



## Episode 024: Ben Ponder – Trade Show Pro Tips and Strategies

BEN

Welcome to The Barcode Podcast. My name is Ben Ponder. I'm your host, and I'm really glad you've joined us today. I want to remind everybody that that The Barcode Podcast is presented by Titanium CPG Insurance. Titanium protects forward-thinking consumer brands with a range of insurance products and risk management services that are designed specifically for natural and organic food and beverage brands. You can learn more online at [titaniumcpg.com](http://titaniumcpg.com).

So today we're going to do something a little bit different. My initial plan was to spend some time really kind of going over what had happened at [Expo West](#). Well, as many of you know, [Expo West](#) didn't happen. So, there aren't really a lot of trends to discuss and that sort of thing.

So, so instead, what I want to do today is actually to talk a little bit with you [00:01:00] about trade show strategy. And this is something that I've learned the hard way, that I've personally experienced and that I've experienced vicariously through a lot of other friends in the industry. Now there's a few things that I want to kind of lay out as, as I guess the parameters of our discussion.

And, you know, first of all, let's just talk about what happened at [Expo West](#), as, as many of you know, for natural and organic consumer brands, [Expo West](#) didn't happen because of Coronavirus concerns. Now, it supposedly is postponed. We'll see how that gets, how that works itself out.

But what I think it's important for folks to know is that [Expo West](#) is in itself, is a really big business. And, and so my, again, just back of the napkin calculations would indicate that if you take into consideration all the registration and all the booth expenses and all the other things

there. You're talking about like somewhere in the neighborhood of \$100 million business that [00:02:00] happens over the course of a week. So, this is a pretty big endeavor. It's a big endeavor for New Hope Network, which puts on the show and for its parent company Informa, which is a British based conglomerate that runs all kinds of trade shows across, not just in the natural foods industry, but really in almost every industry. I think they run like 500 different major expos.

So, but [Expo West](#), Natural Products Expo West is a big one. And so, if and when and how they decide to, to redo it, it has a lot of big economic impacts for obviously the entity that's putting that on for a variety of different consumer businesses, both large and small.

And I had made a post on LinkedIn earlier, I guess earlier in the week, last week that that seemed to have resonated with some folks where I really just sort of pointed out that when [00:03:00] a large retailer or even a large investor, large CPG company, whatever it is makes a decision not to go to a trade show like that, it is costly to them, but it's not kind of existentially costly. It's, it's just kind of like, Oh, bummer.

Whereas for a lot of the brands who, you know, who weren't able to exhibit at [Expo West](#) this year. Or at least so far, it could mean like life or death for the business. Now again, we'll kind of get into whether that should be the case or not, but I think it's just important to acknowledge that, you know, when people were kind of struggling with, do I go, do I stay, do we take a skeleton crew, et cetera. Just a lot harder decision economically and existentially for those startups.

And so I want to talk today with you about trade show strategy writ large and hopefully with an eye toward some of the challenges that startups face around trade [00:04:00] shows in general. And then specific to some of these natural and organic trade shows.

Now, I know that some of our listeners, viewers and readers are you know, you may have a product or a brand or a company that exists somewhere in the broader consumer packaged goods space. I'm going to talk today primarily about natural and organic food and beverage products. But there are a lot of elements of this that translate pretty well regardless of the kind of product that you make. So you may be able to substitute the specific name of a trade show a one for another, but then hopefully the principles still generally apply.

So with that preface, I want to, there are a few themes that we talk about in the, in the Barcode universe and one of those is that has been, I've been reminded of as I've seen some of the different posts on social media and other places about [Expo West](#) and people [00:05:00] make the comment that it goes something like this, "Oh, that was a big part of my marketing budget," or "This startup that was a third or half or whatever of their marketing budget for the year."

And this may sound a little persnickety, but I think it's actually a pretty important point, and that is, I think of trade shows as a sales expense, not a marketing expense. And specifically the kind of trade shows that we're talking about now. Now there are consumer oriented trade shows. So if, if actual consumers are visiting, are the primary audience of a trade show, and yes, at [Expo West](#), there are just regular consumers there.

But the main reason the show exists is for the B2B aspects of it. Then I actually think of those as sales shows or selling shows. And so one of the things that we talk about here at Barcode is that that sales, this is loose, but it's a pretty good heuristic that sales is about getting onto the shelf and marketing is about getting off the [00:06:00] shelf.

And so you can think of sales for the most part, in the food and beverage world, sales is a B2B enterprise, right? You are trying to get in with a retailer, distributor or some other, some other entity that will help you ultimately connect with consumers, where your marketing dollars hopefully will, will be put to good use.

So the sales part is the B2B, and then the consumer facing is the B2C. So when I think of a trade show like an [Expo West](#), it really is primarily a selling or a sales activity. And I think that's important. That's an important framework for people because if you're spending your marketing dollars on a trade show that really is a B2B enterprise, then frankly, you're kind of wasting your marketing dollars because that's not what marketing does, and that's not what it's for.

