

# GLOBAL VIEW notes



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## Expert Advice on Working with Overseas Exhibit Sales Agents

By Michelle Bruno

**F**or exhibition organizers lacking in the resources to establish foreign sales offices or those testing the viability of a specific region, sales agents can be a good first step. What show producers give up in control over employees and resources, they recoup with contacts, experience and considerable cost savings using an agent. Finding a good agent, establishing rapport and maintaining a long-term relationship requires hard work. Industry veteran, Tony Lee, offers some advice on how to find and keep the right partner.

Tony Lee, founder of international exhibition consultancy, Tony Lee International, says, in the past, U.S. organizers believed they didn't need to solicit participation from foreign exhibitors, but now "the world is getting smaller and smaller and shows have to look outside the country to source products." The advantage of having a good sales partner, he adds, is "agents know your standards, product mix and the quality of products you require. These guys are in the business. They specialize in a particular product area and they can guarantee that the exhibitors are prepared to sell and service the market. They add value to your show."

### Selection

There are a number of ways to identify sales agents. With the Internet and social media channels, it may be as easy as posting a message on LinkedIn. Another option—one considerably more reliable—is to solicit recommendations from other trade show organizers in non-competing industry sectors. Lee recommends making contact with the foreign consulates in the U.S. to identify potential candidates. "Let the consulates know you are looking for agents. Then, tread the pavement, get through the red tape and find the right person," he says.

While collecting names can be done stateside, there is no replacement for going overseas to meet potential partners face-to-face. Lee suggests attending international trade shows to "see the agents in action, the types of booths they run and the companies they bring in." On his various recruitment trips over the years, Lee would ask the agents which U.S. shows they participated in and obtain references from them and the show managers they worked with. One of the most important selection criteria for Lee

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was whether they spoke English. “Any sales agent worth his salt speaks English,” he says.

## Contracts

Overseas agents can be individuals, companies, trade associations or government groups. Depending on their capabilities, location (China, for example may have different agents for each province because the country is so large) and areas of expertise, U.S.-based show organizers may contract with them for a variety of services and commission structures. Some agents restrict their offerings to booth sales only, but others will handle marketing and audience promotion for an additional fee.

The most common financial arrangement with individuals and companies involves a commission structure; however, the compensation can get complicated if the agent sells an all-inclusive package (exhibit space, booth package, transportation, customs clearance, delivery, hotels, etc.) vs. raw space. The commission as a percentage of the sale may be higher for new exhibitors (20 to 25% of the booth sales price) and a few percentage points lower for returning companies. Government groups often accept a discount on the raw space or booth package instead of commission.

After the appropriate vetting of an agent has been completed, Lee recommends signing a formal agreement for representation. “It is wise to sign a contract. [The agents] normally want exclusivity. It also protects you for what they will do and what you will do,” Lee explains. The contract drawn up by legal counsel should contain at least the following sections:

- Services to be provided
- Countries/areas being represented
- Term of the contract
- Commission structure
- Independent contractor declaration



[Tony Lee](#)

- Assignment restrictions
- Confidentiality and non-disclosure
- Non-compete provision
- Notices in writing
- Arbitration location
- Termination
- Indemnification
- Jurisdiction location
- Applicable law amendment

In most cases, agents are paid in U.S. dollars by wire transfer after the show. Any fees associated with making the transfer or converting the payment into another currency should be born by the agent or exhibitors, Lee says.

## Maintenance

“It’s not difficult to get agents, but it’s very difficult to keep them,” Lee says. “You can’t fire them because they only sell one booth. You have to work with them. Maybe the pricing isn’t right or the exhibitors have uninteresting products. In some shows, exhibitors are only looking for distributors, not small-lot buyers. You have to speculate to accumulate,” he adds. One of the most critical aspects of maintaining a good relationship with an overseas agent, besides offering a fair compensation package, is to establish a personal relationship with the individuals—visit them as often as possible, stay in contact, even “invite them to your home,” Lee advises.

There is no shortage of companies wanting to exhibit in the U.S. A good agent provides U.S. show organizers with a “filter” for determining whether the potential exhibitors are equipped with the capabilities and financial resources to be successful. A good partner is extremely valuable, but the path toward making them good can be difficult. Organizers have to be prepared for uncomfortable circumstances; eating different types of food when visiting agents in their countries and working around the customs and behaviors of new-to-market exhibitors in the U.S. “It’s hard work and time consuming. You get out of it what you put into it, but it’s also very rewarding,” Tony Lee says.

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