

CASE STUDY

Tunnel Vision

Heidelberg Engineering Inc. forgoes its own proven formula for trade show success in favor of an eye-opening interactive experience that puts attendees in control — and increases leads by 174 percent. *By Lena Valenty*

For the past 10 years, Heidelberg Engineering Inc., a manufacturer of diagnostic ophthalmic instruments, used trade shows as launching pads for its new offerings. Each year, the company centered its exhibit program on a product debut. From the Spectralis OCT, which is used to track surface changes in the retina, to the HRT Cornea, which is used to view corneal structure and pathology, Heidelberg always had a new piece of equipment to share with eager attendees. The company brought in renowned ophthalmologists to give educational presentations about the products' benefits, and paired the presentations with product demos. The strategy, though conventional, was also effective, as the company often closed sales on the spot.

But when it came time to develop an exhibit program for the 2009 American Academy of Ophthalmology (AAO) show in San Francisco, the company faced a problem it hadn't encountered in nearly a decade — it didn't have a new product debuting in 2009. Zip, nada, nothing. Fearing its formula for exhibit success — a product-centric educational presentation and in-booth demos — would fall flat without a new product to talk about, it enlisted the help of San Francisco-based ad agency Jocoto Advertising Inc. to come up with a viable solution. "Our primary challenge became creating buzz for Heidelberg without having a new product to promote," says Colette Kuhnsman, principal of account services/new business development for Jocoto. "We had to figure out what else we could leverage that would attract attendees while still keeping an educational component."

That educational component, while necessary to understanding the complexities of Heidelberg's equipment, is also a huge draw for attendees at health-care shows. In fact, a 2008 study conducted by Marketech Inc. found that 63 percent of health-care show attendees visit exhibits primarily to learn about products.

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In addition to satisfying attendee interest and the need for a thorough explanation of the company's machines, there's another force driving education in Heidelberg's exhibit: the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America (PhRMA) Code on Interactions with Healthcare Professionals. The code governs the marketing practices of pharmaceutical and medical-device companies, and in terms of exhibiting, it includes guidelines for everything from giveaways to wining and dining doctors.

Though the code has definite gray areas that some argue are open to interpretation, one thing is clear: the PhRMA code promotes an education-driven approach to exhibiting. With that in mind and without a new product to promote, Kuhnsman and Kellie Archer, trade show and event manager at Heidelberg, started looking for a topic on which they could school AAO attendees.

See Change

The team took stock of what Heidelberg had to offer and asked themselves "What is it that sets us apart from the competition?" They found their answer in the company's proprietary laser technology, dubbed BluePeak, which is used in its Spectralis line of equipment. The blue laser allows doctors to noninvasively examine a patient's retina — a huge advancement over conventional technology. "Though the technology has been used for quite some time, many attendees were unaware of the benefits of BluePeak compared to what the competition was offering," Kuhnsman says. "AAO became an opportunity to capture and engage attendees, and teach them about the company's technology instead of only focusing on a single piece of equipment."

Beyond creating an exhibit that simply drew attendees in, however, the team wanted to ensure that what they prescribed would also keep physicians in the exhibit for at least three minutes and encourage lengthier interactions with Heidelberg sales reps. After all, the more time physicians spent in Heidelberg's exhibit, the less time they'd have to spend with the competition. And that's when it hit them: If Heidelberg hoped to make an impression on attendees, they had to ditch the passive presentation and in-booth demos (which in the past had focused on whatever new product was being debuted) and instead opt for a more immersive experience that focused on communicating the key benefits of BluePeak through hands-on, interactive avenues that required active attendee participation.

"Obviously, it was really important that we continue to educate doctors," Archer says, "but we've learned through experience that they are extremely competitive, enjoy interaction, and like learning about something in a new way." So Kuhnsman and Archer began working on an exhibit strategy that





Designed to funnel traffic through the space, two 12-foot-tall tunnels in Heidelberg Engineering Inc.'s booth featured interactive presentations on touchscreen monitors.

At the reception desk, a booth staffer swiped each attendee's badge and attached an RFID tag to it. Information on the tag included the attendee's name, title, and other data from the AAO attendee database. Once tagged, attendees entered one of two identical tunnels. The double vision was purposeful design, as Kuhnsman wanted to prevent a bottleneck effect by offering two tunnels through which attendee traffic could flow. Both tunnels contained two 60-inch touchscreens that were activated by attendees' RFID tags. After a personalized greeting, such as "Welcome, Dr. Joe Smith," the touchscreens prompted attendees to move through a brief interactive presentation on BluePeak technology and its benefits.

