

Business – the lifeblood of forensic science

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Try practicing forensic science in a laboratory or collect physical evidence from a crime scene without equipment or supplies. It doesn't take long to realize that forensic science as we know it could not exist without the support and involvement of some very patient and persistent companies able to survive in what is often a difficult and frustrating market.

The profession of forensic science relies heavily on research and advancements in technology; therefore, entrepreneurial endeavors will always be a key measure of progress in the field whether they are fully appreciated as such or not.

One of the most common practices for businesses seeking to establish a customer base in the forensic science community is to set up a booth at a major conference or symposium. It is a proven method that affords vendors an opportunity to showcase their offerings directly to potential customers. But because it can be a rather expensive proposition, it places pressure on sales representatives to make the most of the experience.

"The forensic market is potentially quite small and, thus, not necessarily a high-profit arena," explains Max Houck, Director of West Virginia University's Forensic Science Initiative. "Vendors think that because forensic science is a hot topic, there must be tons of money to be made. In reality, budgets can be very tight and funding quite slim."

While these market conditions may seem ominous, it should inspire vendors to use creativity and hard work to make the most of their marketing dollars. History shows that success is attainable.

Tim Smith is the president of Porter Lee Corporation, which provides a widely used laboratory information management system affectionately called the BEAST (Bar-Coded Evidence And Statistics Tracking). According to Smith, his experience of attending hundreds of forensic science meetings reveals one of the strategic threats facing companies that don't stay active in the forensic science community.

"Crime labs routinely communicate with one another thus many times a purchase decision is made outside of any communications with the vendor," observes Smith.

Ultimately, science is about credibility and competence. Businesses that are perceived as holding themselves to the same standards of accuracy and professionalism as their forensic clients will usually have more success over the long term.

One forensic science leader who has witnessed the trials and tribulations of companies hoping to stand out among their competitors is Dean Gialamas, President of the American Society of

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Crime Laboratory Directors (ASCLD). As Gialamas points out, marketing to forensic scientists can be quite different from marketing to their bosses yet both are equally important.

"At a meeting of crime lab directors, the best thing vendors can do is to understand the operational needs of crime labs," comments Gialamas. "Some vendors end up just giving a sales pitch and lose the chance to build lasting relationships that are meaningful to them and our members."

One company that faced an unusually difficult battle in the early 1990's was Forensic Technology, Inc. (FTI) of Montreal, Canada. FTI is the maker of the IBIS (NIBIN) system, which databases and digitizes images of bullets and cartridge cases for local, regional, and national searching.

When FTI first came on the scene in the early 1990's, not only was their product unknown to the forensic science community, they faced heavy competition from Neumonic Systems, Inc., the company that contracted with the FBI to develop the Drugfire system. As a result, FTI relied on persistence and relationship-building to grow a successful company that now employs over 200 people.

"Make sure you approach the market as a partner and not just a seller," advises Mike McLean, one of the original members of the FTI team. "Making the scientists a part of research programs and soliciting their feedback for product development will allow the end user to embrace change more quickly and accept what you have. If they feel part of the process they will embrace products more freely."

In light of the unique challenges facing companies hoping to connect with crime labs, we hope that all forensic science professionals will remember to support and interact with the businesses that make forensic science possible.

We also hope that sales representatives will be proactive in reaching out to practitioners and managers in the marketplace. To support this effort, *Crime Lab Report* offers the following ten tips to help businesses that want to make a splash in the forensic science community:

10. When attending forensic meetings, be enthusiastic about the value of your products and services. If it wasn't for you, there would be no such thing as a forensic science laboratory. As Mike McLean noted, "be confident yet humble. Don't act like you know it all and that you can solve all their problems. You cannot solve everything but by asking questions and trying to understand you can build trust and respect for years to come."

9. Get out and chat with people. Organizations often hold meals and breaks in the exhibit areas to draw in the meeting's attendees. Take advantage of this courtesy and don't wait for future clients to come to you.

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8. Create a booth that sparks curiosity. Scientists love to explore without being distracted so be sure to cater to this natural instinct. Also, be careful where you place your tables. They can become obstacles that turn potential clients away from your booth.
7. Don't limit your conversations to sales pitches. Talk to the scientists about their work, their goals, and the challenges they face each day. You will be surprised what you learn and they will be more likely to approach you at future meetings.
6. Be everywhere. Diversify your marketing strategy and use online venues and advertisements to reinforce the brand you are trying to establish. Testimonials have a particularly strong impact on scientists because they are perceived as a kind of peer-review which commands respect in any scientific community.
5. Use simple but powerful advertisements to introduce specific products and services. Don't get too flashy. Scientists want to know how you can help them do their jobs better.
4. Make sure your customer service and technical support practices enhance the image you are trying to project. All of your marketing efforts will be wasted if your customers become annoyed or frustrated in their dealings with you. Word of incompetence travels quickly through the forensic science community and your company can't afford to have that happen.
3. Reach out to crime lab directors and supervisors. They make the final purchasing decisions for their laboratories. If you don't tap into this market segment, it can slow your progress over the long haul.
2. Measure the satisfaction of your customers regularly but unobtrusively. Use brief surveys or set up a complaint system that gives you good feedback. Loss of market share can sneak up on you when you're dealing with the slow and often cumbersome pace of government laboratories.
1. Finally, keep reminding your employees that they are supporting an important public service that protects the safety of our citizens and the fairness of our criminal justice system. Hopefully, this will generate an infectious enthusiasm that attracts potential customers to your business.

Companies that follow these simple tips will certainly enjoy higher levels of success than their competitors.

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