives." Give it your situation. Explain why the company is exhibiting, who you want to meet, what you're selling, what Sales expects, what management expects, whether you're launching anything new, and what happened at the show last year. Then ask:

> *"Based on this information, help me develop five measurable objectives for this trade show. For each objective, recommend what we would need to measure during or after the show to determine whether we achieved it."*

Now AI isn't merely giving you ideas. It's helping connect objectives to measurement. That's a much more useful conversation. And there's another benefit. If AI has trouble identifying how an objective could be measured, maybe the objective needs more work.

Research the People You Want to Meet

Trade shows are unusual marketing environments because you often know quite a bit about who might be there before the doors open. You may have access to attendee information supplied appropriately by the organizer. Your salespeople know customers and prospects who are attending. You may know target companies you want to reach. You may know specific accounts that matter. AI can help organize your thinking around those opportunities. Suppose your sales team identifies twenty target companies. Rather than simply giving everyone a list, you could use appropriate public and company-approved information to help prepare account briefs.

What does the company do? What markets does it serve? What problems might be relevant to your product? What recent public developments might make a conversation timely? What questions

should the booth staff ask? What should they not assume? That last question matters. AI can help you prepare. It shouldn't help you pretend you know things you don't.

Let AI Help With Pre-Show Invitations

I've seen plenty of pre-show invitations over the years. Many of them essentially say:

"We're exhibiting at Booth 427. Come see us!"

Why? Why should I come see you? I'm attending a show with hundreds of exhibitors competing for my time. Your booth number isn't a reason. This is another place where AI can help, particularly because it can generate and revise multiple approaches quickly. Give it the audience. Give it the problem your product solves. Give it the reason someone should spend ten minutes with you. Give it the show information. Then ask for several approaches. Perhaps one for existing customers. Another for qualified prospects. Another for dormant accounts. Another for people who have expressed interest but aren't yet ready to buy. Then tell AI what you think.

"Too promotional."

"Shorter."

"Lead with the customer's problem."

"Don't mention our company until the second paragraph."

"Make the call to action an appointment, not simply a booth visit."

Now you're using AI as a writing partner rather than a writing machine. That's a big difference.

Use AI to Help You Think About Appointments

A booth full of traffic may look successful. A booth full of the right people is better. If you know there are specific customers and prospects you want to meet, pre-show appointment setting deserves attention. AI can help you develop the communication sequence. Not just one email. Perhaps an initial invitation. A follow-up. A shorter reminder. A message from the salesperson. A confirmation after the appointment is scheduled. A brief reminder on the morning of the meeting. Different prospects may need different messages. AI makes creating those variations considerably easier than starting from a

blank page every time. But remember something we've already discussed. Personalization isn't putting someone's first name at the top of a generic email.

Real personalization comes from relevance. AI can help you create relevance if you give it enough information.

Prepare the Booth Staff Before They Arrive

One of the most expensive things an exhibitor can do is fly a group of people to a trade show and assume they automatically know how to work the booth. They may be excellent salespeople. That doesn't automatically make them excellent booth staff. The environment is different. The time available is different. The visitor is different. And the objective of the conversation may be different. AI can help you prepare training materials specific to the show. Give it information about your company, the audience, your objectives, products, likely visitor questions, and what constitutes a qualified opportunity.

Then ask it to help create a short booth-staff briefing. You could ask for realistic visitor scenarios. You could have it create role-playing exercises. You could ask it to play the visitor while a staff member practices opening a conversation. You could give it common product questions and ask it to develop a knowledge quiz. You could ask:

> *"Create five realistic trade show visitor scenarios ranging from completely unqualified to an immediate sales opportunity. For each scenario, give me enough information for two booth staff members to role-play the conversation without telling them in advance whether the visitor is qualified."*

Now you've created a training exercise in seconds. And you can ask for five more.

Start Thinking About Qualification Before the Show

This is where pre-show planning begins connecting with something we'll spend much more time on later. Lead follow-up. If you're going to collect information from visitors, decide before the show what information matters. Don't wait until everyone gets home to ask:

> *"How are we going to know which of these people are good prospects?"*

By then you've already lost information you could have collected while the prospect was standing in front of you. AI can help you think through qualification criteria. Describe your product. Describe your

sales process. Describe what makes someone a good prospect. Then ask AI to help identify the information a salesperson would need to decide whether a prospect deserves immediate attention. You might discover that some of the questions are obvious. Others may not be. This is one of those places where AI and human experience work particularly well together. AI can generate possibilities. Sales can tell you what actually matters. Then you build the qualification process around both.

We'll return to this in detail because qualification is the bridge between collecting names and creating sales leads. And that's a bridge many exhibitors never build.

Use AI to Challenge the Plan

Here's one more thing I'd do before the show. After you've developed the plan, give AI enough information to understand it and ask it to find weaknesses. Not praise. Weaknesses. Try:

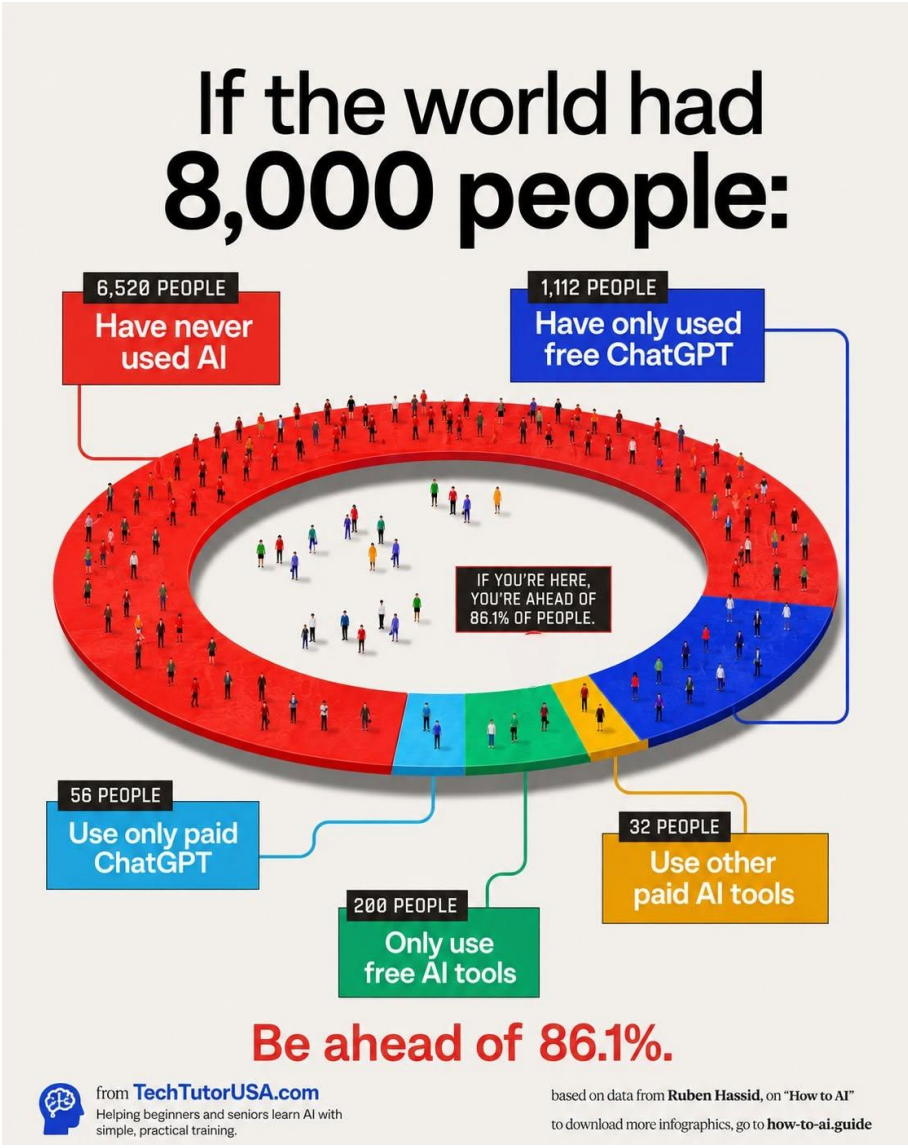
> *"Act as a skeptical senior marketing executive reviewing this trade show plan before approving the final budget. Identify the ten questions you would ask me. Concentrate on objectives, target audience, booth strategy, staffing, lead qualification, follow-up, and measurement. Don't compliment the plan. Challenge it."*

I like prompts like this because AI has a tendency to be agreeable. Sometimes I don't want agreeable. I want somebody poking holes in the boat before we put it in the water. You may disagree with half of what comes back. Fine. If one question identifies something important you've overlooked, the exercise was worth it.

The Goal Is Better Preparation, Not More Preparation

There's a danger in all this. Because AI makes it easier to create things, you can suddenly create far more things than you need. Twenty invitation variations. Fifty booth-message ideas. Thirty staff-training exercises. A twelve-page competitive analysis. A beautiful 40-point checklist for something that used to require ten points. That's not productivity. That's paperwork with a turbocharger. Use AI to simplify your work, not multiply it. The objective is not to arrive at the show with more documents. The objective is to arrive better prepared. Your objectives are clear. Your staff understands what they're supposed to accomplish. Your important prospects know you're there. Your deadlines have been handled.

Your messaging makes sense. Your qualification criteria are established. And you already know what's supposed to happen to the information you collect. That's what preparation looks like. Then the doors open. And everything gets interesting. Because your AI assistant doesn't have to stay back at the office. There are plenty of ways it can help while the show is actually happening. That's next.



It's time to take all this very seriously.



CHAPTER 5

During the Show: Your AI Assistant Didn't Stay Home

Using AI While the Show Is Actually Happening

The doors open. For the next several hours, all that planning becomes reality. Visitors arrive. Booth staff scatter. Demonstrations begin. Meetings overlap. Somebody can't find the person they're supposed to meet. A salesperson disappears for lunch at exactly the wrong time. Your competitor across the aisle suddenly has something new you weren't expecting. And somewhere in the middle of all this, you're supposed to manage the exhibit. This is where I want to make an important distinction about AI. Before the show, you may have the luxury of sitting at your desk and spending twenty minutes working through a problem with ChatGPT.

On the show floor, you probably don't. Your use of AI needs to become quicker and more practical. The question changes from:

"What can AI do?"

to:

"What can AI help me do right now?"

Start the Day With a Better Briefing

Most experienced exhibitors know the value of a short booth-staff meeting before the show opens. The key word is short. Your staff doesn't need a 45-minute motivational speech at 8:15 in the morning. They need to know what matters today. What did we learn yesterday? What appointments are scheduled? Which customers or prospects are expected? What questions kept coming up? What problems did we encounter? What do we need to do differently today? AI can help turn yesterday's information into today's briefing. Suppose you have notes

from several staff members after the first day. Instead of manually sorting through everything, you could give appropriate non-confidential notes to AI and ask:

> *"These are notes from our booth staff after the first day of the trade show. Summarize the five most important things the entire staff should know before the show opens tomorrow. Identify recurring visitor questions, potential problems, strong sales opportunities, and anything we should change today. Keep the briefing short enough to deliver in five minutes."*

Now you have a starting point. You review it. You correct anything necessary. You add what AI couldn't possibly know. And instead of spending half an hour trying to organize everybody's comments at the end of a long show day, you may have a useful briefing in minutes. That's AI doing what I think it does particularly well. Taking a pile of information and helping you make sense of it.

