



# GLOBAL VIEW

## Notes

## Coming to America II: An Update on International Visas



By Michelle Bruno

**T**he delay and denial of visas for international visitors to U.S.-based trade shows has taken its toll on the industry. Lost revenue for exhibition organizers, exhibitors, and the U.S. economy is significant. Still, there have been some changes in the number of countries exempt from visa requirements and the industry itself has organized its efforts to support reform. At the end of the day, international exhibition organizers can play a role in educating visitors about the requirements and providing information to the issuing agencies to expedite the process.

A study published by the Center for Exhibition Industry Research (CEIR) in 2010 summarized the economic impact of visa access. “Key findings indicate that the difficulties in obtaining visas have prevented 116,000 international visitors from participating in U.S. shows. That number breaks down into 78,400 attendees and 37,900 visitors,” writes Joyce McKee on the CEIR blog.

The inability of some visitors to obtain visas has resulted in a significant loss to exhibition organizers and the U.S. Economy—the industry is missing out on \$2.4 billion in sales, 17,500 jobs, and \$750 million in state and federal tax revenue. Further, “if international visitors had easier access

to visas, show organizers could realize as much as \$1.5 billion in business-to-business trade, \$540 million in registration fees and exhibit space rental, and \$295 million in general visitor spending,” McKee adds.

CEIR has turned the results of its research over to the Department of Homeland Security and other Federal agencies in an attempt to keep the issue on the front burner. In the mean time, exhibition organizers can play a role in helping visitors plan ahead, providing applicants with letters of invitation and show data, and—when possible—offering historical information about prior participation to issuing agencies.

Thirty-six countries (see Table 1) currently participate in the Visa Waiver Program (VWP)—a plan that allows visitors from eligible countries to remain in the U.S. for business or leisure up to ninety days without a visa—if the nations meet security and data sharing requirements. Since 2002, the number of countries in the program has slowly increased. “VWP travelers are required to have a valid authorization through the Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA) prior to travel, are screened at the port of entry into the United States, and are enrolled in the Department of Homeland Security’s **US-VISIT program**,” according to the State Department’s **Website**. Payment of the \$14.00 processing fee is also required.

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**Table 1 Participating Nations in Visa Waiver Program**

Andorra	Denmark	Hungary	Liechtenstein	New Zealand	Slovenia
Australia	Estonia	Iceland	Lithuania	Norway	South Korea
Austria	Finland	Ireland	Luxembourg	Portugal	Spain
Belgium	France	Italy	Malta	San Marino	Sweden
Brunei	Germany	Japan	Monaco	Singapore	Switzerland
Czech Republic	Greece	Latvia	The Netherlands	Slovakia	United Kingdom

Most exhibition organizers with a significant number of international attendees and exhibitors provide information about obtaining a visa on their show Websites. The pages typically include the following essentials:

- List of **basic requirements** for obtaining a visa to the U.S.
- Link to the electronic **Nonimmigrant Visa Application** form
- Link to the **Visa Waiver Program** Website
- Link to **embassies and consular offices** where the personal interviews take place and visas are subsequently issued to individuals who are not part of the Visa Waiver Program.
- Form to request a letter of invitation—an essential document for the application process.
- Policy for exhibit space cancellation due to visa denial
- Reminders to apply for a visa at least 90 to 120 days in advance of the show
- Advice about the number of employees that apply for visas. A rule of thumb is that no more than three company employees should apply for each contracted 10 ft. x 10 ft. (3m x 3m) booth.

- **Visa Application Tips** such as those provided by International CES.

Show organizers can also help exhibitors by providing information in multiple languages, offering returning visitors verification of past attendance (to be submitted to the authorizing consulate with the application), and participation in the International Buyer Program. Although none of these “extras” will guarantee that a visa will be issued or allowed by Customs and Border Patrol officers, they help visitors build the business case for attending the show.

In March of 2010, President Obama issued an Executive Order called the National Export Initiative (NEI), “to improve conditions that directly affect the private sector's ability to export. The NEI will help meet my Administration's goal of doubling exports over the next 5 years by working to remove trade barriers abroad, by helping firms—especially small businesses—overcome the hurdles to entering new export markets, by assisting with financing, and in general by pursuing a Government-wide approach to export advocacy abroad, among other steps.”

The NEI and the trade show industry's efforts to lobby Federal agencies to streamline the visa issuance process is a step closer to increasing the number of visas issued to international buyers and exhibitors. In the mean time, exhibition organizers can work to keep the information available to international visitors and support customers during the application process.

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