



**BY PHIL SASSO**  
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## How to get the most from a tool show

Profiting from a buying show takes more than just showing up

It's showtime! Time for your flag or warehouse distributor's annual tool show

Whether you've been a tool dealer for 20 years or 20 days, there's always a lot to gain at these events: cashback bonuses, show-only deals, tool demos, new product introductions, manufacturer sales training, raffles, giveaways and a chance to connect with other dealers.

It may take a bit of work, but the payback can be well worth it. That's why the most successful dealers usually attend at least one flag or warehouse distributor show every year.

Here are some tips from tool show veterans – including myself (I've walked several marathons at the more than 25 aftermarket tool and trade shows I've attended over the last two decades).

### Before the show: Plan ahead

To maximize time, start planning weeks before you pack your bags.

### Make the show a priority

Don't think taking a few days away will kill sales. It's quite the opposite. The deals and discounts alone are worth it. But the contagious energy at and around the show can have a big impact on your bottom line, too.

"You can't underestimate the power of getting together with other dealers," says Don Russell of Cornwell Tools. "Being a tool dealer can be a lonely job. Attending a show can help a



*New product demonstrations are a must-see at any tool show.*

Photo: Courtesy of ISN

dealer realize you're not alone – there are other dealers across the country that can identify with you."

### Reserve your room and flight early

This can help you get better hotel rooms, seating and/or pricing. Many shows give top tool dealers a full or partial credit toward travel and lodging. Ask your representative if you qualify (and if not, make becoming a VIP your goal for next year).

### Have a budget, but don't be rigid

Without a budget, it's easy to overspend ... or underspend.

"A lot of dealers come to our show with a budget in mind," says Sarah Shelstrom, public relations director at ISN. "But don't let a preconceived budget hinder you."

### Know your numbers

Reviewing your averages can help you decide not just your budget, but how to allocate your budget, says Steve Dewar, Cornwell Tools district manager and 23-year tool and equipment veteran.

"Review your numbers with your DM before the show for advice," Dewar says.

Your number of open accounts and your average time payment amount can determine your buying goal. For example, you'll buy differently if you want to increase your overall customer base than if you want to increase your average sale per customer.

### Ask customers for input

Cornwell's Dewar gives his dealers handouts to generate a master wish list. Customers list all the tools they want their distributor to find details or deals on at the show.

### Go online for more

To see a list of upcoming show dates and locations, visit [vehicleservicepros.com/20988760](http://vehicleservicepros.com/20988760).



Also, Dewar makes this list an entry form for an aftershow raffle. Winners can only win tools from their wish list. This helps customers focus and create longer, more realistic lists.

Don't worry if you don't get a big response, the list alone is valuable, says Dewar. Add these items to each customer's wish list in your computer. Put the forms in a binder and bring it with you to the show as a giant shopping list.

"It's easier than it sounds," Dewar says.

And be sure your customer's cell number is on each list. This way you can call from the show floor with questions. It shows you're working for them.

### Check your inventory

Know what you have and what you need. "Do your homework," ISN's

Shelstrom says. "Know your inventory. Ask customers what they want. And create a target list of what vendors you want to see. Then prioritize that list. You want to make the most of every minute you're at the show."

### Know the deals

You can often comb the show directory or floor plan for special offers.

One year, a dealer blogged about attending the ISN Tool Dealer Expo, Shelstrom says. He spent an hour or more in his hotel room listing every cash back offer and prioritized them by value. Then he walked the show by going down his list.

On the other hand, there can also be "hidden promotions," says Darren Wilson, director of mobile field sales for Medco Tools. These deals require you

to walk the show with your eyes peeled.

### Place your pre-show order

Some shows offer discounts before the event even begins. This is a good time to stock up on items you sell every day and save time.

"Anything you buy before the show, you'll have before the show, and you can start selling before the show," Medco's Wilson says.

Getting a preorder of common items out of the way upfront allows you to have more time to focus on new vendors and new lines.

### During the Show: Get the most from your time

You're at the show to learn, recharge and most importantly, to buy. To get it all done you need to keep your focus

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and stick to your plan. Just like on your route, time is money.