Listen for Patterns

One of the most valuable things happening in your booth has nothing to do with how many badges you scan. You're hearing the market talk. Visitors ask questions. They describe problems. They react to your product. They compare you with competitors. They tell you what they're planning. They tell you what's frustrating them. They may even tell you what they wish somebody in your industry would build. The problem is that these conversations are happening all over the booth with different staff members. One person hears one thing. Another person hears something else. At the end of the day, much of it disappears. AI can help identify patterns if you give it useful information.

Imagine asking each staff member to record three or four observations at the end of the day. Nothing complicated. What questions did you hear repeatedly? What objections came up? What problems were visitors trying to solve? What surprised you? What did people seem especially interested in? Combine those observations and ask AI:

> *"Review these booth-staff observations from today. Identify recurring themes, questions, objections, customer problems, competitive mentions, and anything that appears more than once. Don't make assumptions beyond the information provided."*

Now you're beginning to turn dozens of individual conversations into market intelligence. That's more valuable than a traffic count.

Adjust While You Still Have a Show

Here's where those patterns become especially useful. Suppose it's the end of Day One of a three-day show and visitors keep asking a question your graphics don't answer. Why wait until next year to fix it? Maybe the booth staff needs a better response. Maybe tomorrow's demonstration should address it. Maybe a monitor presentation can be changed. Maybe the staff briefing should emphasize it. Maybe the question reveals that visitors don't understand your message as well as you thought they did. AI can help you think through the response. You might say:

> *"Visitors repeatedly asked the following question today: [QUESTION]. Our current booth message is [MESSAGE]. Give me five possible reasons visitors may be confused and recommend simple changes we could make tomorrow without redesigning the exhibit."*

Some suggestions may be useless. One might be exactly what you need. That's enough. The point is that your trade show plan doesn't have to become frozen the moment the show opens. You're collecting real information. Use it.

Help the Staff Have Better Conversations

Trade show conversations happen fast. A visitor walks up. You have seconds to establish some relevance. Then you need to learn enough to determine whether the conversation should continue. AI can be useful in helping staff prepare for those conversations. Suppose several staff members are having difficulty explaining a complicated new product simply. Give AI the technical description and say:

> *"Our booth staff needs to explain this product to a visitor in about 30 seconds. Rewrite this explanation in conversational language. Assume the visitor understands our industry but isn't familiar with this product. Concentrate on the business problem it solves rather than technical features."*

Then take the result back to the staff. Or perhaps you're attracting plenty of visitors but conversations are lasting too long with people who aren't likely prospects. You could ask AI to help develop several polite transition questions that allow staff to learn quickly why someone stopped. The purpose isn't to turn your people into robots reciting AI-generated scripts. It's the opposite. Give them better tools so they can spend more time having genuine conversations with the right people.

Research Before an Important Meeting

A prospect you've been trying to reach for six months sends a message.

"I'm at the show. Can I stop by at 2:30?"

Absolutely. Now you have 20 minutes to prepare. This is another situation where AI can help. Using appropriate public information and whatever company-approved information you already have, you might ask AI to help create a quick briefing. What does the company do? What do you already know about the account? What products or services might be relevant? What questions should you ask? What shouldn't you assume? If you're using an AI system capable of accessing current web information, you might also research recent public developments involving the company.

But current information needs to be verified. And confidential internal information needs to be handled according to your company's policies. AI can help you prepare for the conversation. It shouldn't become a reason to forget common sense.

Capture Better Information While It's Fresh

Here's where we begin moving toward one of my favorite subjects. Leads. We'll spend much more time on this in the next chapters, but something important has to happen while the visitor is still standing in the booth. You need to capture information that will matter later. A badge scan can tell you who the person is. It may tell you the company, title, address, email, and other registration information. But it doesn't necessarily tell you why they stopped. What are they interested in? What problem are they trying to solve? Do they currently use a competing product? Are they planning a purchase? When? Who else is involved?

What should happen next? Those are the things your salesperson will wish somebody had captured when they're looking at the record three days later. AI can help you decide before the show what information should be captured. During the show, depending on the lead-retrieval system and your company's policies, it may also help organize or summarize notes. For example, a staff member's raw note might say:

> *"New plant Q1. Using XYZ now. Problems with downtime. Mary recommends us. Wants demo with engineering. Call next week."*

AI could help turn that into something more useful:

> *"Prospect is planning a new plant in Q1 and currently uses XYZ equipment. Experiencing downtime issues. Referred by Mary. Requested a follow-up demonstration involving the engineering team. Recommended next action: contact next week to schedule demonstration."*

Same information. Much more useful when somebody reads it later. But don't let the technology become an excuse for capturing less information. AI can't summarize what nobody bothered to record.

Your Phone Just Became More Useful

You don't necessarily need to be sitting behind a laptop in the booth to use AI. Many AI tools are available on smartphones. That means your assistant can be in your pocket. You may be able to speak rather than type. You can ask a quick question. Summarize a thought. Draft a message. Review a photograph or screenshot when appropriate. Turn rough notes into something organized. Prepare for an upcoming conversation. This is particularly useful during a trade show because exhibit managers spend very little time sitting still. But there's an important practical point here. Don't become the person walking around the booth staring at a phone while visitors are trying to make eye contact.

Technology should support engagement. It shouldn't replace it. The person standing in front of you wins.

Turn Show-Floor Activity Into Content

Trade shows produce enormous amounts of potential content. New products. Customer conversations. Presentations. Demonstrations. Industry observations. Photos. Questions. Trends. Staff experiences. Most companies use a fraction of it. AI can help turn appropriate show-floor information into content quickly. You might give it several notes and ask for a short LinkedIn post. Or ask it to turn three observations from the day into an email update for customers who couldn't attend.

Perhaps someone on your team gave a presentation. AI can help turn the main points into several short posts. Maybe the same question has been asked twenty times in the booth. That sounds like the beginning of an article. Again, the content should come from your experience. AI helps you package it. That's different from asking AI to

invent something so you have something to post. The trade show is already giving you the material. Pay attention to it.

Keep Management Informed Without Writing a Novel

Somebody back at headquarters wants an update. Maybe it's your boss. Maybe it's the CEO. Maybe it's Sales. They don't need a minute-by-minute diary of the show. They need the important things. AI can help turn your notes into a concise management update. You might say:

> *"Using these notes from Day One, prepare a brief update for senior management. Include overall activity, important customer or prospect meetings, recurring market observations, significant sales opportunities, problems requiring attention, and what we're changing for tomorrow. Keep it under 300 words. Don't add anything that isn't in my notes."*

That last sentence matters. Don't add anything that isn't in my notes. You're using AI to organize the report. Not manufacture the report.

Watch the Competition—Intelligently

Trade shows give you an unusual opportunity to see competitors in one place. What are they emphasizing? What's new? How are they positioning themselves? What are visitors responding to? What questions are customers asking about them? AI can help organize observations from your staff. Suppose five people walked the floor and came back with notes about three competitors. Give those notes to AI and ask it to organize them by competitor, message, product, apparent strength, potential weakness, and questions that deserve further investigation.

Notice the phrase questions that deserve further investigation. That's different from asking AI to declare what a competitor's weaknesses are based on a few booth observations. Observation is evidence. Interpretation is judgment. Don't confuse the two.

AI Doesn't Belong in Every Conversation

There's something else worth saying. Just because AI can help during the show doesn't mean you should use it constantly. Trade shows are human environments. That's their great strength. People travel hundreds or thousands of miles because there is still value in standing across from another human being, asking questions, seeing

reactions, shaking hands, examining products, and having conversations that don't happen quite the same way through a screen.

Don't use AI to automate the humanity out of the experience. If a customer is telling you about a serious problem, listen. If a prospect is explaining what they need, ask another question. If an old customer walks into the booth, put the phone down. AI will still be there in five minutes. The customer may not.

End Each Day Smarter Than You Started

This may be the simplest way to think about using AI during the show. At the end of each day, ask:

What did we learn today that should change what we do tomorrow?

Collect the observations. Collect the questions. Look at the leads. Talk with the staff. Then use AI where it helps you organize and analyze what you've learned. A trade show shouldn't be three identical days repeated one after another. Day Two should benefit from Day One. Day Three should benefit from both. AI can help accelerate that learning. But while all of this is happening, your company is also collecting names. Maybe hundreds of them. Maybe thousands. The scanner beeps. Another name goes into the system. Beep. Another one. Beep. Another one. And everybody feels good because the lead count keeps going up. There's just one problem.

A name isn't necessarily a lead.

And understanding the difference may be one of the most important things you do at the entire show. That's next.



CHAPTER 6

You Collected Names. Did You Collect Leads?

The Most Misunderstood Part of Exhibiting

The show is going well. Traffic is good. The booth staff is busy. The lead retrieval system keeps beeping. At the end of the first day, somebody looks at the number and says:

"We got 187 leads today."

Maybe. Or maybe you collected 187 names. There is a difference. And after more than 50 years in the trade show industry, I believe that difference is at the heart of one of exhibiting's biggest and most expensive problems.

Trade shows generate names. Qualification creates leads.

That's not semantics. It's the beginning of understanding what should happen after the show.

The Scanner Doesn't Know Who Wants to Buy

Badge scanning is wonderful technology. It's fast. It's convenient. It eliminates business cards and handwritten lead forms. It can automatically capture information about the visitor. But there's something a scanner can't determine simply from reading a badge.

Why did this person stop at your booth?

Maybe they're interested in buying. Maybe they're an existing customer. Maybe they're a student. Maybe they're a competitor. Maybe they're looking for a job. Maybe they're a consultant. Maybe they liked your demonstration. Maybe they wanted the giveaway. Maybe they saw someone they knew standing inside. Or maybe they

really do have a problem your company can solve and are planning to purchase something in the next 90 days.

Beep. Beep. Beep. From the scanner's perspective, they can all look remarkably similar. That's why I have always been uncomfortable when exhibitors refer to every name collected at a trade show as a sales lead. They're not. Some of them may become excellent leads. Some may become customers. Some may represent significant sales opportunities. But first you have to figure out which is which. That's qualification.

Put Yourself in the Salesperson's Shoes

This is where Marketing and Sales can begin looking at the same pile of names very differently. Marketing comes back from the show excited.

> *"Great show. We generated 600 leads."*

Sales hears:

> *"Here are 600 people. We don't know which ones are actually interested in buying. Please call all of them and figure it out."*

Those are very different messages. Now put yourself in the salesperson's shoes. They already have customers. They already have prospects. They already have quotes outstanding. They have meetings. They have calls to return. They have a pipeline. They may have sales opportunities they have been working on for months. Now you hand them 75, 100, or 200 names from the trade show and say:

> *"Follow these up."*

Which one should they call first? The CEO? The engineer? The person who spent 30 minutes in the booth? The person who scanned a badge to get literature? The visitor whose note says, "Interested"? Interested in what? Interested when? Interested enough to buy? You can see the problem. The salesperson isn't necessarily ignoring good leads. The salesperson may be trying to find the good leads buried among all the names. That's a marketing problem before it becomes a sales problem.

I Built a Business Around This Problem

I didn't learn this from a book. I learned it by watching the problem happen over and over again. Companies would invest enormous amounts of money in trade shows. They paid for exhibit space. The

exhibit. Shipping. Drayage. Travel. Hotels. Labor. Graphics. Promotions. Lead retrieval. Staff time. Then they collected hundreds or thousands of names and handed them to Sales. And too often, that was essentially the end of the process. I saw an opportunity to do something differently. In 1986, I built a business around trade show lead response, qualification, follow-up, nurturing, and measurement. Over the years, we processed more than one million trade show sales leads.