So, I want to kind of lay out that for [00:07:00] natural products, and again, this is food, beverage, personal care, supplements, a lot of other household supplies, things like that. Anything that's happening in that natural products world and to some extent also specialty and gourmet - there are really four anchor shows in a year. And these are the shows that, that typically the larger retailers have some presence at. And, and that, that presence is going to vary pretty dramatically.

But the one that we theoretically should have just had is [Natural Products Expo West](#), which happens most years, until this point, roughly every year in March of the year in Anaheim. So just right next door to Disneyland, you won't ever probably make it to Disneyland, but you'll see the backside of the Matterhorn.

And so that happens in March. This is the cadence. In July, is the [Summer Fancy Food Show](#), which happens in New York City. In September, so this is in the fall, in September is [Natural Products Expo East](#), which in recent years has been in Baltimore, although this year will be again, a Coronavirus permitting, will be held in Philadelphia. And then in January, in the winter is the [Winter Fancy Food show in San Francisco at the Moscone Center](#). And the you can think the two expos [Expo West](#) and [Expo East](#) are put on by the new hope network. And then the two [Fancy Food Shows](#) are put on by the specialty food association.

Those are different organizations with different missions and they, they really tend to attract a different, a different crowd. And so the natural products expos tend to be a little larger, but they, and they also tend to be a little bit more focused on organic and natural products.

Not exclusively, but, but there, there are some more guardrails around that at that show. Whereas the [Fancy Food Show](#) historically has been, [00:09:00] it's, it's about specialty and gourmet foods. So not necessarily healthy, better for you, more environmentally conscious or sustainable. A lot of, you know, a lot of international exhibitors bringing their specialty foods from countries all around the world as well as kind of more interesting, intriguing, bespoke products that are just kind of odd or niche in some way and not necessarily trying to be, to make any sort of "better for you" claims. So, so again, a little bit stereotypically the [Fancy Food Shows](#) tend to have a lot more chocolate and kind of coffee and stuff like that. And maybe some more locavore type stuff as well.

So, so you've got those. Those are four big shows, and we'll talk in a minute about how you prioritize which ones to attend, which ones to exhibit at, etc. But in kind of in rough terms, depending on your kind of product, [Expo West](#) [00:10:00] is the largest of those shows by far. You know, [Expo East](#) is a much smaller show. But it's not, I, I would say, depending on the year [Expo East](#) feels, this is anecdotal, feels comparable to [Summer Fancy Food Show](#) in New York city, although sometimes [Summer Fancy Food Show](#) over the last few years it's been scheduled

and kind of funky ways. So it's, sometimes they have had trouble with attendance because they, and maybe it's because of the Javits center is only available on the 4th of July weekend or something like that.

But, so there, there are a few, I guess a few factors in here that that may change the, the kind of rank ordering every year, but typically the San Francisco [Winter Fancy Food Show](#) is the, is the slowest of them. Although I would say I've been the last couple of years, over the last couple of years, I feel like that show has, has a renewed energy and vibrancy to it, which is encouraging to me.

So, [00:11:00] okay. So, so then there's, those are kind of generalist anchor shows if you're a natural food or you know, or beverage brand, then you have your distributor shows. Now each, each distributor has, you know, because these distributors are very large companies. They have a number of shows that they put on typically across the country.

And, so I'll give you a couple of examples. So in natural foods, [UNFI - United Natural Foods Incorporated](#) is the largest of the natural foods distributors of the of the broad line distributors, and then [KeHE](#) is the second largest. These are both really big organizations and UNFI, so for example, again, who knows how the, how the schedule is really gonna play out, but you can always Google this and make sure that a show is actually going to happen, but at least for 2020, [UNFI](#) has two shows scheduled in Sacramento, one in Connecticut, one in San Francisco, one in Minneapolis, and one in Las Vegas. And then [KeHE](#) [00:12:00] has more seasonal oriented shows. So they have a, this happens, pretty, pretty regularly - a summer show in new Orleans, usually in February. And holiday show in Chicago in, I think that one's in June. Right? So you, and you think, Oh, a holiday show in June. It's because they're, you know, these are more seasonal focused things where if you want to get placement on the shelf in advance of the holiday season, you need to be having this conversations. June is pretty late actually in the grand scheme of things.

But, so sometimes brands will, if you are in distribution with a particular distributor. There will either be explicit or implicit pressure for you to participate in those shows and that is because part of the economic model of these distributors is they make money when they, when they buy and sell your product, they make money through off invoice discounts and things along those lines. They [00:13:00] make money on advertising fees, they make money on data fees, and they make money on shows. And so this is sort of another revenue stream for them, but it's also, potentially if you do it right, a useful revenue stream for them and for you. So ultimately you need to make a decision about which show or shows make the most sense for you and for your brand.

And are you, is this a, you know, if it's a show that you know, historically UNFI had a Long Beach show and a Foxwoods show, which is in Connecticut, and so you don't necessarily want to exhibit at those shows if you, if you neither have a presence in that region, nor you plan on having a significant presence, let's say for the next few months or year or two. Right? So, but if you think, Oh, I'm not on the West Coast, but that's a, that's a major strategic priority for us then. Okay, then that makes sense for you. You should probably begin to prioritize some of those selling shows, which really are the, these distributors shows now.

