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OPPORTUNITY

India on the Threshold

New Opportunities for U.S. Exhibition Organizers and Exhibitors

By Michelle Bruno

With its impressive economic growth, coupled with plans to improve infrastructure, and the population's insatiable appetite for western products, India is a prime market for U.S. exhibition organizers and U.S. exhibitors. Although the local exhibition industry in India has advanced to some degree in recent years, there is still room for improvement. Organizations willing to endure some short-term inconveniences and those that search out experienced in-country partners are poised to reap the benefits commensurate with emerging markets.

Although inflation currently hovers around 10%, according to the Wall Street Journal, India's Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee is predicting the economy to expand to 8.5% in 2010. Foreign investment is on the rise as well. "The Bombay Stock Exchange's benchmark Sensitive Index rose 0.5% Monday. Market watchers expect foreign investments in shares to rise as the world's second fastest-growing major economy after China continues to gather steam," the Journal states.

As recently as six years ago, U.S. exhibitors were having poor results with exhibiting in Indian exhibitions. "India is mired with massive infrastructure problems. The major cities have venues that are in dire need of modernization and it takes two hours to get across town to go to a show," says

Tom Kallman, CEO of Kallman Worldwide, an international pavilion organizer based in Waldwick, NJ. "Companies weren't finding good results because the attendance wasn't decision-making level. There was a lot of interest but no follow through and no results," he says.

Fast forward to a few months ago. "The Indian organizers that are embracing the western [exhibition] business model now are finding it successful. Joint venture partnerships with Indian companies are beginning to emerge," Kallman says. His clients in the defense and aerospace industries are very engaged in the Indian market now. "The U.S. government is keenly interested in fostering a relationship with India as a strong ally and partner. Indians have a thirst for quality military hardware and processes. There are shows in New Delhi, Hyderabad, and Bangalore and more and more [shows] are being run by Indian entities that have established trade show industry expertise," he adds.

Margaret Cassilly, vice president international operations at the National Association of Broadcasters has visited India several times in recent years to investigate the industry that her association represents. "India is one of those regions with a population and market that no industry should overlook," she says. "The Indians have an insatiable appetite to be global players. There are opportunities in India for any market segment. Companies don't have to establish themselves in Mumbai. India is large and diverse and has a variety of needs all over country," she explains.

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Cassilly offers some advice to exhibition organizers and companies looking to establish themselves in India:

1. Prepare for a multi-year commitment to the market. It takes some time to find the right partner, establish a brand and do the research necessary to operate in India.
2. Negotiate one-year contracts with potential business partners. "Shop around for the right partner and don't continue to do business with the wrong company. There are lots of people with enough experience in India to help you find a decent partner," says Cassilly.
3. Be willing to compromise. The conditions for exhibitions are not optimal in most of the country. "Facilities are inadequate and timelines are much longer than in the U.S. You have to be flexible and do the best with what's available," she says.

Cherif Moujabber is an expert in developing international markets for international organizers, exhibitors, and venues. His firm, Creative Expos of Walpole, MA was called upon to assist with market research and development in India for SEMI, San Jose, CA-based association serving the manufacturing supply chains for the microelectronic, display and photovoltaic industries. Although SEMI is well established in other emerging markets as well as Europe, they were in search of a partner and location for an exhibition on solar panel technology.

After extensive research, Moujabber recommended the city of Hyderabad. In addition to a state-of-the-art exhibition center with a hotel and convention center nearby, the region is a hotbed for the Indian Photo Voltaic industry. The second major task was to find a local partner. After interviewing and researching a number of candidates, he chose a professional conference organizer (PCO) called KW Conferences with offices in New Delhi, Mumbai, Hyderabad and Chennai. "The lines are blurred between companies that can do promotion and logistics. After reviewing a number of indigenous and non-indigenous companies, the differentiating factor was whether or

not they owned their own shows. [KW] did not," Moujabber says.

Moujabber reiterates some of the challenges in the Indian market for exhibition organizers. "The infrastructure is way behind what you would expect in a booming market. [For example] China is way ahead of what you would expect. The two main cities don't have adequate convention centers which restrains the industry as a whole," he says. Although in the last three years the quality of the exhibitions and organizers has improved, some of the simpler things such as transportation to and from the facilities, air conditioning and services inside the venues still require improvement.

Although U.S. organizers have gotten somewhat of a late start in India, Moujabber believes there are still huge opportunities there. "We have let the British, Europeans and Germans take a big step into a market that we could have competed in if we felt more confident. Even though the plans of other countries are very clear, the industry still hasn't taken off yet and there is still a chance to catch up," he says. It comes down to individual organizations and the niche markets they control as well as the fact that the Asian markets are saturated. "It's a matter of months before this thing explodes. If they build a couple of good convention centers in the capital, the exhibition industry will take off," Moujabber explains.

U.S. exhibitors are farther ahead than the organizers when it comes to doing business in India. "The larger companies have been more mindful of the markets. Their products are in demand so many haven't waited for [American] show organizers to make their move. They are participating in exhibitions produced by European and Asian organizers," Moujabber says. He believes the opportunities for small to medium-sized manufacturers are now available. "With growth expected between 8 and 12 percent, now is the time to go," he says.

Check the next edition of Global View Notes for information and resources on shipping exhibition materials to India.

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