That's a lot of names. And it taught me something that has stayed with me throughout my career.

The value isn't in the pile.

The value is in identifying the people inside that pile who have a reason to continue the conversation. That's what turns trade show activity into potential business.

Qualification Should Begin in the Booth

The best time to learn about a prospect is usually while they're standing in front of you. Not three weeks later. Not after Sales receives a spreadsheet. Not after somebody imports the names into a CRM. Now. You don't need to interrogate people. You're having a business conversation. But that conversation should help you understand why they're there and what should happen next. What are they using now? What problem are they trying to solve? Are they considering a change? What's their timing? Are they involved in the decision? What happens next? The exact questions depend on your company, product, market, and sales process. But the principle doesn't change.

Capture information that helps determine what should happen after the show.

That's much more valuable than collecting another email address.

AI Can Help You Develop Better Questions

This is an excellent place to use AI before the show. Suppose you're selling industrial automation equipment. You could tell ChatGPT about the product, your typical customer, your sales process, and the information Sales needs before deciding whether an opportunity deserves immediate attention. Then ask:

> *"Help me develop five conversational qualification questions for our booth staff. The questions should help us understand the*

> *visitor's current situation, reason for interest, purchasing intention, approximate timing, and involvement in the decision. They should sound like natural business questions, not an interrogation."*

Look at what AI gives you. Then take those questions to Sales. That's important. Ask the salespeople:

> *"If we came back from the show with answers to these questions, would you know who you wanted to call first?"*

If they say no, keep working. That's the test. The goal isn't to create impressive questions. The goal is to collect useful answers.

Notes Matter More Than You Think

I've seen lead records containing notes like:

"Good prospect."

"Hot."

"Send info."

"Interested."

Those notes may have meant something to the person who wrote them while the conversation was fresh. Three days later? Not so much. Interested in what? Why are they a good prospect? What makes them hot? What information should we send? What did we promise? What happens next? AI can help turn rough booth notes into clearer summaries, as we discussed in the previous chapter. But there's a limit. If the note says only "Hot prospect," AI doesn't know why. It can make the sentence prettier. It can't create the missing conversation. This is worth remembering throughout your use of artificial intelligence.

AI can organize information you capture. It cannot recover important information you never collected.

Not Everybody Has to Be Ready to Buy

There's another mistake exhibitors make. They divide the world into two groups. Hot lead. Not a lead. That's too simplistic. Suppose someone is a perfect prospect for your company but isn't planning to buy for nine months. Is that person worthless? Of course not. They simply aren't ready for Sales today. That's where lead management becomes more than lead distribution. Some people need immediate

sales attention. Some need additional qualification. Some need information. Some should be nurtured. Some are existing customers who need something completely different. And some probably don't need any further attention at all. The objective is to determine which is which. That's why I prefer thinking about trade show follow-up as a process rather than an event.

Sending one email after the show isn't a process. Importing everybody into the CRM isn't a process. Handing a stack of names to Sales isn't a process. Those are activities. A process determines what happens to different people based on what you know about them and what they do next.

Here's Where AI Gets Interesting

Now imagine combining that process with artificial intelligence. AI can help organize information. It can help summarize notes. It can help identify patterns. It can assist with segmentation. It can help create different communications for different types of prospects. It can help personalize messages. It can help analyze responses. It can help prepare nurturing content. And, when used appropriately with your systems and data policies, it can help you make sense of a large amount of lead information much faster than someone manually reading every record.

That's powerful. But I want to put a large warning label on this idea.

AI should support your qualification process. It should not invent one.

If your company hasn't decided what constitutes a qualified lead, AI doesn't magically know. If Sales and Marketing disagree about what a good prospect looks like, AI doesn't solve that disagreement. If nobody owns follow-up, AI doesn't suddenly create accountability. If you collect poor information at the booth, AI doesn't turn poor information into good information. Technology can make a good process better. It can also make a bad process faster.

Ask Sales Before the Show, Not After It

Here's a conversation I'd like every exhibit manager to have before the next show. Sit down with Sales and ask:

> *"What would you need to know about someone we meet at the show for you to consider that person worthy of immediate follow-up?"*

Then listen. Maybe it's project timing. Maybe it's budget. Maybe it's company size. Maybe it's current equipment. Maybe it's purchasing authority. Maybe it's a specific business problem. Maybe it's geographic territory. Maybe it's something unique to your industry. Whatever it is, that's information you should consider capturing. Then ask another question:

"What would make you want to call one person before another?"

Now you're talking about prioritization. This is where Marketing can make Sales' job much easier. Instead of saying:

> *"Here are the trade show leads."*

you can eventually say:

> *"Here are the people who appear to have the strongest reason for immediate sales attention. Here's what we know about them. Here's what they told us. And here's what they expect to happen next."*

That's a very different handoff.

Don't Make Sales Dig for the Buyers

This may be the simplest way I can explain my philosophy about trade show leads. Imagine I give you a pile of 500 names. Somewhere in that pile are twenty people who have a genuine interest in buying what you sell. Your job is to find them. Would you rather have Marketing identify those twenty as far as possible through qualification and response? Or would you rather give all 500 names to Sales and tell the salespeople to start digging? I know which one I'd choose. Salespeople should sell. Marketing should help make sure they know who deserves their attention first. That's not keeping leads away from Sales.

It's giving Sales better leads. And it changes the entire conversation about trade show follow-up.

The Show Isn't Over When the Booth Closes

This is the point where many companies mentally finish the trade show. The booth closes. Everybody flies home. The exhibit ships back. Expenses start arriving. Pictures get posted. Someone says it was a great show. And the names get distributed. Done. No. If lead generation was one of your objectives, you may have completed the

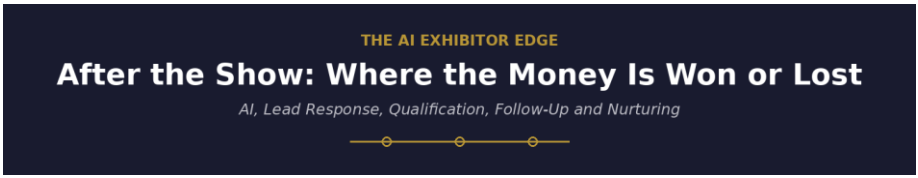
expensive part of the trade show. You haven't necessarily completed the important part. You paid to get those people into the booth. You paid to have conversations. You paid to capture their information. Now you need to find out what those names are worth. And that's where the combination of a disciplined lead-management process and artificial intelligence becomes particularly interesting.

Because AI can help you respond faster. It can help you communicate differently with different prospects. It can help organize responses. It can help identify priorities. It can help nurture the people who aren't ready today. And it can help make sure the potential buyers don't disappear into the pile. That's what we're going to look at next. Because when the show closes, the exhibit may be over.

The selling opportunity isn't.



Information worth knowing. Time worth spending. A webinar worth scheduling. A recording worth watching. A book worth reading.



CHAPTER 7

After the Show: Where the Money Is Won or Lost

AI, Lead Response, Qualification, Follow-Up and Nurturing

The booth is gone. The crates have been packed. Your staff is back at work. The expense reports are arriving. And sitting somewhere in your lead retrieval system, CRM, spreadsheet, or database are all those names you paid so much money to collect. Now what? This is where I believe one of the greatest opportunities in trade show marketing begins. It's also where an enormous amount of the potential value from exhibiting can be lost. For more than 22 years, my company specialized in what happened to trade show leads after the show. We processed more than one million of them.

That experience taught me something very simple.

Collecting the names isn't the difficult part.

Figuring out which ones represent genuine sales opportunities—and making sure those opportunities receive the right attention—is. AI gives us some extraordinary new tools to help. But before we talk about AI, we need a process.

Everybody Deserves a Response

Let's start with something I believe strongly. If someone gave you their information at your booth, they deserve a response. That doesn't mean a salesperson has to call every person. It doesn't mean everyone gets the same response. And it certainly doesn't mean every person is a qualified sales lead. It means you acknowledge the interaction. You respond. You begin determining what should happen next. For years, companies have struggled with this because responding individually to hundreds or thousands of people can require considerable time and effort.

AI changes some of that. It can help you create communications faster. It can help personalize them. It can help develop different responses for different types of visitors. It can help you organize information. It can help you prepare follow-up sequences. But there's a fundamental decision that has to come before all of that:

Someone has to own the process.

If Marketing believes Sales owns the leads and Sales believes Marketing handed them a pile of unqualified names, AI isn't going to settle the argument. Decide who owns what. Then put AI to work.

Speed Matters, but Relevance Matters More

We've all received the post-show email.

> *"Thank you for visiting our booth at XYZ Expo. It was great meeting you. Please contact us if we can be of assistance."*

That's follow-up in the same sense that saying "Have a nice day" is customer service. It's polite. It's better than nothing. But it doesn't accomplish very much. The problem isn't necessarily the wording. The problem is that everybody gets essentially the same message regardless of why they visited. The person who wants to buy next month gets it. The person who stopped for a demonstration gets it. The existing customer gets it. The person who wants literature gets it. The student gets it. Everybody becomes:

Dear First Name.

AI makes it much easier to create different communications for different situations. But before you can communicate differently, you need to know something about the recipient. That's why the information captured in the booth matters so much.

Use What You Learned at the Show

Imagine two visitors. The first stopped at your booth, scanned a badge, watched a demonstration, and left. The second told your booth staff that her company is replacing three machines during the next six months, described a specific problem with the current equipment, asked about installation time, and requested that someone contact her the following week. Should those two people receive the same follow-up? Of course not. Yet in many systems, both may simply appear as:

Trade Show Lead.

That's where useful notes and qualification information begin to pay off. AI can help take the information you've collected and turn it into more relevant communications. For example, you might give AI appropriate information about the second prospect and ask:

> *"Using only the information below, draft a short follow-up email from the salesperson who met this prospect at the trade show. Mention the prospect's stated problem, the planned equipment replacement, and the agreed next step. Do not invent any details. Make the message sound personal and professional rather than automated."*

That's considerably different from:

> *"Thanks for stopping by Booth 427."*

The AI didn't create the relevance.

The conversation at the show created the relevance.

AI simply helped you use it.

Let Prospects Help Qualify Themselves

Here's where the process gets more interesting. Not everyone will be fully qualified while standing in the booth. Sometimes there isn't enough time. Sometimes the right salesperson isn't available. Sometimes the visitor doesn't know all the answers. Sometimes all you know is that there appears to be interest. That doesn't mean the next step has to be handing the name to Sales and hoping someone figures it out.

You can continue the qualification process after the show. A follow-up communication can invite the prospect to tell you more about what they need, what they're interested in, or what they want to happen next. In other words, prospects can help self-qualify. This has been an important part of the lead-management process I've taught for years. Think about the difference. Instead of your salesperson repeatedly trying to reach 100 people to determine who is interested, you create a response mechanism that allows interested prospects to raise their hands.

Some will. Some won't. And their behavior gives you additional information. AI can help you design that communication and make the choices clear. For example, depending on your business, a follow-

up response might allow someone to indicate that they want to schedule a conversation, receive specific technical information, request pricing, arrange a demonstration, discuss an upcoming project, or simply stay informed. Now you're learning more. That's qualification.