There are lots of distributors out there and lots of them have [00:14:00] shows. I'm just giving you examples of, of two of the biggest ones. So if you're in distribution, with any distributor, that's that, that's of any size it is, the odds are good that they have at least one, if not multiple shows. So you can check with them and then you're just going to make some decisions about what's the right show for me and how do I approach that.

So, that's, that's kind of like understanding the distributors shows. And again, I'm throwing a lot of this stuff out here at you so we can, we can parse it in a minute, but then you have a lot of other category specific shows, and I can't list all of them because there's so many, because there's so many different categories, but like some that you may have heard of or may or may not have.

Are like the [Sweets and Snacks Expo](#) in, in Chicago. there's the [IDDBA expo](#), which is, I think this year in Indianapolis, but it moves around. It's for the [International Dairy Deli and Bakery Association](#). So again, pretty big. And you know, it's everything from [00:15:00] bread and bagels to yogurt and milk and everything in between.

If you're in produce or fresh stuff, there's the [United Fresh Show](#). There's a lot of these different things. So, again, a lot of, even brokers, not just distributors, but brokers may have shows and you have to, you know, I think it's really useful and smart and savvy of a brand to calendar this out for a year or two in advance and make some decisions among your leadership team about like, where do we need to be and where do we need to prioritize our sales expense spend as it relates to these particular shows.

Some of these shows are what people collectively, are kind of vernacular, they're referred to as selling shows or order writing shows where people kind of come up to you and you can actually, you know, the, in olden times you would actually sort of write out an order, like almost a purchase order right there on the spot.

[00:16:00] And that is that some of them are more transactional, others are, you're beginning a process. It's more of almost a business development type show. So every show has its own flavor there. So, so those are, again, there's a whole universe of shows in your business or your brand will have, we'll need to prioritize which shows are applicable to you and which ones matter most for you. And that's because of the type of person who attends, the, the geography that you're focused on this year, et cetera.

So, then I want to spend a few minutes talking about who attends these shows. And this is an important part because like when you're ultimately, you're going to these shows because you're trying to persuade people to buy your product or to stock your product so that other people can buy it, right?

So ultimately, if you have a finite amount of money, which everybody does. Even if you have a lot of it, it's still finite. You have to make some decisions about - [00:17:00] what do I say yes to? What do I say no to? Now, so, so then part of that calculus is to think through which shows are the right people for me and for my business going to be present, you know, so that there's a high probability that I have the kind of interactions or relationship building activities, whatever it is that I need for my business at this stage.

And, and again, if you're tiny, tiny. That's going to be very different than if you're a big growth stage brand and you're doing dozens or hundreds of millions of dollars a year in revenue. That's just a really different set of priorities.

But so in general, the people who attend these shows include buyers or category managers. Or, sometimes they'll be called category merchants. Every, every retailer has, has their own jargon, but these are the people who, effectively are bringing in product. And so these are typically the most sought after [00:18:00] conversations at any of these trade shows. Right? These are the people who, when they have, you'll notice, when you go to the show, some people will have

their lanyards turned around, some shows have, have kind of solved for that by putting your name on both sides of it or whatever.

But, the people who, you know, if their, if their name badge says, you know, I, you know, buyer for Kroger or buyer for Walmart, buyer for Whole Foods, whatever, then you are the belle of the ball. You're every single booth wants to stop you, wants to have a conversation, wants you to try all of their things because they know if you like their product, then you could kind of be a King maker, right? So you're super popular. You're probably, if you're that buyer, you're over-scheduled, you have a lot of other meetings because you're trying to accomplish a lot in that week or that weekend, or maybe even just a day that you're there.

And so you're, you're very rush, rush, rush, and, typically you'll see these people walking you know, with great purpose down the aisle and, and maybe they try to be friendly. Maybe they aren't trying to be friendly, [00:19:00] but they're just trying to get stuff done. And, and so those people are the ones that everybody really wants to talk to.

If those people casually stop by your booth, then obviously in most cases you probably want to talk to them, not that you want to go, you know, over and above and just sort of fall all over yourself. Because sometimes that can backfire just like it would at a junior high dance, but in like instead, like you want to answer questions, you want to, you want to make sure that people have a positive experience of your product, but that's one, you know, kind of fundamentally, and that's one reason why [Expo West](#) broke this year is because the first people to pull out were the buyers and the category managers of the retailers and, and when those people didn't attend, everybody else, starting with the big brands said, eh, it's not worth it. That's the most important, audience to me. So you, you do want to make sure, do you have the information that though that that audience is looking for. And so they're typically going [00:20:00] to want some sort of a flyer that they can take with them or maybe take a picture of, you know, do you have the UPCs? Is do you have item numbers? Do you have all the, all the requisite things so that they can order? Because sometimes these are for big entities, but a lot of times they may even be for smaller entities. Maybe it's a, a one or two shop kind of mom and pop natural food store that's somewhere around the country. Well, those people can be really important early beachhead accounts for you if you, if you support them properly. So, so, understanding that buyers and category managers, and in the case of really small businesses, sometimes the owners themselves are a really important constituency at these shows.