## Dress comfortably

You're on your feet a lot at a tool show, says Medco's Wilson. Wear walking shoes.

## Fly your Flag

No matter if you're at a corporate rally or a warehouse distributor show, feel free to show your brand pride with logoed gear. It can help you connect with other dealers.

## Be stingy with your time

At most shows you have only about 12 to 16 hours of floor time. That may sound like a lot, but with over 100 vendors and more than 1,000 products to see, you could have as little as six minutes per booth – and that's without allowing any time for breaks.

"Get to the show floor early and stay to the end," ISN's Shelstrom says.

Your goal is to use as much floor time as possible learning and buying. Save meeting and mingling until after hours.

## Take notes

You'll be learning a lot in a short time. Don't think you can remember it all. Take detailed notes so you can refer back to them after the show, says Dewar.

## Ask "What's new?" at every booth

Your goal is to see the latest and greatest. Your customers will be asking you the same question when you're back on your route.

## Get in on the giveaways

There are tens of thousands of dollars worth of giveaways at most shows. (ISN estimates two million dollars in cash and prizes at their Orlando show and one million dollars at their Vegas show – including trucks and cars.) But you have to be in it to win it. Be sure you keep your eyes open and enter every raffle you qualify for.



*Networking starts at the show, but can continue year round.*  
Photo: Courtesy of Medco

## Get together with your representative

This is a chance to meet your day-to-day sales contact in person. Take the time to discuss your goals and buying list, says Medco's Wilson. They can give you insights you might not get from just reading the show materials.

"In this business, it's not how you sell your product, it's how you buy your product," Wilson says. "Your Medco sales rep will prepare a history of what you've bought over the last year."

## Look beyond just tools

There are vendors at shows offering financing, insurance, inventory management applications and more. Take a few minutes to see how they may fit your business.

"Our show has several vendors promoting what we call toys," Wilson says. Since Medco's show is in fall, they have a lot of holiday packages and gift items at their show.

I've seen booths for everything from

beef jerky to gun safes at a tool show. Don't be so focused on tools that you miss other hot inventory and special order opportunities.

## Keep in touch with customers

Use text and social media to keep customers in the loop. Post photos of new products to your Facebook, Instagram, YouTube or Twitter account. One Cornwall dealer I know posts Facebook videos from his flag's show ([vehicleservicepros.com/20858291](https://www.facebook.com/vehicleservicepros.com/20858291)).

"Text your customer a photo from the show floor," suggests Dewar.

Ask them if this is the tool they're looking for on their wish list.

## But don't be TOO in touch

Don't take customer calls on the show floor. Floor time is precious. Return any customer calls and texts after show hours or the next day.

## Make time for training

Take the time to attend workshops. Knowing how to sell can be as

important as knowing what to sell, says ISN's Shelstrom.

### Soak up the energy

Don't be so rushed you miss the chance to laugh, listen and recharge, says Cornwell's Russell.

### Save time for fun until your job is done

Most shows are at interesting venues. But save the sightseeing and family time until the show is over. Evenings are a great time to network with other dealers and share tips and tricks. Take the time to swap contact info so you can keep in touch long after the show is over.

### After the Show: Sharpen the saw and stoke the fire

The show is over. But that doesn't mean you're done. Now is time to cash in on your trip.

### Kick back for a few days

Many dealers take a few days off after the show to relax. You can make it a family vacation, a romantic escape or just a getaway.

Remember you can write off your travel costs to and from the venue, show lodging and even a portion of your meals as a business expense. So, make the most of your tax-free trip. (Ask your accountant for details.)

### Don't fall back into the grind

You're invigorated, stocked up and full of new ideas. Now it's time to cash in to sell all that great inventory, says ISN's Shelstrom.

### Place your post-show order

Some shows don't end the deals when the show closes. For example, Cornwell extends promotional pricing for three weeks, but only for dealers who attended the show, says Russell.

### Get the word out

Tote and promote. Create flyers. Send

emails and texts. Post it to your social media. Let every customer know all the great new products and deals you got at the show. It's time to turn that great inventory into cash flow.

### It's worth going

You may think you can't afford time off to go to a tradeshow. Really, you can't afford *not* to go.

Follow this advice and the show will more than pay for itself. 📌



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