Not All Follow-Up Belongs to Sales

This is where I sometimes challenge the traditional process. Why should Sales receive every name first? If we know that only some of the people collected at a trade show are genuine sales opportunities, why make salespeople sort through everyone else to find them? I would rather do as much qualification as reasonably possible first. Then prioritize. The strongest opportunities go to Sales quickly. Others continue through the appropriate follow-up or nurturing process. That doesn't mean Marketing hides names from Sales. It means Marketing helps organize the opportunities so Sales can use its time intelligently. Think about it from the salesperson's perspective. Which would you rather receive Monday morning?

> *"Here are 143 trade show leads."*

Or:

> *"Here are the twelve people who appear to deserve immediate attention. Here's why each one was prioritized, what they told us at the show, what they've done since the show, and what they expect to happen next."*

I know which list I'd start calling.

AI Can Help With Prioritization

This is an area where AI can be particularly useful, but also where human oversight becomes especially important. Suppose you've collected information such as product interest, project timing, current situation, purchasing role, requested next step, booth notes, and post-show responses. AI can help organize that information. It can help summarize each opportunity. It can help apply qualification criteria you've already established. It can help identify records missing important information. It can help group prospects according to next action. And it may help highlight people who appear to deserve faster attention. But notice what I said:

Qualification criteria you've already established.

Don't simply dump a list into AI and ask:

"Which ones are the best leads?"

Best according to what? Your company has to define that. AI can help apply the rules. The people responsible for the business should establish the rules.

Ask AI to Explain Its Recommendation

If you use AI to assist with lead prioritization, don't settle for a ranking. Ask why. For example:

> *"Using the qualification criteria I've provided, organize these prospects into immediate sales attention, additional qualification, and nurture. For each prospect, explain which information caused you to place the person in that category. Do not infer information that isn't present. If important information is missing, identify what we still need to learn."*

That last part may be more valuable than the ranking itself.

What do we still need to learn?

AI can help identify the gaps. Then your process can help fill them. That's considerably more useful than pretending incomplete information is complete.

The Sales Handoff Should Tell a Story

A qualified lead shouldn't arrive on a salesperson's desk looking like a business card. It should tell a story. Who is this person? Why did they visit? What are they interested in? What problem are they trying to solve? What is their timing? What role do they have? What happened in the booth? What happened after the show? What have we promised? What should happen next? AI can help turn scattered information into a concise summary. Imagine a salesperson opening a lead record and seeing:

> *"Met at ABC Expo. Company plans to replace two production systems in Q1. Current equipment is experiencing downtime problems. Prospect participated in the booth demonstration and requested additional technical information. Post-show response indicated interest in discussing specifications and scheduling a virtual demonstration. Prospect appears to be involved in the evaluation process. Recommended next action: salesperson contact within two business days to schedule technical discussion."*

Now Sales has something to work with. Compare that with:

"Hot lead. Send info."

We've come a long way.

And Then There Are the People Who Aren't Ready

This group may contain more future value than many exhibitors realize. The prospect is a good fit. The interest is real. But the timing isn't. Maybe the budget won't be available until next year. Maybe a contract has to expire. Maybe they're still researching. Maybe the project hasn't been approved. Maybe they're simply early in the buying process. What happens to them? Too often, not much. The immediate leads get attention. Everyone else slowly disappears. That's where nurturing comes in. Nurturing simply means staying appropriately relevant to someone who may become a sales opportunity later. Not pestering them. Not sending:

"Just checking in."

every three weeks for the rest of their natural life. Providing something useful. An article. A case study. A product update. An answer to a question they asked at the show. An invitation to a webinar. A relevant customer story. Information that helps them make a future decision. AI can make creating and adapting this content much easier.

One Idea Can Become Many Useful Communications

Suppose your company has a strong case study showing how a customer reduced production downtime. You don't necessarily need to send the entire case study to everyone. AI can help turn the same underlying information into different forms. A short follow-up email. A brief LinkedIn post. A three-paragraph customer story. A salesperson's talking point. A short nurture email. A list of lessons learned. A summary for a prospect with a similar problem. The underlying expertise remains yours. AI helps you reuse it. That's important because nurturing often fails for a very practical reason. People run out of things to say. AI can help you find more ways to say something useful without inventing more things to sell.

Personalization Without Pretending

AI makes personalization easier. It also makes fake personalization easier. There's a difference.

> *"Hi John. I hope you're having a wonderful Tuesday in Cleveland!"*

That's not a relationship. That's software knowing it's Tuesday. Useful personalization is based on something relevant.

> *"You mentioned at the show that reducing changeover time is a priority for your new production line. I thought this case study might be useful because the customer faced a similar issue."*

That's relevant. AI can help you create communications like that when you've captured the right information. But don't let it fabricate familiarity. If the prospect didn't tell you something, don't pretend they did. If you don't know their problem, don't invent one because it makes the email sound better. Trust is worth more than clever personalization.

AI Can Help, but Automation Can Also Hurt

Once companies see how easily AI can create communications, there's a temptation to automate everything. Be careful. More messages don't automatically mean better follow-up. Faster doesn't automatically mean better. Personalized doesn't automatically mean personal. The purpose of AI is not to allow you to send 10,000 mediocre emails faster. It's to help you communicate more effectively and make a good process easier to execute. There should still be moments when a salesperson picks up the phone. There should still be personal emails. There should still be judgment. There should still be a human being recognizing that one prospect deserves something different from everyone else. AI is part of the process.

It isn't the process.

Somebody Has to Watch What Happens

There's another reason post-show follow-up fails. Nobody owns the outcome. The names were sent. Sales was notified. Marketing moved on to the next event. Three months later, somebody asks what happened. And nobody really knows. That's not a technology problem. That's accountability. Someone needs to know: How many people responded? How many were qualified? How many were sent to Sales? How many are being nurtured? How many sales opportunities were created? What happened to those opportunities? What revenue resulted? AI can help organize and analyze that information. But somebody still has to care enough to ask.

Don't Stop at "We Followed Up"

I've heard exhibitors say:

"Yes, we follow up with all our leads."

Then I ask what that means.

"We send everyone an email."

That's response. It's not necessarily lead management. A real process continues. Who responded? Who qualified? Who needs attention? Who isn't ready? Who should receive additional information? Who should Sales call first? Who bought? How much? And eventually:

Did the trade show produce enough business to justify what we spent?

That's where this whole conversation has been heading. Because collecting names isn't the objective. Sending emails isn't the objective. Using AI isn't the objective. The objective is producing business results from the trade show investment. And if you follow the process far enough, you eventually arrive at the question management has every right to ask:

Did the show pay?

That's next.



CHAPTER 8

From Leads to ROI

Using AI to Help Find Out Whether the Show Paid

Sooner or later, somebody asks the question. Sometimes it's the CEO. Sometimes it's the CFO. Sometimes it's the Vice President of Sales. And sometimes it's the exhibit manager asking the question nobody else seems particularly interested in answering.

Did the show pay?

It's a reasonable question. Trade shows are expensive. By the time you add exhibit space, the exhibit itself, shipping, drayage, labor, electrical, internet, travel, hotels, meals, promotions, lead retrieval, staff time, and everything else that finds its way onto the final expense report, the investment can be substantial. Yet companies sometimes measure the results with statements like:

"We had a lot of traffic."

"The booth looked great."

"Sales thought it was a good show."

"We collected 643 leads."

"Everybody seemed pleased."

Those things may matter. But none of them answers the question.

What did we get for the money we spent?

That's where measurement begins. And AI can help.

Start With the Objective

You can't intelligently measure the return from a trade show unless you know what you were trying to accomplish in the first place. That's why we discussed objectives before the show. If the objective was to

generate qualified sales opportunities, measure qualified sales opportunities. If the objective was to schedule meetings with existing customers, measure the meetings. If the objective was to introduce a new product, determine what evidence will tell you whether the introduction accomplished what you expected.

If the objective was to generate sales, track the sales. Different objectives require different measurements. That's obvious when you say it. Yet exhibitors sometimes collect whatever numbers are easiest to collect and then try to turn those numbers into proof of success. Traffic is easy to count. Badge scans are easy to count. Giveaways distributed are easy to count. That doesn't necessarily make them meaningful.

Measure what matters, not simply what's easy to measure.

Leads Are Not ROI

Let's return to those 643 names. Is 643 good? Maybe. Compared with what? Suppose another exhibitor collected only 150 names. Did you outperform them? What if 100 of their 150 were qualified prospects and only 30 of your 643 were? Now which number do you want? This is why lead quantity alone tells us very little. A trade show doesn't become successful because the scanner beeped a lot. What happened after the beep? How many names became qualified leads? How many became sales opportunities? How many opportunities became sales? How much revenue resulted? What was the gross profit? How does that compare with what the company invested?

Now we're beginning to talk about return.

Follow the Lead Far Enough

One of the problems with measuring trade show ROI is timing. The show happens in March. The prospect doesn't buy until September. By then, the company may have mentally moved on through three more shows. Unless someone tracks that prospect back to the original event, the trade show may never receive credit for helping create the sale. That's why measurement isn't something you do only when the show ends. It continues. If lead generation and sales are important objectives, somebody needs to follow qualified opportunities through the sales process. What happened? Was there a meeting? A demonstration? A proposal? A quote? A sale? No sale?

Still pending? If you stop tracking when the name is handed to Sales, you don't have ROI measurement. You have lead distribution.

AI Can Help Connect the Pieces

This is where AI's ability to organize and analyze information can become useful. Imagine you have information from several stages of the process. The names collected at the show. Qualification information. Post-show responses. Sales assignments. Opportunity status. Revenue. Show expenses. That information may live in different places. AI can help you organize it, summarize it, identify patterns, and turn it into something management can understand. For example, you might provide an appropriate, company-approved dataset and ask:

> *"Analyze these trade show results. Show the number of names collected, number that met our qualification criteria, number sent to Sales for immediate follow-up, number placed into nurturing, number that became active sales opportunities, number that resulted in sales, total revenue attributed to those sales, and total show cost. Identify any missing information that prevents us from calculating a reliable return."*

Notice that last sentence again.

Identify any missing information.

Sometimes the most useful thing AI can tell you is that you don't have enough information to answer the question. That's better than manufacturing certainty.

AI Is Very Good at Asking, "What Happened Here?"

Numbers tell a story. Sometimes the story isn't obvious until you compare them. Suppose one show produced: 800 names. Another produced 350. If you stop there, the first show wins. But then you discover that the 800 names produced 40 qualified opportunities while the 350 names produced 75. Interesting. Then you discover the first show generated $180,000 in sales while the second generated $620,000. Much more interesting. Now suppose the first show cost $75,000 and the second cost $110,000. Now you have a business conversation. AI can help you look for those relationships. You might ask:

> *"Which shows generated the highest percentage of qualified opportunities?"*

> *"Which produced the highest sales revenue relative to cost?"*
>
> *"Which shows generated a large number of names but relatively few qualified prospects?"*
>
> *"Which industries or job titles appeared most frequently among eventual buyers?"*
>
> *"What patterns do you see among leads that converted to sales?"*
>
> *"What should we investigate before deciding whether to exhibit at these shows again?"*

AI isn't making the decision. It's helping you see the information.

Don't Ask AI to Prove the Show Was Successful

This sounds obvious, but it's worth saying. Don't start with the conclusion.