Then, you're also going to encounter brokers. So brokers typically represent multiple brands to one or more retailers, and that is, so there's some inefficiencies in the, in the world. There's a lot of inefficiencies in the world of grocery, and one of those is that everyone of these buyers or category managers can't meet [00:21:00] with every little, brand who makes a new granola bar or whatever the thing is.

So one way that that works is you have brokers, some are national, some are regional, some are retailer specific. And those people really specialize in having relationships at the headquarters or administrative level with those retailers. And sometimes distributors. And then also depending on the range of services they provide, they may or may not help you kind of execute a variety of other things around pricing, promotions and placement. So getting it actually onto the, onto the store shelves.

But those brokers can, depending on. You know, your need for distribution can be really useful because a really good broker can unlock certain accounts that you might struggle with or that you frankly may never have a chance of getting into without having that right kind of warm introduction.

So brokers will be there. Investors will be there. Investors. I think used to be [00:22:00] fairly rare at these shows. Now it feels like they're swarming, with, with, with investors. And that is, there's a lot of money in, in this space. Now, that wasn't always the case, but, because there are enough of these big strategic CPGs who are interested, they've effectively, outsourced their research and development departments to these small brands. The small brands, you know, make a minimum viable product. They, they scale it to a certain certain point, and then the big CPG company says, yeah, okay, I'll buy it. I maybe if I pay \$100 million for it. That's still a better deal than if I paid 200 million to try to make a, make a brand or make a product myself, and then it failed.

So, and, and most of these, most of these big companies realize that, that innovation is not really their wheelhouse. And so they, they kind of, push that off. To this decentralized R & D network, which is really all the startup ecosystem. And so because of that, because that's kind of how it has worked over the last several years, there are a lot of investors who say, "Oh, wow, if [00:23:00] I, if I can put some money into the right startup here, then you know, who knows? Maybe maybe that. That the, this little tiny a kitchen scale type type company becomes a big deal, sells for a lot of money, and I make a lot of money back." So, you will find a lot of angel investors, some small VC funds in some bigger VC funds.

Now, depending on your scale, you're not, probably most of the, the relationships that you build with investors are, you're playing a long game in general, and we're not going to talk about investors that much here, but, just because you are not big enough today, and you need to understand that probably in a lot of cases, particularly for the large venture capital funds, or the large private equity funds, you're not, most of you are not big enough for them to even consider yet, but it doesn't hurt to begin to develop a relationship because as you grow, it'll be more natural and and friendlier and all this kind of stuff if you, if you've had, if you've been developing that [00:24:00] relationship over a period of months or years.

So one of the purposes of these things is, you know, these investors, they're not necessarily sourcing deals, but they're just kind of getting a feel for the industry. What's new, what's interesting, and they like to be, you know, kind of be about town, be you know, see and be seen.

And so, so investors are, are just part of that, that world. You will also at your booth at, at most of these trade shows, you will encounter big CPG companies and so those will be, you'll have representatives from really kind of all over the very large, what are typically very large, organizations.

And that's everybody from R & D folks to corporate development or people who are involved in kind of sourcing deals and mergers and acquisitions. Maybe, maybe that large CPG company, this is pretty en vogue now, has a, has a corporate venture capital arm that, that makes some investments. And so a lot of those, a lot of those folks will be there.

It's okay to not be [00:25:00] super paranoid, but at the same time, to be cautious within, in those conversations don't necessarily, I think it's, it's a good tip to just kinda ask a lot of questions and to, to be smart and savvy about it. You don't necessarily give your process away to an R and somebody who walks up and they say R & D chef for Nestle or something like that, because that's just kind of foolish. But it's, you don't have to be rude to that person either. In the truth is they're probably not looking to like knock off one-to-one your product. They're really evaluating what's going on in the, in the market.

So anyway, a big CPG folks are at these shows, influencers, more and more are at these shows, and now some of these folks might be classified as consumers, but again, what has happened

over the last five to seven, maybe more years, is that the influencer, social media influencer industry has, has really mushroomed. And for a lot of people, this is a really big business there. There are people who make tens [00:26:00] of thousands, in some cases, hundreds of thousands of dollars. Per month or even per post to talk about brands. And so there's an, there's a cottage industry that has grown into a really big industry of particularly wellness, health, wellness, and foodie influencers who often are in attendance at these shows.

And again, you may not have, you may not be at a point in the life of your business where you can afford to pay somebody thousands of dollars, to post about your product and, and argue it's arguable whether you should, until you're, you're really, really advanced in, in scale and stage. But it doesn't hurt to develop relationships with these folks. And again, exchange contact information. You're on their radar. It doesn't hurt to be on their radar. So those folks are there.

Then you have the more traditional influencers of the press, right? And so the press are every, everything from industry specific press, you're a Nosh and Bevnet folks to, you know, food, [00:27:00] business news and other kind of industry segment type things all the way up to more mainstream, you know, your, your Pop Sugar's, your INC magazine, your Entrepreneur, your to your Wall Street Journals in New York Times, which they're not going to be at the smaller shows. But you know, all of these folks are gonna be going to send some representatives to particularly, the, the larger shows.

