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## Trade Show Tips for Freelancers



### Navigate the newest products with our pro pointers

By Charlotte West – August 4, 2008



No matter what their beat, writers are always on the lookout for the next story. Industry events and trade fairs can be a great source of story ideas, but you need to know how to wade through the muddy waters of PR reps, press kits and product launches.

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#### Don't try to cover everything

Trade fairs bring together media and industry insiders, whether you cover fashion, technology or outdoor gear. If design is your thing, the Milan Furniture Fair in Italy is the place to be. If you cover gizmos and gadgets, there's the annual Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas, and if you write about cars, one of the biggest happenings of the year is the North American International Auto Show in Detroit.

All of these events give companies an opportunity to showcase their latest products, and provide writers with ample hunting ground for leads. "I think going to trade fairs can be invaluable in terms of story ideas and contact gathering," says freelancer Kate Siber, who writes about outdoor gear for publications such as *Men's Journal*, *Outside* and *The New York Times*.

But while trade shows can be a source of ideas, they can also be overwhelming due to their sheer size. The week-long Milan Furniture Fair, for instance, attracts 2,500 exhibitors, 5,000 journalists and almost 300,000 visitors. The fairgrounds themselves take up the equivalent of several city blocks, and there are alternative events and exhibitions scattered throughout the city. It's impossible to cover everything, and if you try, you're likely to just end up frustrated.

#### Go in with a game plan

The trick is to boil it down to the things that are interesting -- and forget the rest. "Go into the shows [and] events knowing what you're looking for," says Heather Levine, who regularly attends bridal and fashion shows as fashion editor for *The Knot*. "There are always lots of great products to see. The easiest way to find the 'good stuff' is to know the brand that you're working with. Is there a color that works well with the company aesthetic? For instance, Neon would be much more appropriate in a teen magazine than a bridal magazine. What's their design style? If it is modern, hone in on products that have sleek lines and poppy colors. And traditional: look for earthy tones and elegant craftsmanship."

In addition to knowing what your publication seeks, it's also important to focus on what appeals to you personally. "Like anything, look for things that fall into your interests; at a film festival, I know I have no interest in horror or terror movies. So those don't even get my consideration -- the weeding-out process has begun! At the furniture expo, maybe you're into mid-century American? Go there," advises a top editor at a large entertainment magazine.

#### Find a balance

Another challenge of prowling trade events is finding the right balance between filling up your calendar ahead of time and leaving enough time for doing some on-the-ground research. Once you register for an event, you are likely to receive a deluge of emails from PR representatives requesting meetings. "There aren't enough hours in a week to meet with everyone who'll want a piece of you, so the key is to know who's worth the time and who gets 'Sorry, I'm all booked up,'" says Jon Wilde, senior editor at *Men's Journal*. "I generally reserve meetings for three reasons: the company's so big that I need to be walked through their new lineup, the company's so cool/innovative/new that I want to make sure they know me and keep me in the loop going forward, or I have a good relationship with the PR person and he or she begs me to take the meeting."

Other writers prefer to avoid the PR junket altogether. "My technique is to turn up and follow my nose. I am too disorganized to filter all the invites and promo stuff I get sent so I'm much more reliant on picking up the buzz at the event itself. Besides, the biggest PR campaigns and most lavish parties don't necessarily equate to the most interesting work," says Marcus Fairs, founder and editor of British design and architecture blog, [Dezeen.com](#).

Even those who schedule PR meetings ahead of time say it's equally important to spend time just wandering around. "Some of your best trade show discoveries will come from simply roaming the floor with an open mind, so be sure to leave yourself plenty of unbooked time. As a freelance writer specializing in new products, it was important for me to just keep an eye out for out for unusual and interesting products that might float below other people's radars," explains former freelancer Seth Porges, who is now associate editor at *Popular Mechanics*.

### Look for the little guys

For freelancers attending trade events without an assignment, finding the off-beat products can be the key to selling a story. New York-based freelancer Steve Mazzucchi covers outdoor gear and attends shows such as Outdoor Retailer and Snowsports Industry Association (SIA). "A couple of years ago, I walked up to this dead-looking booth at SIA and found out about these gloves with a zipper along the knuckles that let you pop your fingers out, Alien-style, without removing the glove. I ended up writing about those for a couple publications," he says.

"I think this really cuts to the heart of what you should be trying to do at a trade show -- find really cool, different stuff that your editors have never seen before and will get excited about. When it comes to snow sports, [for instance], even mainstream mag editors are probably gonna know about the new stuff from bigger brands. Funky knuckle-zip gloves from a company with, like, three employees? Not so much," says Mazzucchi.

Whether you're covering an event on an assignment or snooping around for story ideas, a lot of the secret to navigating trade events is common sense. "Make at least a few appointments with companies and with editors, if possible, and let the rest happen. The first time you go is probably going to be an experiment, but you'll learn from it for the next time," advises Siber.

### Tips from the experts:

- 1. Use the opportunity to network.** "These events are more about people than products -- it's the time when you catch up with old friends and make new ones. The social aspect is really important and without it fairs would be fairly awful experiences. Often, you can simply grab the press CDs and look at the products in more comfort when you get home," says Fairs.
- 2. Set aside time to wander around.** "You should reserve at least a full day's worth of time for pounding the pavement and looking for those cool little companies that nestle in the shadows of convention centers," says Wilde.
- 3. Ask about media-embargoed products.** This is standard practice in some industries like automotive. "A lot of companies have secret items to show long-lede media -- but you might have to ask. So be sure to seek out non-disclosure agreement meetings in order to get the scoop on embargoed products," says Porges.
- 4. Look for trends, not just products.** "The hardest part of an editor's job isn't finding the coolest stuff to feature, it's packaging the cool stuff in an interesting way. So whether that's gear or movies or clothing, you need to know what the big trends are for the season, or find great ways to group what look like disparate things," says Wilde.
- 5. Read all about it.** One tip for navigating trade fairs on the ground is to read show guides, both online and print. "You won't be able to see everything at shows of this size, so be sure to frequently check the blogs while you are at the shows -- they have massive teams of reporters covering every nook and cranny of the show, and are a great way to scout out things worth checking out. If something looks great, head over to the booth," advises Porges.
- 6. Take care of yourself and the environment.** Bring snacks to avoid the over-priced, unhealthy food normally served at trade fairs, and wear comfortable shoes. In addition, "don't take press kits, unless it's on a memory stick. Companies should know that paper's a waste in this digital age. And more importantly, your back will thank you," says Wilde.

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