> *"Help me prove this trade show was worth the money."*

That's the wrong assignment. You've already decided what answer you want. Ask instead:

> *"Analyze these results and tell me what they support. Identify both positive and negative findings. Don't assume the show was successful."*

That produces a much healthier conversation. Sometimes the numbers will support another year. Sometimes they may suggest reducing the investment. Sometimes the show may be valuable for reasons that aren't directly connected to immediate sales. Sometimes you may discover that the show itself wasn't the problem. Your execution was. That's an important distinction. A show can attract exactly the right audience and still produce disappointing results if your objectives were unclear, your booth messaging was weak, your staff wasn't prepared, qualification was poor, or follow-up failed.

Don't blame the show for a broken process.

Separate Activity From Results

This distinction can dramatically improve the report you give management. Activity tells you what happened. Results tell you what the activity produced. We had 2,400 booth visitors. Activity. We collected 610 names. Activity. We conducted 37 demonstrations. Activity. We scheduled 22 meetings. Activity. Those numbers aren't

useless. They help explain what happened. But keep going. How many qualified prospects resulted? How many sales opportunities? How many proposals? How many sales? How much revenue? That's where results begin. AI can help you organize those two categories so the report doesn't confuse motion with achievement.

Give Management the Report They Actually Need

Exhibit managers sometimes know far more about the show than senior management wants to know. That's understandable. You've lived with this thing for six months. You know what the freight cost. You know what happened with the electrical order. You know why the graphics were changed. You know who missed the staff meeting. You know what happened when the demonstration stopped working at 11:15 Tuesday morning. The CEO probably doesn't need all of that. Management usually needs the bigger picture. What were we trying to accomplish? What did we spend? What happened? What business resulted? What is still in the pipeline? What did we learn?

What should we do next? AI can help turn a mountain of show information into a concise management summary. For example:

> *"Using the information I've provided, prepare a one-page executive summary of this trade show. Begin with our objectives and total investment. Then summarize qualified opportunities, sales results to date, open pipeline attributable to the show, important customer or market observations, and three recommendations for next year. Clearly distinguish completed sales from opportunities that are still open. Do not treat pipeline value as revenue."*

That last instruction matters. A $500,000 opportunity isn't a $500,000 sale. Not yet. Management knows the difference. Your report should too.

Be Careful With ROI Math

AI can help with calculations. That doesn't mean you should stop understanding the calculation. At its simplest, ROI compares what you gained with what you invested. But companies may define trade show return differently. Some use revenue. Some use gross profit. Some include only directly attributable sales. Others consider influenced opportunities. Some evaluate individual shows. Others look at an annual program. Before asking AI to calculate ROI, determine how

your company defines it. Then tell AI exactly what formula to use. And check the arithmetic. If your company calculates ROI as:

(Gross Profit Attributable to the Show − Show Cost) ÷ Show Cost × 100

tell AI that. Don't simply say:

"Calculate our ROI."

Otherwise, you may receive a mathematically correct answer to a question you didn't mean to ask.

The Pipeline Matters Too

One challenge with trade show measurement is that sales cycles don't always cooperate with report deadlines. Management may want a report two weeks after the show. Your average sales cycle may be six months. You can't report sales that haven't happened. But you can report what you know. Perhaps the show produced twelve qualified opportunities. Four have already moved to proposals. Five are being actively pursued. Three are still being evaluated. That doesn't prove final ROI. But it tells management something important about the potential return still developing. The key is labeling it accurately.

Sales are sales.

Pipeline is pipeline.

Potential is potential.

AI can help you present those categories clearly without turning optimism into accounting.

Compare Shows Over Time

The real value of measurement becomes more apparent when you stop looking at one show in isolation. Suppose you exhibit at twelve shows each year. Which ones consistently produce qualified opportunities? Which generate sales? Which attract lots of traffic but few buyers? Which have improving results? Which are declining? Which cost the most per qualified opportunity? Which seem to attract the types of prospects who eventually become customers? Those questions can influence future budgeting far more intelligently than:

"We've always done that show."

If you maintain consistent information across events, AI can help compare the results and identify patterns that may be difficult to spot manually. It might not make the decision to cancel Show Number Seven. But it might give you a very good reason to ask why you're still there.

Sometimes ROI Exposes the Real Problem

Here's something I've seen throughout my career. Companies sometimes say they can't measure trade show ROI. What they really mean is that they don't have a process connecting the show to the sale. They collected names. They distributed them. Then they lost visibility. Six months later, they can't determine which sales came from the show because nobody tracked them. That's not an ROI calculation problem. That's a process problem. AI can help analyze information. It can't analyze information you never collected. It can help connect data. It can't connect data your systems never retained. It can help create reports. It can't report sales nobody tracked back to the show.

That's why the Pre-Show, During-Show, Post-Show, and Payoff process matters. Each stage feeds the next. Objectives tell you what to measure. Booth conversations create information. Qualification identifies opportunities. Follow-up advances them. Sales tracking reveals outcomes. Measurement tells you whether the investment worked. AI can help at every stage. But the stages still need to exist.

The Payoff Is More Than a Number

There's another benefit to measuring results. You learn. Maybe one show consistently produces excellent prospects but relatively little booth traffic. Good. Now you know traffic isn't the right measure for that show. Maybe another attracts thousands of people but almost nobody matching your target audience. That's useful too. Maybe your highest-quality leads consistently come from pre-scheduled appointments rather than walk-up traffic. That tells you where to put more effort next year. Maybe prospects who received a particular demonstration convert at a much higher rate. Pay attention. Maybe your post-show self-qualification process identifies opportunities the booth staff missed. That's worth knowing. ROI measurement isn't simply something you do to defend the trade show budget.

It's how you make the next show better. And that's where AI's ability to analyze patterns may become one of its most valuable contributions.

AI Doesn't Eliminate Accountability

I keep returning to this because it's important. AI can make analysis faster. It can make reports easier. It can help uncover patterns. It can help organize complicated information. But somebody still has to own the results. Someone has to ask what happened to the leads. Someone has to follow the opportunities. Someone has to make sure Sales reports the outcomes. Someone has to connect revenue back to the show. Someone has to decide what the numbers mean. And someone has to make the next decision. That's management. That's Marketing. That's Sales. That's the exhibit team. That's people. AI helps. People remain accountable.

Now for the Warning Label

At this point, I've spent most of the book showing you things AI can help you do. Research. Plan. Write. Organize. Prepare. Analyze. Qualify. Follow up. Nurture. Measure. It's impressive. And we're only getting started with what these tools will eventually be able to do. But before you start uploading every company document you can find and asking AI to run your trade show program, we need to have another conversation.

Because AI has weaknesses. It can make mistakes. It can invent facts. It can mishandle an assignment if you give it poor instructions. And depending on what you're using and how your company has configured it, there may be information you should never put into an AI system in the first place. So the next chapter may be one of the most important in this book. We've spent a lot of time talking about what AI can do for you. Now let's talk about how it can get you in trouble.



CHAPTER 9

Don't Let AI Make You Look Stupid

Where AI Can Get an Exhibitor in Trouble

By now, I've probably convinced you that AI can be a pretty useful assistant. Good. Now I'm going to tell you not to trust it. At least not completely. That may sound contradictory, but it isn't. I've spent this book showing you how AI can help research, write, organize, analyze, prepare, communicate, qualify, follow up, and measure. I've also repeatedly used words like help, assist, and suggest. There's a reason. AI can do remarkable things. It can also be wrong. And one of the most dangerous things about an AI mistake is that it may not look like a mistake.

It can be beautifully written. Confidently presented. Perfectly organized. Completely believable. And wrong. That's why learning how to use AI responsibly is just as important as learning how to use it productively.

AI Can Make Things Up

There's a term you may hear associated with AI errors.

Hallucination.

It simply means AI generated information that isn't true or isn't supported by the available information. The word sounds almost harmless. The consequences may not be. Suppose you ask AI to research an upcoming trade show and it gives you an attendance figure. Where did that number come from? Suppose it tells you a competitor introduced a particular product. Is that true? Suppose it summarizes an exhibitor manual and tells you freight is due on May 12. The actual deadline is May 2. That's not an interesting little AI mistake anymore. That could cost you money. The lesson isn't to stop using AI. The lesson is:

Verify anything important.

The More Important the Information, the More Important the Verification

I don't verify every AI-generated sentence equally. If I ask ChatGPT for ten ideas for a booth theme, I'm not going to launch a federal investigation into idea number seven. It's an idea. I'll decide whether I like it. If I ask it to rewrite an email I've already written, I read the result and decide whether it still says what I intended. But if AI gives me a deadline, price, regulation, contract requirement, statistic, quotation, legal requirement, or other factual information that could materially affect a decision, I want to know where it came from.

That's why, when we talked about reviewing the exhibitor manual, I suggested asking AI to include page numbers. AI can help you find the information faster. You verify the important information against the original source. That's a sensible partnership.

Don't Confuse Confidence With Accuracy

Human beings do this too. Someone says something confidently and we tend to believe they know what they're talking about. AI can have the same effect. It doesn't shrug. It doesn't always say:

"I'm really not sure about this, Rich."

It may simply answer. And because the answer is grammatically correct and professionally written, we lower our guard. Don't. One of the most useful follow-up questions you can ask is:

"How do you know that?"

Or:

"What is your source for that statement?"

Or:

"Which parts of your answer are facts and which are assumptions?"

Or:

"What in the information I provided supports that conclusion?"

Make AI show its work when the answer matters. And if the information is important enough, check the original source yourself.

Be Careful What You Upload

The ability to give AI documents is one of the things that makes it so useful. It's also one of the things that should make you stop and think. Not every document on your computer belongs in an AI system. Your company may have rules governing the use of AI. Follow them. There may be confidential customer information. Pricing information. Contracts. Employee information. Product-development information. Unreleased financial information. Customer lists. Proprietary processes. Sales forecasts. Personally identifiable information. Information covered by confidentiality agreements. Just because you can upload something doesn't mean you should. Before putting sensitive business information into an AI tool, understand what tool you're using, how your company has configured it, what your company's policies permit, and how that information may be handled.

If you're not sure, find out. Convenience isn't a good reason to create a confidentiality problem.

Trade Show Leads Deserve Special Attention

This is particularly important when we start talking about the post-show process. Lead information may contain personal and business information about real people. Names. Email addresses. Phone numbers. Companies. Titles. Purchasing plans. Budget information. Project timing. Internal problems. Notes from conversations. Potential purchasing decisions. You should not automatically take a spreadsheet containing hundreds of prospects and upload it into whatever free AI tool happens to be open on your screen.

Your company may have an approved AI environment for working with business data. It may have restrictions. It may require information to be anonymized. It may prohibit certain uses entirely. Know the rules before you start experimenting. Throughout this book, when I say AI can help analyze lead information, I'm describing a capability. I'm not giving you permission to ignore your company's privacy, security, contractual, or data-handling requirements. That's your responsibility.

AI Can Accidentally Change What Someone Said

Remember the example of turning rough booth notes into a cleaner summary? That's useful. It's also something you need to watch. Suppose the original note says:

"Considering replacement next year."

AI rewrites it:

"Customer plans to replace equipment next year."

Those sentences aren't the same. Considering became plans. That's a small wording change with a potentially significant business meaning. Or the original note says:

"May need three units."

The summary says:

"Customer needs three units."

Again, AI just made your sales opportunity look stronger than the evidence supports. That's why I like instructions such as:

"Do not add, infer, or strengthen anything that isn't explicitly supported by the original notes."

Then review the result anyway. AI should clarify the information. It shouldn't improve the prospect.

Don't Let AI Invent Personalization

We talked earlier about using AI to help personalize follow-up. Used properly, that's valuable. Used carelessly, it can become creepy—or simply dishonest. Suppose AI researches a prospect and finds something online. It then writes:

"I know your company has been struggling with production delays..."