And then you've got a lot of service providers who show up here. And this is again, one of those things you have to be, you have to navigate. You're not, you could get overwhelmed and you could get sidetracked. Having too many conversations with service providers. So it kind of the, the kind of the, I guess stereotypical example here is packaging providers. There, you'll, you'll be approached by lots of people who make any, any variety of packaging. And so it could be a, you know, plastic packaging, glass packaging, film, cardboard core, get all those things. It's okay to exchange information again there, they're there because they have a captive market of you, the booth, but you're [00:28:00] there, the booth being like your, it's a business to business show for them and they're trying to develop those relationships with people who they can sell their products to.

But for the most part, as a brand, your primary focus is on your own business to business transactions, which tend to be more geared toward the retailers and distributors. So, you can meet people and have really good conversations, but you also want to make sure that there's a good balance between those things and that you don't get sidelined over here having an in depth conversation about, you know corrugated edge crush tests when, the retailer that you actually wanted to talk to was, was passing by at that moment.

And then I guess the last, the last kind of category of, of people who attend these shows, I think of generally as connectors and hype men. And that is, not necessarily, I don't mean that in a pejorative sense. These are people who know people in the industry and they may fall into any number of the other categories. They may be investors or service providers or whatever else, but these are the people that you're going to see in [00:29:00] a lot of shows. Maybe they're consultants, maybe they work for a brand or whatever else, but these people know everybody. They kind of, they're social butterflies and they know people. And again, the more shows you attend and the more regular you are in that circuit and with your booth and all that kind of stuff, the more you're going to develop some relationships there.

And you want to just kind of be smart about those relationships and make sure that you're, you're building quality relationships with the right people who have aligned values and aligned incentives. And so I think having, just understanding my, my objective here is really for, for our



audience to just kind of understand that there is an audience at each of these shows and that audience is made up of lots of little sub audiences.

And when you go to the show, it's important for you to A. know that and B. begin to think about and tailor your messaging and kind of what's happening at your booth to allow for an accommodate for and prioritize [00:30:00] which of those audiences you really are focused on.

Okay. So, now I want to talk a little bit about budget. Budget for a trade show. And again, this gets back to the, my opinion is that that trade shows are sales expenses, and for the most part they're again, it might be some, some minor exceptions or edge cases that that that's not the case, but again, we're painting it with a broad brush here, so they're sales expenses, not marketing expenses, and so therefore I'm thinking of my sales expenses across the whole year, and I think, okay, I have either, I'm the founder. Usually when you're a small brand, the founder or co-founders are responsible for sales, and so you're going to go, you're going to travel to some company's headquarters that their invitation to, to pitch and to present and to sample your, your products.

You're really doing the same thing, but you're doing it at a, at a trade show in a, hopefully more efficient manner because you're going to one spot and a [00:31:00] variety of different buyers and other key people are going to show up there. So you want to think through, if I had to, let's say I had a, I was planning on, I'm a cofounder, founder person, or maybe I'm the sales VP or head of sales for some smaller growing brand. I've got to make a decision about like whether can I go to five or six of these headquarters type presentations in a year, or can I go to two or three, or maybe I can only afford to go to one and then, like, what is my budget based on my, how much cash I have in the bank, what my projections are? Do I have, do I have, investor money or not? Again, a lot of different factors, but even if it's a small budget, it's still good to have a budget or about these things. So, so you're going to set aside some amount of money for the year 2020 or next year for 2021 and this is going to be, okay, we're going to spend X for our sales related expenses this year.

And so I, I tend to think of these trade shows as a portion of, or [00:32:00] percentage of that sales expenditure. So maybe you think this is the biggest deal we can do this year on the sales front. So we need to focus on, you know, we're going to spend 50% of our budget this year. We're going to spend 25% of our budget, or 10%, whatever the right percentages for you based on the prioritization that you and your team go through around like, well, what do we need to, what do we need to spend sales related, you know, dollars on?

So in general, I like to say this, that like. You're trying to do this, right, right? So, so there is the, there's the kind of making do get in by, you know, just sort of, phoning it in version where you have a card table and a, and a tablecloth, and, and maybe stick a, you know, a bed sheet back behind you and they're sure there's your show booth.

But really that's probably counterproductive for you, even if you think, well, that's the reality of my budget. Well, you can also be resourceful and, and there's a lot of ways to make a [00:33:00] booth look good that aren't necessarily expensive. Now, some people, and certainly when you go to a trade show and you see these giant booths with like rotary things and and lofts and vehicles incorporated. There again, a lot of these big companies or money or or companies that have raised a lot in investment, they're spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on their booth. And probably on shipping their booth and that sort of thing. Let's assume you don't have that kind of money, and even if you had that kind of money, it might not be the best investment of your, of, of that money. So you're trying to be scrappy and resourceful about it. You want to say, okay, I've

got a 10 by 10 or an eight by 10 or whatever the dimensions are, the booth, how can I make the most of it?

