



## Case Study: Start-Up's Trade Show Strategy Results in 498.4% ROI

**Background:** Marathon Renewable Energy, Inc. was a start-up solar installation company run by a husband-wife team. They had agreed to keep start-up costs to a minimum and to run the new business out-of-pocket, avoiding start-up debt to the greatest extent possible.

**Challenge:** One of the most promising ways for renewable energy installation companies to pick up new leads in Wisconsin is to exhibit at the Midwest Renewable Energy Society's annual Renewable Energy Fair in Custer, WI. The company's owners decided that exhibiting at the event would be well worth the time and the booth fee. However they knew that in order to be effective, their display would have to set them apart from the myriad other solar contractors who would doubtless also be there.

Marathon Renewable Energy, Inc. needed an inexpensive trade show display that would:

- Draw prospects in to the booth,
- Inform and educate them,
- Encourage them to interact and converse with booth attendees,
- Capture their names and contact information for follow up after the show, and
- Establish MREI as a unique company at the Fair.

A final concern was the infant status of the company. As a start-up company with only one completed project under its belt, MREI would need to somehow establish itself as a trustworthy provider without compromising its integrity.

**Solution:** MREI's budget ruled out commercial trade show display products, especially since most of the products available through trade show display companies focused on slick corporate branding rather than actual lead generation. This approach seemed unlikely to be worth the investment – especially given the casual “homegrown” atmosphere of the event.

Instead, Anne Michelsen devised an alternative plan that fit both the lead generation goal and the budget. First, she decided to include interactive elements in the booth, knowing that when people get the chance to use multiple senses and different areas of their brains, they are more likely to spend time and ask questions. Marathon Renewable Energy offered multiple products and services, but their main product was solar thermal water heaters, so that is what she focused on. She included:

1. Simple, inexpensive but clearly visible vinyl banners with the company name, logo, location and main product offering;
2. Staff polo shirts with prominent company logos;
3. A poster she wrote and designed showing the Anatomy of a Solar Hot Water System, including an illustrated diagram explaining the technology along with a series of photos showing Dan in the process of installing a system;
4. Brochures for both residential and commercial solar water heaters and copies of solar thermal fact sheets;
5. An authentic piece of solar site assessment equipment called a Solar Pathfinder;
6. A laptop slide show documenting MREI's first solar thermal installation;
7. A photo album, also of the solar installation;
8. Lead capture sheets for interested prospects to sign up to be contacted; and
9. A drawing for a free solar site assessment.

In addition, four weeks before the event Anne distributed a press release to local media announcing MREI's incorporation.

**Results:** Four days after distribution of the press release, MREI was contacted by a reporter at The City Pages (a local alternative newspaper very popular with MREI's target demographic) requesting an interview. The interview was conducted at the site of MREI's first installation, with the customer present. The June 6-11 issue of the City Pages featured the owner and his customer on the cover with the customer's home in the background, complete with solar panels. Although the article was not specifically about MREI, the company was mentioned extensively and the article featured quotes from both the owner and his customer.

From prior experience, MREI's owners had anticipated a certain amount of distrust or skepticism on the part of the public due to their start-up status and lack of track record. However, after putting their publicity and branding efforts into effect, only one person out of the dozens they spoke with at the event expressed concern with the issue. The vast majority of customers and prospects at the Energy Fair and outside of it responded very positively to MREI as a professional provider. At the Energy Fair at least a dozen people commented about the City Pages article. Several admitted to having sought MREI out at the fair as a result of the article.

The informational poster proved to be a big hit with fair attendees. It drew people into the booth and encouraged them to spend time learning about the product without feeling pressured to interact with booth attendants. It also piqued their curiosity and prompted many people to ask questions or make comments, which frequently lead to crowds gathering outside the booth, as well as lead capture. The Solar Pathfinder and photo album also generated interest for the booth.

The one item that did not perform well was the laptop slideshow. Between solar glare and dust settling on the screen, it was nearly impossible to view. Fortunately much of the same information was included in the photo album, which was not adversely affected by the outdoor venue.

MREI's lead generation strategy resulted in 35 solid solar water heating leads from the lead capture sheets and an additional 176 names from the drawing. All 211 names were entered into MREI's newsletter subscriber list. The 35 requests for more information were followed up with phone calls, which resulted in 8 site visits within 2 months after the Energy Fair and, eventually, one solar thermal installation. In addition, attendees collected about 200 of the residential solar hot water brochures and approximately 20 commercial brochures. Dan Michelsen observed at least one prospective customer referring to the brochure repeatedly during a site visit after the Fair.

In conclusion, even though the follow-up could likely have been improved had MREI had a dedicated and experienced solar sales staff, the profit margin on jobs generated yielded an estimated ROI of 498.4% — well worth the time and expense involved.



Anne Michelsen of Green Ink Copywriting helps green and sustainably-minded businesses thrive by providing lead generating web content, press releases and other sales and publicity essentials. For more information please visit [www.GreenInkCopywriting.com](http://www.GreenInkCopywriting.com) or email [anne@greeninkcopywriting.com](mailto:anne@greeninkcopywriting.com).