Do you know that? Did the prospect tell you? Is it public information? Is it even true? AI may combine information in ways that sound plausible but create a statement you would never make face-to-face. A good rule is simple. Don't let AI put words in your mouth that you wouldn't comfortably say to the person standing in front of you. If personalization is based on an actual booth conversation, use it. If it's based on something the prospect requested, use it. If it's based on legitimate information you know to be accurate and appropriate,

perhaps use it. But don't manufacture familiarity. People can smell that.

Sometimes even through email.

Your Brand Still Has a Voice

AI can write quickly. That doesn't mean it automatically sounds like your company. If five people in your organization use AI independently, you could suddenly have five very different voices communicating with customers. One sounds formal. One sounds cheerful. One sounds like a lawyer. One sounds like a motivational speaker. And one sounds like ChatGPT swallowed the corporate brochure. You need some consistency. Give AI examples of appropriate company communications when permitted. Tell it about your audience. Tell it how you want the company to sound. Tell it what words or phrases you don't use. Then review what it produces. The objective isn't to make every communication identical.

It's to make sure AI doesn't slowly turn your company into someone you don't recognize.

Watch the Marketing Language

AI has another habit. It can become enthusiastic. Very enthusiastic. Suddenly your product isn't simply useful. It's revolutionary. Your solution isn't effective. It's game-changing. Your company isn't experienced. It's world-class. Your new product doesn't improve something. It transforms the future of the industry. Maybe it does. But probably not every Tuesday. This is one reason human editing matters. AI can create polished marketing language very quickly. Your job is to decide whether anybody wants to read it. I generally prefer plain English. Tell people what the product does. Tell them why it matters. Tell them what problem it solves. Let the reader decide whether it's revolutionary.

AI Doesn't Understand Your Corporate Politics

Every exhibit manager smiled at that heading. You know exactly what I mean. AI may recommend something that makes perfect logical sense and has absolutely no chance of happening inside your company. It doesn't know that Sales and Marketing have been arguing about lead ownership for six years. It doesn't know that the CEO loves the annual show even though the numbers are questionable. It doesn't know that Product Management refuses to demonstrate anything

before final release. It doesn't know that the booth design was approved personally by someone you aren't going to challenge. Unless you give AI that context, it sees the problem primarily as information.

You see the organization. That's another reason experience matters. The technically best answer isn't always the practically best answer.

Copyright and Ownership Still Matter

AI can generate writing, ideas, images, presentations, and other material remarkably quickly. That doesn't mean every possible use is automatically appropriate. Companies should have clear policies around AI-generated material, particularly when creating public-facing content, graphics, copyrighted material, trademarks, customer-facing claims, or anything based on someone else's intellectual property. If you're creating important public materials, know where the source material came from. Check factual claims. Make sure you have the right to use the material involved. And if your company has legal, brand, or communications review requirements, AI doesn't make them disappear. AI may shorten the creation process. It doesn't eliminate responsibility for the finished product.

Beware of the Beautiful Report

This deserves special attention because AI is extremely good at making information look impressive. Give it some numbers and it can create a polished analysis. Give it notes and it can create an executive summary. Give it a spreadsheet and it may identify patterns. The finished result can look authoritative. That doesn't mean the underlying data is good. If your lead records are incomplete, the analysis is incomplete. If your sales outcomes weren't tracked, the ROI report can't magically recreate them. If your staff inconsistently recorded qualification information, comparisons may be misleading. If the data is biased, incomplete, duplicated, or incorrectly entered, AI can create a very professional-looking analysis of bad information.

Remember our old computer expression:

Garbage in. Garbage out.

AI adds a new possibility:

Garbage in. Beautifully formatted garbage out.

Don't be fooled by the presentation.

Use AI to Challenge AI

Here's one of my favorite techniques. After AI gives you an important answer, turn it around. Ask:

"Now critique your own recommendation. What could be wrong with it?"

Or:

"What assumptions are you making?"

Or:

"Give me three reasons I should not follow this recommendation."

Or:

"What information would you need before being more confident in this answer?"

You're using AI as its own devil's advocate. That doesn't guarantee accuracy. But it can expose assumptions and weaknesses you might otherwise overlook. You can also start a new conversation and ask the same question differently. If the answer changes dramatically, that's something worth investigating.

Keep a Human in the Loop

You'll hear this expression frequently as AI becomes more integrated into business:

Human in the loop.

I like it. It means a person remains involved in reviewing, deciding, approving, or acting on what AI produces. For trade show work, that's exactly where I want you. In the loop. AI reviews the exhibitor manual. You verify the critical deadlines. AI drafts the invitation. You approve what goes to customers. AI summarizes the booth notes. You make sure the meaning hasn't changed. AI helps prioritize prospects. Your qualification criteria and people determine what happens next. AI analyzes the results. Management decides what they mean. That's a healthy relationship.

My Rule Is Simple

The more I've used AI, the more I've come back to one basic rule:

AI creates. You decide.

AI suggests. You decide. AI drafts. You decide. AI analyzes. You decide. AI recommends. You decide. AI may be faster than you. It may know more facts than you. It may generate more possibilities than you could create in an afternoon. But it doesn't carry the responsibility for the decision. You do. That's not a weakness of AI. That's how it should work.

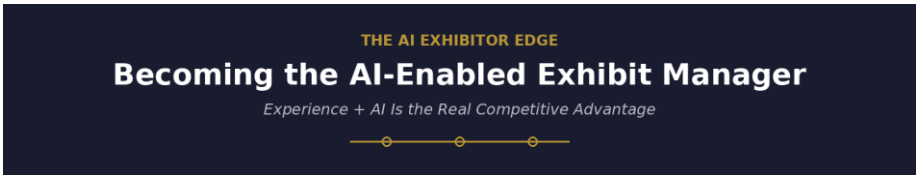
Don't Be Afraid of It. Respect It.

I don't want this chapter to frighten you away from using AI. Quite the opposite. The better you understand its limitations, the more confidently you can use it. We've been doing this with technology for years. We use calculators, but we still notice when the answer makes no sense. We use GPS, but hopefully we don't drive into a lake because the voice told us to turn right.

We use spellcheck, but we still proofread important documents. AI deserves the same kind of intelligent skepticism. Use it. Experiment with it. Let it save you time. Let it help you think. Let it do the grunt work. But don't surrender your judgment to it. Because the most valuable combination isn't artificial intelligence by itself. It's artificial intelligence in the hands of someone who understands what they're doing. And for the exhibit manager, that's where the real edge begins. That's what we're going to bring together in the next chapter.



I hope you will tell others about this book.



CHAPTER 10

Becoming the AI-Enabled Exhibit Manager

Experience + AI Is the Real Competitive Advantage

We've covered a lot of ground. We've used AI before the show to help with research, planning, exhibitor manuals, deadlines, objectives, messaging, invitations, appointments, booth-staff preparation, and qualification. We've taken it onto the show floor to help organize observations, prepare staff briefings, identify patterns, improve communications, and capture better information. Then we followed the names home. We looked at how AI can support response, qualification, prioritization, nurturing, sales handoff, measurement, and ROI. And we talked about something equally important. Where AI can get you in trouble. Now I want to put all of that together. Because becoming an AI-enabled Exhibit Manager isn't about using ChatGPT twenty times a day.

It's about recognizing where AI belongs in the exhibiting process—and where it doesn't.

Start With the Process, Not the Technology

If there's one mistake I don't want you to make after reading this book, it's this: Don't go looking for places to stick AI into your trade show program simply because AI is the newest thing. Start with the job. What are you trying to accomplish? What needs to happen before the show? What needs to happen during the show? What needs to happen after the show? How will you know whether it worked? Then ask:

Where could AI make this better, faster, easier, or more effective?

That's a much more useful question. I've spent much of my career looking at trade shows as a complete process.

Pre-Show.

During-Show.

Post-Show.

And ultimately:

Payoff.

Each part affects the others. AI doesn't change that. It gives you a new set of tools to use within it.

Before the Show: Prepare Smarter

Before the show, AI can help you deal with information. Lots of information. Instead of manually digging through an exhibitor manual, AI can help identify deadlines and organize them. Instead of beginning audience research with an empty screen, AI can help you develop questions and investigate possibilities. Instead of writing every invitation from scratch, AI can help create and refine messages. Instead of beginning booth-staff training with a blank piece of paper, AI can help develop scenarios, questions, exercises, and briefing materials.

Instead of wondering whether you've overlooked something, you can ask AI to challenge the plan. None of those things eliminates the need for an experienced exhibit manager. They give that manager more time to manage. That's the point.

During the Show: Learn Faster

Once the show opens, you're surrounded by information. Visitors are telling you things. Staff members are learning things. Competitors are showing you things. Customers are asking questions. Prospects are revealing problems. The danger is that much of that information disappears almost as quickly as it arrives. AI can help you capture it, organize it, summarize it, and identify patterns. But again, AI isn't the star of the show. The conversations are. The observations are. The relationships are. The people are. AI helps you make better use of

what those people are telling you. That's why I don't believe artificial intelligence diminishes the value of face-to-face marketing.

Used properly, it may help us pay more attention to what happens face-to-face.

After the Show: Don't Waste What You Paid For

This is where my trade show experience makes me particularly stubborn. You paid too much money to collect those names to let them disappear after the show. The booth was expensive. The exhibit space was expensive. The people were expensive. Travel was expensive. Hotels were expensive. Shipping was expensive. Drayage was certainly expensive. Then you finally got prospects to stop, talk, share information, and give you permission to continue the conversation. Don't waste that. Respond. Qualify. Prioritize. Follow up. Nurture. Measure. AI can help with all of those things. It can help make the process more manageable. It can help you deal with larger amounts of information.

It can help personalize communications. It can help summarize records. It can help identify patterns. It can help create nurturing content. It can help organize results. But AI cannot care whether the leads get followed up. People have to care.

The Best AI Tool May Be the Question You Ask

Here's something I've discovered while teaching AI. The biggest breakthrough often isn't learning another feature. It's learning to ask a better question. Instead of:

> *"Can ChatGPT write an email?"*

ask:

> *"Why aren't prospects responding to our post-show email?"*

Instead of:

> *"Can AI analyze this spreadsheet?"*

ask:

> *"What does this spreadsheet tell us about which trade shows produce our best qualified opportunities?"*

Instead of:

> *"Can AI create booth messaging?"*

ask:

> *"Would someone walking past our booth understand in five seconds why they should stop?"*

Instead of:

> *"How many leads did we get?"*

ask:

> *"How many of the names we collected actually became qualified sales opportunities?"*

AI becomes more valuable when the questions become more valuable. And sometimes the greatest contribution AI makes isn't the answer. It's causing you to think about the problem differently.

Your AI Assistant Can Learn the Assignment

There's another step you can take as you become more comfortable. Instead of starting every AI conversation from zero, give it more context about how your trade show program works. You may be able to provide appropriate information about your company, audience, products, objectives, terminology, brand voice, qualification criteria, and exhibiting process. Then when you ask for help, AI has more context. Imagine the difference between telling a brand-new temporary assistant:

> *"Help me with the trade show."*

and telling an assistant who already understands your company:

> *"We're going to the ABC Show again. Last year's objectives and results are attached. This year we're introducing Product X and Sales wants twenty appointments with qualified accounts. Let's build the pre-show plan."*

That's where AI begins becoming more than an occasional question-and-answer tool. It begins becoming part of the workflow. But remember Chapter 9. What information you provide, where you provide it, and how it is handled must fit your company's privacy and AI policies. Useful doesn't mean careless.