And that's where you're really trying to think through every part of that experience. In general though, I think as a rule of thumb, it's, it's probably useful to say that you're not going to do a show well, particularly one of these bigger shows and anchor show like an xpo West for less than [00:34:00] \$10,000. Right? So it might be 20,000. It might be more depends on how many people you bring, how far you're going. There's a lot of different variables there. But I think it's important to know that to do this with excellence, and if you're going to do it, if you're going to go to the trouble, try to do with excellence, then in that scenario, you're going to spend some money, and so you're going to spend money on, on, obviously, travel for yourself and your team.

So that's airfare. That's a hotel or Airbnb, that's transportation once you get there, if you're renting a car or a van, if you're Ubering, Lyfting, et cetera. your booth construction, right? You're going to, you're making a booth and maybe it's fabric, maybe it's vinyl, maybe it's made out of wood or some other material. You're actually constructing a booth that is a branded experience that costs money. There's the shipping, which is a often kind of a surprisingly expensive part of this. You're shipping your booth, typically on pallets to the convention center, and you're shipping it home from the [00:35:00] convention center. And that's tedious, it's costly and you're going to want to allocate some, some significant dollars. You're not going to spend a couple hundred bucks shipping pallets across the country. You're talking thousands of dollars, and then you're a, again, because you're going as a food or beverage company, you're going to this show, assuming that you're going to be sampling.

Well, when you're sampling, you need to have product there, and so you've got to make a decision about how am I bringing product in my, if I'm available on the grocery shelves, wherever I'm at, I'm, you know, wherever this, this show is happening, I might want to buy some product off the shelf because that's a, you know, it's, it's more, it's more convenient or easier for me to, to get the product that way.

Otherwise, you know, if it's a refrigerated frozen, I have to bring a cooler, you know, I'm packing my duffel bag full of whatever the product is, and maybe, maybe it makes it through airport security well, maybe it doesn't. So you're trying to take into consideration those things. And then obviously exhibitor fees, registrations, [00:36:00] and other kind of all the, all the last minute add ons. You know, like if you, you know, people who've done the conference circuit know that like wifi at a convention center is ridiculously expensive. If you need another power outlet, it's ridiculously expensive. So you just have to have to, have your eyes open going in and know this is going to be a pretty significant investment.

Even if you're a small brand, if you're a big company or a big brand, you're going to spend probably hundreds of thousands of dollars on this, but you're not playing that game yet because you're a startup, so you have to just be smart about it. So, you want to have an actual budget that you're, you're building out, your team agrees to. It fits in the broader scheme of what, what are my sales expenses for the year? And then how do my sales expenses fit into my broader budget for the year? And then you're, you're making decisions based on that - where you stay, how you get there, what your booth looks like, how much money you have to spend on a booth, et cetera.

So now, now we're going to kind of for this, this last section of, of our conversation today, I want to talk [00:37:00] about a few pro tips. And this is, you know, sometimes lessons learned the hard way, you know, from my own failures or challenges that I've experienced personally or

friends in the industry have experienced. And, and hopefully you can learn some lessons along the way that will help you to avoid common pitfalls.

So, so one pro tip is go only to the shows where you have an objective, a plan, and the budget to execute with excellence. And that is, rather than trying to be everywhere, then trying to hit all of the different shows, it would be better for you to go to one or two shows in the year and do those really, really well.

And this is a general principle that probably applies to lots of different aspects of your business, but only do the things that you can do really, really well. And, and you will get a lot more mileage out of it doing that rather than having the proverbial card table, you know, and, you know, advertising specialty pen out as a sample, right? [00:38:00] It's just kind of sad and pathetic.

And, and, and related to that, here's another pro tip, and that is bring more people than you think you'll need, but the number should be appropriate for the show. And that is, You know, when you go to a show and there's one guy there, typically it's a, you know, we used to joke that it's like a, it's usually a middle aged guy in an embroidered polo shirt or something like that. Right? So, and, and he's just kind of sitting there and he looks sad and lonely, like you feel sorry for the person. And again, it may be the middle aged guy, maybe any anybody else, but when there's one person sitting at the booth. And it's just kind of sleepy and nobody's walking up to them. Nobody's talking to them, and there's, there's no activity, it just doesn't sell your brand or your business very well. Versus the booth that has, more people there, there's more activity. There's more, there just feels like there's more happening. It's just like a restaurant or a club or something like that. You, you, you know, you're walking down the street and you see the [00:39:00] restaurant or club and there's lots of people in there. You assume, oh, there must be the food or drinks or whatever. The scene must be a lot better there than the, the sad little restaurant where nobody's sitting in there kind of the Nighthawks, a vision of the, the lonely diner. So like. You're trying to actually create a scene at your, at your booth that attracts people and having enough people and having the booth adequately manned is important to that.

It also will be really useful to you if you're the only person there and you have to use the bathroom. Then your booth, there's nobody present when you're using the bathroom, so it's, it's really nice, particularly for long or intense shows where it's pretty fatiguing to have an actual team and that team should be appropriate for the size of your booth and the length of the show and, and how much money you're, you're wanting to spend on this show. Because again, every one of those people who fly and have to have a hotel room or whatever, it's just going to cost you some money.

