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GLOBAL VIEW

Notes



for International Exhibitors Participating in U.S. Trade Shows

By Michelle Bruno

Many new-to-market international companies (perhaps with the exception of those from Canada) struggle with exhibiting in U.S. trade shows. From lead collection protocols to union labor practices, some exhibiting procedures and cultural customs are as “foreign” to international exhibitors as shows without pipe and drape are to Americans. Here are a few best practices for international exhibitors wanting to reach U.S. buyers and a potentially lucrative market on the verge of recovery.

English speaking personnel and materials

Staff the booth with English speaking personnel or hire a local interpreter who understands the products and industry. Only about 30% of the American population speaks a language other than English. The most commonly spoken second languages are Spanish, followed by French and German. In addition, literature should be prepared in English and specification sheets should be written using the Imperial system of weights and measures (inches, feet, pounds, etc.).

Labor practices and costs

Labor, exhibit installation, lifting, and handling, delivery of goods to the stand, storage of empties, and the loading and unloading of vehicles are strictly controlled by labor unions at most major convention centers in the U.S. Exhibitors should contact the show organizer or general service contractor to understand the restrictions, limitations, and costs associated with these labor practices before the show.

Advanced technology tools

Lead collection and matchmaking technology has become very sophisticated in the U.S. and relies on a much more open framework for information exchange between buyers and sellers—a transparency that may be unfamiliar to many international companies. Most major trade exhibitions make lead retrieval equipment available for rental and employ advanced profiling and networking applications to match attendees with exhibitors. New exhibitors should understand how these systems work and make sure that they are compatible with their own databases.

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Social media platforms

Social media channels such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter are becoming more popular as tools for engaging with attendees before, during, and after exhibitions in the U.S. In addition, many shows use private social networks that are exclusively available to show participants. These social networking opportunities help reduce the psychological barrier of distance that sometimes exists between U.S. buyers and international exhibitors. Exhibitors from outside the U.S. should use these platforms to familiarize themselves with the industry, potential customers, and topics of interest to buyers.

Visa requirements

With the exception of citizens from the 36 countries participating in the Visa Waiver Program, visitors from other countries require visas to be admitted to the U.S. The process requires a personal interview with U.S. consular officials as well as a thorough screening and may take several months. International exhibitors requiring visas should initiate the procedure as early as possible and contact the show organizer for a letter of invitation to begin the process.

Customs regulations

The customs regulations for importing goods into the U.S. can be complex. Recent measures to tighten security such as the 10+2 Initiative have impacted the ease with which exhibitors can import exhibit properties and products. New-to-market companies should contact the show's official international freight forwarder and customs broker or one that specializes in international trade shows in order to make sure they are in compliance with import and export regulations.

Culture and communication

The American culture is not as dependent on long-term relationships as a requirement for doing business as many other cultures are. Quick response, ease of



communication, and similarity of business practices are traits that are highly valued by U.S. Buyers. To take advantage of these, international companies should be prepared to follow-up *immediately* with interested attendees after the show, make it easy for buyers to contact them (Web site in English with contact information—especially email addresses), and employ English-speaking staff that can respond immediately to inquiries.

Booth design

Some booth designs and sales practices that are common in Europe, Asia, and South America are prohibited or regulated in the U.S. Multi-tiered booths and configurations that violate line-of-sight rules aren't allowed in many U.S. shows. In-booth hospitality (open bars) is acceptable at some exhibitions but highly controlled (all food and beverage must be purchased through the convention center). New-to-market companies should consult the exhibitor manual or show management to learn what is allowable.

Most U.S. exhibition organizers with a sizable international exhibitor population make special accommodations for Non-American participants including country pavilions, multi-lingual staff, and Web sites in multiple languages. Still, there is a learning curve for companies that are exhibiting in the U.S. for the first time. Working closely with show management and official show contractors can help exhibitors save money and improve performance.

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