You Don't Need to Change Everything Monday Morning

After seeing all these possibilities, you might be tempted to redesign your entire trade show operation around AI. Don't. Pick one problem. Maybe the exhibitor manual drives you crazy. Start there. At the next

show, upload the manual into an approved AI tool and see whether it can help create your deadline checklist. Then try pre-show invitations. Then staff training. Then daily show summaries. Then lead-note organization. Then post-show communication. Learn what works for you. AI adoption doesn't have to be a corporate transformation project. Sometimes it starts because somebody saves two hours doing something they hate doing. Then somebody else asks:

"How did you do that?"

That's how change often spreads.

Build Your Own AI Trade Show Playbook

As you find things that work, save them. If you develop a good prompt for reviewing exhibitor manuals, keep it. If you create a useful booth-staff training conversation, keep it. If you find a good way to have AI challenge your objectives, keep it. If you develop instructions that consistently turn rough booth notes into useful sales summaries, keep them. If you create a reliable process for analyzing post-show results, document it. Over time, you're building something valuable. Not simply a collection of prompts. A trade show AI playbook based on the way your company actually exhibits. That's far more useful than downloading 500 generic prompts from the Internet.

Your playbook reflects your objectives. Your customers. Your products. Your sales process. Your people. Your experience. That's where AI becomes genuinely yours.

Don't Keep It to Yourself

If you discover something that saves you an hour, teach your team. If Sales finds a useful way to prepare for appointments, share it with Marketing. If Marketing develops a better method for using AI to personalize follow-up, show Sales. If the exhibit manager finds a faster way to summarize daily observations, teach the booth staff how to provide better input. AI becomes more valuable when people stop using it as isolated individuals and begin sharing what works. You don't need everybody using the same prompts. You do need people learning from one another. The companies that become good at AI probably won't be the companies with the largest collection of AI tools.

They'll be the companies that learn how to use the tools they have to solve real problems.

Experience Still Wins

I want to return to something I said earlier. AI doesn't make experience obsolete. It makes experience more powerful. If you've managed 100 trade shows, you've seen things AI hasn't. You know what happens when freight is late. You know what happens when the booth is understaffed. You know how long a "five-minute executive visit" can actually last. You know that the perfect plan can change fifteen minutes after the doors open. You know which numbers management cares about. You know what Sales will and won't do. You know when a visitor's question means something. You know when a prospect deserves immediate attention. You know when something doesn't feel right.

AI can give you information. Experience gives that information meaning. Put the two together and you have something considerably more valuable than either one alone.

The Edge Isn't AI

This may sound strange in a book called The AI Exhibitor Edge, but AI itself isn't the edge. Everyone can get AI. Your competitors can use ChatGPT. Their exhibit managers can upload manuals. They can write emails. They can generate booth ideas. They can summarize notes. They can analyze spreadsheets. The tool isn't your competitive advantage if everyone has access to the same tool.

How you use it is the advantage.

Your experience. Your process. Your customer knowledge. Your ability to ask better questions. Your ability to recognize a good answer. Your ability to reject a bad one. Your willingness to experiment. Your discipline in following through. That's the edge.

Don't Become an AI Expert

Unless you want to. If artificial intelligence fascinates you and you want to understand every new model, feature, and technical development, enjoy yourself. I do. But you don't need to. You're an Exhibit Manager. Or Event Manager. Or Trade Show Manager. Or Marketing Manager. Or maybe you're the person who inherited the trade show program when Bob left. Your objective isn't to become an AI expert. It's to become better at the job you already have. If AI helps you save five hours preparing for a show, good. If it helps your staff

have better conversations, better. If it helps you identify qualified opportunities faster, better still.

If it helps prevent good prospects from disappearing after the show, now we're getting somewhere. And if it helps you finally connect the trade show investment to measurable business results, that's when AI stops being interesting technology and starts becoming a business tool.

Keep Asking the Question

I started learning AI because I kept asking a simple question.

"Can it do this?"

Then I'd try something else.

"Can it do this?"

That's exactly how I'd like you to approach it. The next time you're doing something tedious before a show, ask:

Could AI help me with this?

When you're struggling to organize information:

Could AI help me with this?

When you're preparing the booth staff:

Could AI help me with this?

When you're staring at hundreds of names after the show:

Could AI help me with this?

When management wants a report:

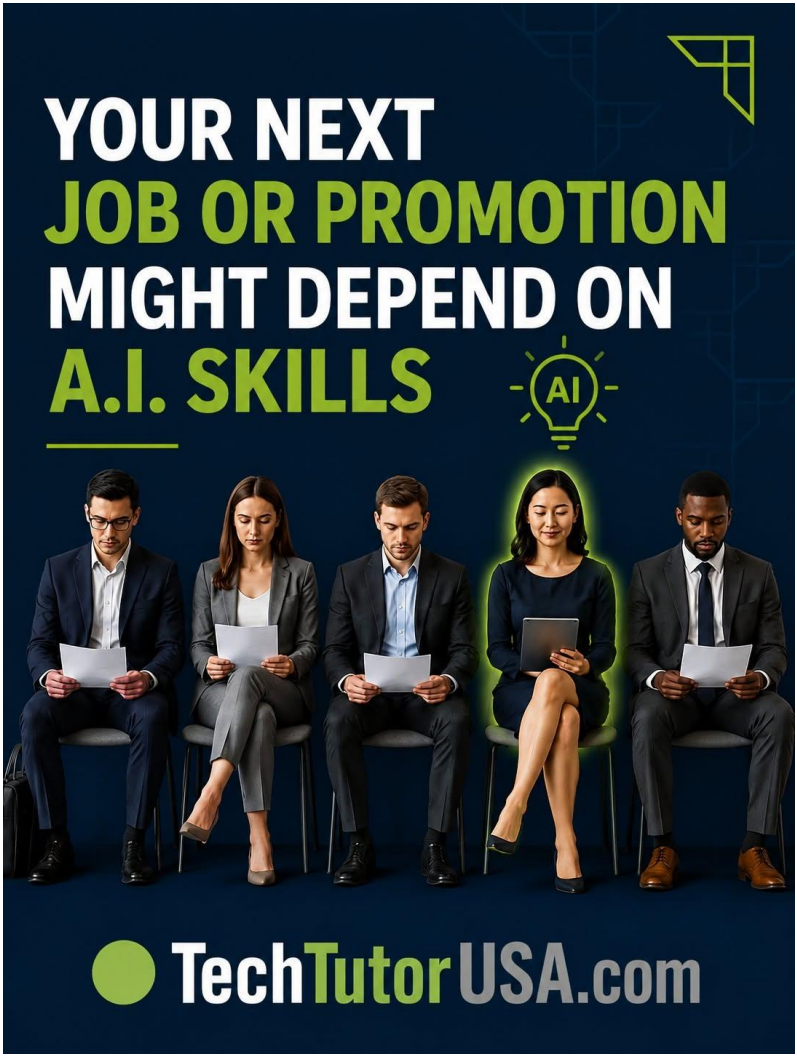
Could AI help me with this?

Sometimes the answer will be no. Sometimes it will be yes. And sometimes you'll discover something you hadn't even thought to ask about. That's the fun part. Because artificial intelligence is going to keep changing. The specific tools will change. The capabilities will change. What seems extraordinary today may seem ordinary a few years from now. But one thing isn't going to change. The exhibit manager still needs to know what they're trying to accomplish. Technology doesn't replace that. It never has. What AI gives you is a remarkably capable new assistant. You bring the trade show

knowledge. You bring the business knowledge. You bring the experience.

You bring the judgment. AI brings speed, information, analysis, organization, and an almost endless ability to help you explore possibilities. Put them together.

That's The AI Exhibitor Edge.



This is almost certainty.



CONCLUSION

The Show Isn't Changing. The Way You Manage It Is.

Trade shows have always been about people. That hasn't changed. Companies exhibit because they want to meet customers, find prospects, introduce products, demonstrate capabilities, build relationships, learn about their markets, and create business opportunities. AI doesn't change any of that. A prospect still has to have a reason to stop at your booth. Your staff still has to know how to engage that person. Someone still has to ask good questions. Someone still has to listen. Someone still has to determine whether there's a reason to continue the conversation. And after the show, someone still has to make sure that conversation doesn't disappear. What AI changes is how much help you can have along the way.

You Have an Assistant You Didn't Have Before

Think back through the exhibiting process we've covered. Before the show, AI can help you research, read, organize, plan, write, prepare, and think. During the show, it can help you make sense of what you're learning, organize observations, prepare communications, improve staff briefings, and capture better information. After the show, it can help with response, qualification, prioritization, personalization, nurturing, analysis, and measurement. That's a pretty capable assistant. And we're still early. The AI you use a year from now will almost certainly be able to do things the AI I'm writing about today can't do.

That's why I deliberately haven't tried to make this book a catalog of every AI feature currently available. That book would be outdated before I finished writing it. Instead, I want you to understand something that will last longer than any individual AI tool.

Start with the job that needs to be done. Then ask how AI can help you do it.

That's the habit worth developing.

Start With One Thing

You don't need to overhaul your entire trade show program tomorrow. In fact, I wouldn't. Pick one thing you already do. Something repetitive. Something time-consuming. Something you've done so many times you can almost feel yourself getting bored before you start. Then give AI a shot at it. Maybe it's the exhibitor manual. Upload it to an AI tool your company permits you to use and ask for a chronological checklist. Check the results. Did it save you time? Good. Next time, try something else. Ask AI to help develop pre-show invitations. Or create booth-staff role-playing exercises. Or challenge your objectives. Or summarize the first day's staff observations.

Or clean up lead notes. Or help prepare a post-show management report. You don't need to learn everything AI can do. You need to discover what it can do for you.

Don't Lose the Human Part

There's an irony in writing a book about using artificial intelligence for trade shows. Trade shows exist largely because human beings still value being together. We can conduct meetings online. We can watch demonstrations online. We can research products online. We can exchange specifications online. We can buy almost anything online. Yet people still travel across the country and around the world to walk trade show floors. Why? Because there is still value in looking someone in the eye. Seeing the product. Asking an unexpected question. Meeting someone you didn't expect to meet. Having the conversation after the presentation. Running into an old customer in the aisle.

Discovering something three booths away that wasn't on your schedule. AI shouldn't remove those things from exhibiting. It should give you more time for them. If AI saves you two hours reading documents, that's two hours you can spend thinking about the people you're trying to attract. If it saves you an hour preparing a report, that's an hour you can spend talking with Sales. If it helps organize booth notes, perhaps your staff can spend more time listening instead of typing. If it helps identify the best opportunities after the show,

your salespeople can spend more time talking with people who may actually buy.

That's where technology serves the human process rather than replacing it.

Don't Lose the Process Either

There's something else AI can't replace. A process. If your company doesn't know why it's exhibiting, AI can't fix that. If your booth staff doesn't know who they're looking for, AI can't fix that. If you haven't decided what makes someone a qualified prospect, AI can't fix that. If nobody owns post-show follow-up, AI can't fix that. If Sales receives hundreds of unqualified names and nobody knows which ones deserve attention, AI may help organize the mess.

But I'd rather prevent the mess. That's why I keep coming back to:

Pre-Show. During-Show. Post-Show. Payoff.

AI can complement every part of that process. It shouldn't become a substitute for having one.