So, another pro tip, [00:40:00] pack your lunch and wear comfy shoes. And, and that is, you know. It. One of the ironies of, of a food or beverage show is if you're at the booth, you really don't have time to eat lunch. And typically the food available in a convention center is pretty bad and hard to access. And so, otherwise, you're just going to end up snacking, you know, on samples of random popcorn or whatever the thing is, and you're going to, you're going to be weak. And these are like, these shows are work and you'll be tired. You'll be fatigued, you'll have talked all day. You want to stay appropriately hydrated and all that kind of stuff. So just plan ahead and, and. You know, pack something. If it's cold cuts and sandwich bread or whatever the thing is, make sure that you have sustenance that will allow you to make it through the full day because that's a, that it's, it's an endurance race.

And again, related to the endurance race. Wear comfy shoes. Don't like, I'm sure you look great in your, your whatever, [00:41:00] cowboy boots or stiletto heels. But the reality is you're going

to be on your feet for eight to 12 hours that day. And, you're, you're playing the long game here, so, so wear comfy shoes. Just trust me on that.

Another thing, and this relates to some of the, you know, both hydrating and, and being at the booth, and this is less a pro tip and more of a, an immutable law of trade shows. And that is when you leave your booth, it is inevitable that the most important person that you hoped to talk to over the course of that show will arrive at the booth.

You can test me on this, and you can talk to anybody else if this is just how it works. The second you leave the booth either to use the restroom, to go walk the show, to go reserve your booth for next year, whatever the thing is. That will be the moment that that one buyer, that one investor, that one person, that one influencer that you really hoped would, would come by your booth, they'll come by at that very moment.

So the corollary to this is, as a founder or as an important leader in your [00:42:00] organization, kind of the goal, if you're boothing at the show, is to not leave the booth any more than you have to. And so that means you're trying to schedule meetings that are there. Maybe you have a little pocket right beside the, the booth where you can have more in depth conversations, because anytime you leave, that person's gonna show up. So just know that and take that into account.

Next pro tip, use your booth to create a differentiated brand experience. Think about the details, and this again gets back to that, don't phone it in. Don't, don't just kind of do like the, the getting by, getting by version of. of your booth, like, take some care, take some, you know, it doesn't have to cost tons of money. That the joke that we had, at, Siete was that, our first booth, I, I designed in, you know, really in a program that's not designed for booth, construction. And, and then we had, I [00:43:00] had a buddy of mine build it in his backyard in East Austin up on like hubcaps and tire rims and stuff like that, and we painted it and that sort of thing. And people thought it was so charming and cute and all that kind of stuff. But the reality is it was pretty inexpensive, and but it was, it felt consistent with the brand and the brand that we were trying to build. And so it wasn't a thing that we just did in a slapdash way, even though we did it on a shoestring budget, we did it thoughtfully, and we really tried to create an environment at the booth that was consistent with the brand, and I'd encourage you to do the same. Whatever your brand is, don't just do the same old, same old. How can you invite your a, if it's a retail category manager or any anybody else who's visiting your booth for the first time, that they walk away and they feel like, Oh, I didn't just go to a booth, I got an experience of, of this brand, and it's, it's really winsome and appealing and, and, and [00:44:00] something that I want to learn more about.

Okay. So that's a pro tip. next pro tip, get creative about your budget. And that is you don't always have to do things the way everybody else does them, right? So it may be that you're, you're renting a trailer and that trailer is part of your booth contraption and you're going to drive it across country, or you're going to do something different that isn't just kind of the regular expectation of, of, of the trade show. Obviously it has to work within the parameters or guidelines of that trade show, but you can do some things that don't necessarily cost the most money, right? So you can, you know, maybe you're gonna buy pieces of your booth at Home Depot or someplace like that in the, in the vicinity of the trade show. So that you're not shipping a bunch of expensive stuff, LTL across the country, right? So just think creatively. Think, in, in nonconventional ways [00:45:00] about your, like, ways you can be smart about your budget.

And then there are certain things you can do, that, you know, there are different trade associations. So here in the, in, in Texas and in parts of the South, there's the Southern United States Trade Association, or SUSTA that if you partner with SUSTA, it's a, a branch of the federal

government. And really what they're trying to do is to promote, brands based in a set of Southern States. And there's, equivalent organizations across the US and those entities will help, if you are open to or willing to go, you know, visit a trade show or have conversations, related to exporting your products to other countries, then those organizations can subsidize part of your, your travel and, and booth registration expenses for the show.

So those can be some interesting hacks that you can kind of Google and figure out, that might help you be more cost effective in the way that you kind of execute your trade show [00:46:00] strategy.

And also obviously just pack smart. So pack, the, the right amount of stuff that you need for the booth that you need for your, your team and, and don't over-pack and don't, don't go crazy and don't necessarily, You know, send 12 different shipments, you know, LTL, like, like bundle things together, be smart about it. And then think about like, how does your booth fit onto pallets? Because that could be, if you know, the difference in shipping three pallets versus 10 pallets is probably going to be pretty significant.