Attendees spent an average of eight to 10 minutes inside the tunnels, and then moved on to the next step of the interactive experience — customizing their own Heidelberg device on one of two kiosks. The kiosks, each comprising a 48-inch touchscreen monitor and a printing station, resembled an oversized iPhone. The touchscreens featured 15 different icons, each one representing different components that attendees could select to build their perfect piece of equipment. When booth visitors finished designing the diagnostic device of their dreams, they simply hit print, and out came the device's schematics on a piece of paper.

Those that wished to speak with a Heidelberg rep about making their dream device a reality brought the specs to a staffer at the demo stations. Specs in hand, the rep then selected a Heidelberg product that most closely matched the plan created by the attendee and provide a demonstration. On the other hand, attendees not interested in speaking with reps could move on to another area of the exhibit. Whichever path attendees chose, all specs created during the show were automatically sent to Heidelberg sales reps for use in post-show follow-up.

Upon completing their personalized specs and/or chatting with Heidelberg reps, visitors participated in a trivia game based on information presented during the tunnel tour. The game station, a black, curved wall on which a 52-inch flatscreen was mounted, featured five small touchscreens resting atop pedestals that arched out from the base of the station. A banner with the text "You Make the Call" was positioned above the flatscreen, which was flanked by the phrases "test your knowledge" and "impress your colleagues." The multiple-choice trivia game included product-related questions and visual clues. Each doctor's score was displayed on a leader board on the 52-inch flatscreen and according to Archer, attendees kept returning to the exhibit to check the board throughout the show and see who nabbed the top score. "Doctors are very competitive, so the trivia game attracted a lot of people," she says.

But what seemed like a harmless trivia game was actually a device used to further educate attendees about the company's key messages and keep them in the exhibit. To wit, attendees that participated in the various in-booth activities (i.e., the tunnel, the kiosk, the demo station, the game) racked up participation points, which were tracked by the RFID tags on their badges. At the end of the exhibit experience, attendees that took part in at least three activities could redeem their points for the educational book on retinal disorders mentioned in the pre-show marketing collateral. "The reference book served as an incentive for attendees to stay in the exhibit and participate in the different activities," Kuhnsman says. It also served as an educational takeaway that spelled out practical, real-world applications of Heidelberg's technology.

Seeing is Believing

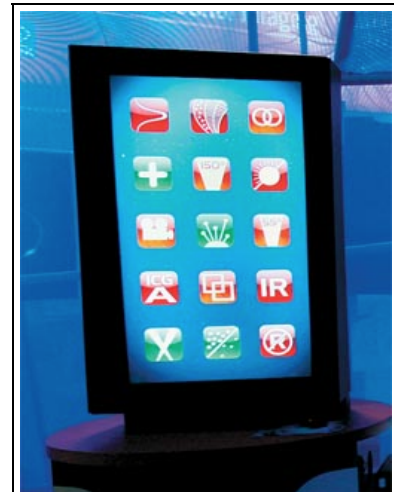
Though the exhibit experience was focused on physician education, Heidelberg learned a thing or two about its customers and prospects as well, thanks to the RFID tags. The company dissected each attendee's booth experience based on the data collected via the tags, and it plans to use that information to improve future exhibit programs. "The RFID tags allowed us to track people's movement through the space, and we were able to see what each person was most interested in and how much time they spent at each activity," Kuhnsman says.

That information, coupled with the devices that visitors custom designed on the kiosks, proved valuable pieces of the follow-up puzzle as well — sales reps used them to collect, qualify, and prioritize new leads, and were able to customize post-show correspondence. For example, if Dr. Joe Smith created a dream device that featured similar traits to, say, an HRT Cornea machine, a Heidelberg rep could then mail that attendee specific product information about that machine instead of sending out the entire product catalog.

Not surprisingly, the interactive experience, educational components, in-booth demonstrations, and personalized approach resulted in a jaw-dropping 174-percent increase in leads over the previous year. What's more, the number of leads converted to sales increased by 72 percent compared to 2008 figures, leading to the highest sales in company history.

By simply shifting its marketing focus from new products to an existing technology, and replacing a presentation theater with an interactive, engaging exhibit experience, Heidelberg was able to sell more than it ever had before. Turns out that a new exhibit formula was just what the eye doctors ordered.

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To learn more about doctors' specific needs, Heidelberg provided attendees with the chance to customize a device.

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