Especially After the Show

If there's one area where I hope this book changes your thinking, it's what happens after the show. I've spent too many years watching companies invest enormous amounts of money to create opportunities and then fail to finish the job. They design a beautiful exhibit. They ship it across the country. They send a staff. They pay for hotels. They entertain customers. They demonstrate products. They scan hundreds of badges. Then they go home and hand all those names to Sales. That's not where the process should end. That's where another part begins. Respond to the people who visited. Give them an opportunity to tell you what they want.

Continue qualification. Identify the genuine sales opportunities. Get those opportunities to Sales quickly. Nurture the people who may become opportunities later. Track what happens. Measure the results. Find out whether the show paid. AI can make much of that easier than it has ever been. But somebody still has to decide to do it.

The Edge Belongs to the Person Using the Tool

Sooner or later, AI will simply become another part of doing business. We won't be nearly as fascinated by it. Nobody will announce:

"I used artificial intelligence today!"

any more than we announce that we used email. We'll just use it. When that happens, the advantage won't come from having access to AI. Everyone will have access. The advantage will come from knowing how to use it intelligently. For the exhibit manager, that means combining two things.

Your knowledge of exhibiting.

And:

Your ability to use AI to make that knowledge more productive.

One without the other isn't nearly as powerful. AI without trade show knowledge can produce a lot of answers. Trade show knowledge without AI can still produce excellent results. But put experience and AI together and something interesting happens. You can research faster. Prepare faster. Communicate faster. Analyze faster. Experiment faster. And perhaps most importantly, you have more time to concentrate on the decisions and relationships that still require a human being.

Keep Asking

I learned AI by being curious. I still am. I see something it can do and wonder what else it might do. That's the attitude I'd like you to take away from this book. The next time you're working on a trade show and find yourself buried in something tedious, ask:

Can AI help me with this?

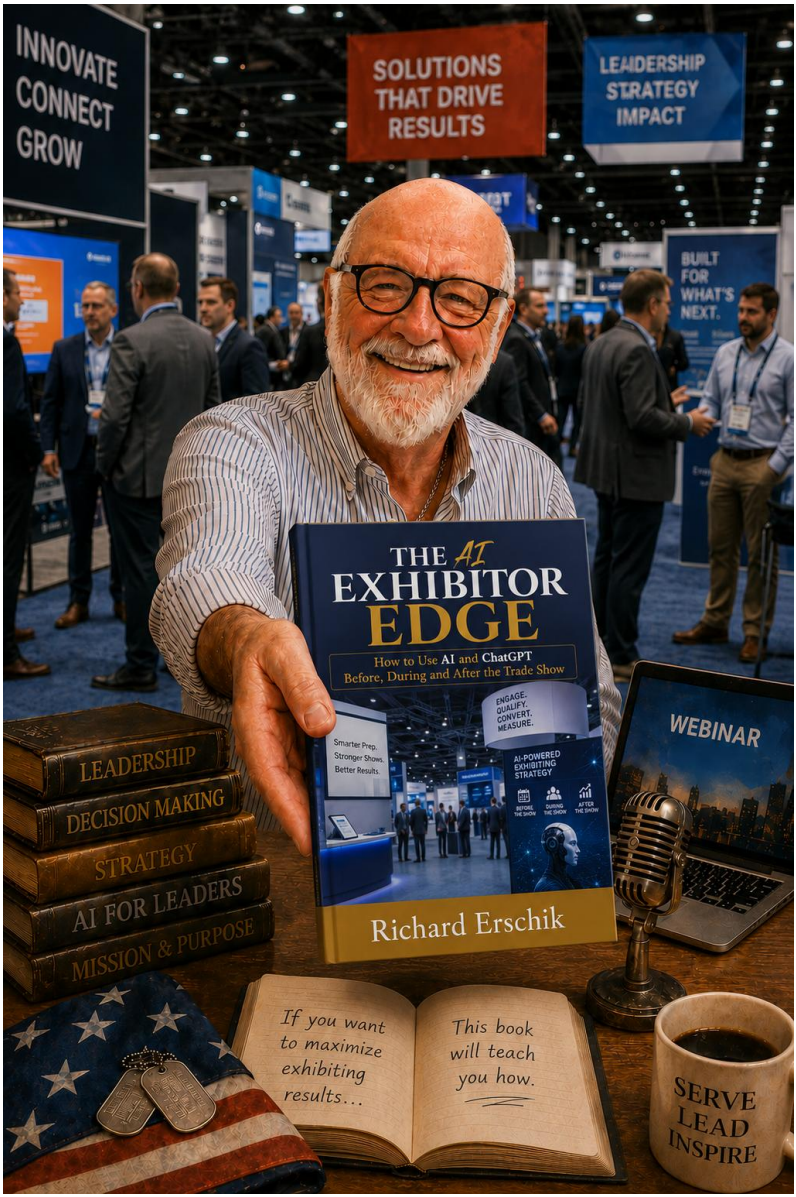
Try it. If the answer isn't useful, change the question. Give it more information. Explain what you really need. Challenge the answer. Keep talking. And when it gives you something important, remember the rule from Chapter 9:

AI creates. You decide.

You don't need to become an AI expert. You need to become an exhibit manager who knows when AI can help. Because the companies exhibiting beside you are going to discover these tools too. Some already have. The question isn't whether artificial intelligence will find its way into trade show marketing. It already has. The question is what you're going to do with it. The booth still needs you. Your customers

still need you. Your salespeople still need you. Your company still needs your judgment. Now you simply have a very capable new assistant. Put it to work.

That's The AI Exhibitor Edge.



This book has been your starting point. Don't stop here.



NEXT STEPS

If you've made it this far, I hope I've accomplished what I set out to do. I wanted to introduce you to artificial intelligence in plain English and, more importantly, show you how AI and ChatGPT can become practical tools in the everyday work of managing trade shows. But there's something else I hope you've taken away from this book.

AI is a tool. Exhibiting still requires a process.

Artificial intelligence can help you research faster, prepare better, communicate more effectively, analyze information, improve follow-up, and save an enormous amount of time. But it still needs to fit into a sound exhibiting process. That's something I've spent more than 50 years learning, doing, refining, and teaching. My approach looks at the complete trade show:

Pre-Show. During-Show. Post-Show. Payoff.

It begins with knowing why you're exhibiting and what you want to accomplish. It continues through preparation, booth-staff performance, visitor engagement, qualification, lead response, follow-up, nurturing, sales handoff, and finally measuring the results. And if there's one part of that process I believe deserves considerably more attention, it's what happens to all those names after the show. You paid to acquire them. Now you need a process for finding the buyers hiding among them.

If You'd Like to Go Further

The primary way I teach the complete process is through my Live Online Exhibitor Training Webinar. The program goes beyond the AI applications you've learned in this book and teaches the practical Pre-Show, During-Show, and Post-Show process I've developed from more than five decades in the trade show industry and more than one

million trade show sales leads. The investment for the live online webinar is $795. If a live program isn't right for you, the recorded version is available for $179 and allows you to learn the process on your own schedule.

And for those who prefer to learn by reading and doing, my book Trade Shows Don't Cost… They Pay! provides the DIY process for improving lead response, qualification, prioritization, nurturing, sales handoff, measurement, and ROI. The book is $79. You can learn more about all three at:

ExhibitorTrainingWebinar.com

Whether you ever take one of my programs or buy another one of my books isn't the most important thing. Use what you've learned here. Open ChatGPT. Give it one of the jobs you're doing manually today. See what happens. Then try another. Because you don't have to change everything about the way you manage trade shows. You just have to start discovering where AI can help you do it better. And now you know where to start.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard Erschik — Rich to the thousands of people who have attended his presentations and training programs — is an entrepreneur, author, speaker, trainer, trade show specialist, and AI educator. His connection to the trade show industry goes back more than 50 years. He has been an exhibitor himself, experienced the problems exhibitors face firsthand, and eventually built a business around solving one of the industry's most persistent problems: what happens to all those names collected after the show. In 1986, Rich founded a company specializing in trade show lead response, qualification, follow-up, nurturing, and measurement. Over more than 22 years, his company processed more than one million trade show sales leads, giving him a perspective few people in the industry have ever had on what actually happens between collecting a name at a booth and turning that name into business.

That experience became the foundation of his trade show training. Rich has made more than 350 presentations, trained more than 45,000 professionals, and was a featured presenter at the EXHIBITOR Show in Las Vegas for 18 years. His teaching has always focused less on telling exhibitors what they should do and more on showing them how to actually do it. Then artificial intelligence entered the picture. At 80+, Rich approached AI much the same way he approached the personal computer when he first encountered one in the early 1980s: with curiosity. He saw what it could do and started asking questions.

Can it do this? What about this? Could it help with that? One question led to another until using AI turned into teaching AI. Today, Rich teaches AI and ChatGPT to beginners, seniors, executives, and business professionals through webinars, presentations, books, group programs, and individual instruction. His approach remains the same one he has used throughout his career: Plain English. Practical examples. No tech jargon. He is the author of numerous books, including ChatGPT Made Simple, The AI Executive Edge, and Trade Shows Don't Cost… They Pay! The AI Exhibitor Edge brings two parts

of Rich's career together. It combines more than half a century of trade show experience with his practical knowledge of artificial intelligence to answer a question he believes every exhibit manager should now be asking:

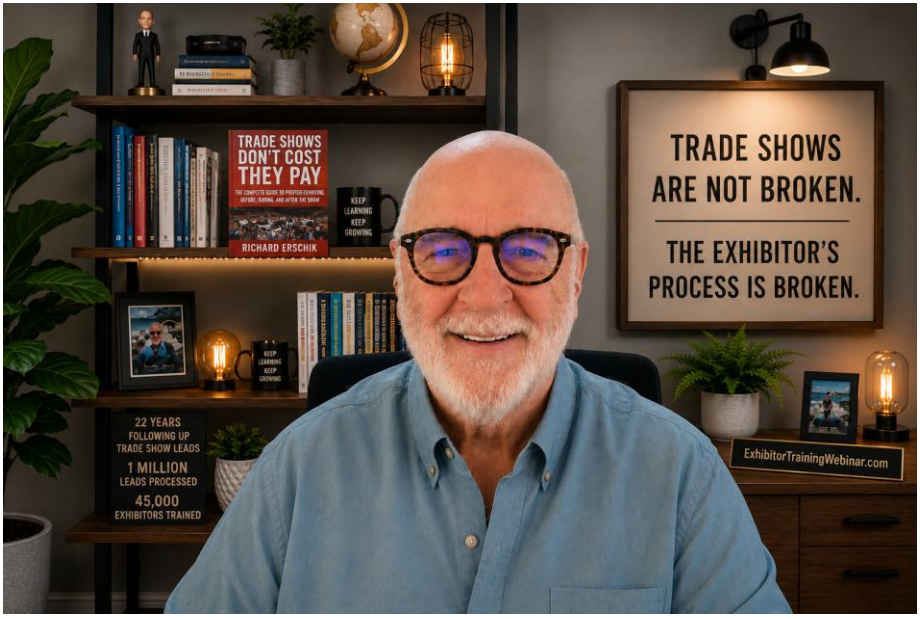
How can I use AI to make my trade show program better? Not someday. Now. Rich's answer is the book you just read.

To Learn More

ExhibitorTrainingWebinar.com Live online exhibitor training, recorded training, books, and practical resources for improving trade show results before, during, and after the show.

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Thank you for reading this book. The next steps are up to you.