So, a couple more pro tips if possible, and again, this is going to depend on your schedule and where you're at in the life cycle of your company, but if possible, walk a given show before you exhibit there. And that's because it's really useful to understand what's the vibe of a given show. And then are there, if it's a show that that is consistently at one particular location like [Expo West](#) [00:47:00] traditionally is in at the Anaheim Convention Center, which changes on a year to year basis. But if you've been there before, you have a sense of, okay, this is a pretty good location for a booth, or this is not a very good location for the booth. The reality is, and again, maybe this is one of those dirty little secrets. If you're, if you have a really awesome booth and a really great product and, and there's excitement about your, about your product and what you're building, then there isn't such a, there isn't such a thing as a bad booth location. And if you have a, a location that you feel like stinks, it probably is somewhat reflective of the energy around your booth. Now, there are, with that said, there are places that tend to be better than others. Particularly if you're an early stage or emerging brand. And so often, I recommend that people don't try to compete head to head. You don't want to be right across the aisle from some ginormous, huge multibillion dollar [00:48:00] company that has all the swirling things and, and you know, people, you know, juggling fire and all the, all that kind of stuff, right? Because you're just gonna, you're going to pale in comparison to whatever they've got going on. So in general, it's usually in your best interest to try to be in one of the clusters where other early stage or emerging brands are. Now, hopefully you're not in a back corner, but the reality is if you wait too late to register, you're going to have the, you're going to be kind of the runt of the litter and you're going to have the worst booth placement, and then you just have to make a decision - am I willing to have the worst booth placement but be at the show? Or am I going to say, eh, I'm just gonna pass because I feel like I need to have better booth placement. The other reality of these shows is you tend to get a priority the more time and money you spend with a given show. So you actually, if, if you've been boothing, at a given show for 10 years, you are way ahead of the line. you're at the head of the line compared [00:49:00] to some startup that's never, never been to the show before. So that means you get a chance to pick your booth much earlier in the process, therefore you get better booths. So, kind of think through some of that, but one of the tips around that is if you can walk the show before you exhibit there.

And then, another pro tip, is if possible, do everything as early as you can. And that's a register, reserve, book hotels - all of that kind of stuff because, particularly for, for very popular shows, it's going to get really tight, as you get within a month or two of the deadline, because most of us are last minute people, myself included. And, and there is a mad dash for all the hotel rooms, all the, you know, rental cars, all the things that you probably are going to need. And if you're the kind of

person who can think ahead, if you've budgeted and you planned, and you said, I'm going to go to this show, but not that show, and you know, you're going to go to, to a given show and [00:50:00] you have the money in the bank because you're going to have to pay for it in advance, then, you know, as early as possible, if you can at least, register as early as possible, then that improves the likelihood that you're going to have a better booth space. Right? And if you, you know, you reserve your hotel room or your Airbnb earlier, that improves the likelihood that you'll be in closer proximity to the show, should you assume, assuming that you want to be there.

So, I'm going to, I'm going to kind of break there and just kind of say, in review, what I've tried to do is to, is to lay out in, in pretty rapid fire fashion a number of things that I would encourage early, early stage and emerging brands to consider when you're thinking about your trade show strategy for this year or for coming years.

In my experience, most of the brands that I've ever known and been a part of don't have a trade show strategy. And so I'm, I'm encouraging you to be ahead of the game. Again, this is part of our Barcode mantra of, of play chess, [00:51:00] not checkers. Let everybody else play checkers. If you're playing chess, you're going to do it smarter and you're going to be better positioned to be successful and you're not, you're not just going to get lucky. You're going to increase the probability of success for your, for your brand, for your company, for your investors, and all the people who are involved in in your business. So hopefully this gives you a framework for having further discussions with your team about how you need to approach, any, any trade show specifically, you know, we're coming off of this, this [Expo West](#) debacle, but you can imagine if you had, if you had planned and thought through some of these things, you also would have been better prepared to make some strategic decisions about "What should we do if this happens? What should we do if that happens?" And so, again, I think one of the cool things about planning is it helps you sleep better at night and you don't, you don't live in this constant state of anxiety and stress, which is bad for you, bad for [00:52:00] your company, and bad for your loved ones all around you.

So I just want to remind everybody as we wrap up that this episode and all of the other Barcode Podcast episodes are available online at [barcodestartup.com](http://barcodestartup.com) and on your preferred platform of listening, viewing, and reading. And so, you know, again, you're a, if you prefer to, you know, a lot of people while they're working, like to have [YouTube](#) up and they, either they're watching it or they're listening to it on another tab. We've got you covered. We're at, please subscribe to our YouTube channel where we post all of these videos. And the same thing is true for all of the podcast channels as well and platforms. So if you're an [Apple](#) or a [Spotify](#) or a [Stitcher](#) or a [Google](#) person, we've got you covered. Please go there. Subscribe. And if you wouldn't mind, it really helps us and it helps other startups discover this content. If you would be willing to, not just subscribe, but rate and review the [00:53:00] podcast and then just share it with somebody. You know, again, one of the cool things about the entrepreneurial community in Austin, around the country, around the globe is that we are a generous bunch, and we know we've, we know what we've, the path that we've chosen is a really hard one.

And it's a lot better if you don't do it alone. And so, you're, you're interacting with other people. Maybe it's in your commercial kitchen or coworking space or wherever you hang out and share this with other people in your life who you think would really benefit from it. So thanks again for joining us and we'll see you next time.