

Five Money-Saving Secrets for Tradeshow Exhibitors

It is an unfortunate, but true, fact that tradeshows are places of extreme excess. Multiple resources, hundreds of man-hours and millions of dollars are wasted on show floors across the country every day. You are paying for plenty of it. Maybe it's the pressure of too many deadlines, shrinking budgets or an overworked staff that causes exhibit marketing professionals to neglect or forget important processes and procedures that are required for a show to run smoothly and stay on budget.

There certainly are an overwhelming number of tiny details to oversee before, during and after the show. When multiple departments share in the planning and execution of the program, there is ample room for error if good communication procedures are not practiced. Below is a list of the most common budget busting habits that, if immediately eliminated from your tradeshow program, will save you money and reduce waste.

Secret # 1: Inventory exhibit properties before the show.

Believe me when I tell you, you don't want to get to the show and find out that your counter is missing one leg, three lights are burned out and there's a huge wine stain on your white carpet. Not setting up your exhibit before it ships to the show can cause huge headaches and trigger extra expenses when surprises are discovered during installation. Rushing around looking for a quick fix at the closest hardware store will not be cheap. By taking a critical look at your display, graphics and accessories a few months before the booth ships to the show, you will have plenty of time to order what's missing, fix what's broken and clean what's dirty.

Set up your display before the show. Take a critical look at your graphics. Are the messages relevant and the current products you offer? Get up to speed on the timelines required by your suppliers for creating new graphics. Waiting until the last minute to design and produce the new panels for your display or the banner for your retractable stand can add expensive rush charges to the cost. It never fails that rushing to meet a tight deadline usually results in mistakes that you are unable to correct in time. Give your design team ample time to be creative and deliver quality ideas. Don't forget that you will need at least one extra day to review a proof by email and maybe two days if you want a test strip delivered to you for color matching. A good policy is to count backwards the number of days you need for design, proofing, production and shipping, add two, then give those deadline dates to your staff and service providers as a guide.

When is the last time you updated your display structure? It might be time to purchase a new exhibit. Enormous advances have been made in display design and construction materials. Converting an aging structure to a more modern or sustainable option can reduce exhibiting costs substantially. The latest styles use aluminum extrusions, retractable panels and fabric graphics that will save you money in a variety of ways.



New, innovative engineering allows for compact shipping. The lighter shipping weight of the latest substrates, the collapsibility of the new designs and the small sized shipping containers combine to reduce costly freight and drayage fees. In addition, it takes less time to install and dismantle these new exhibits, so your labor expenses could be cut in half.

Since we're talking about cost cutting, have you ever considered reducing the size of your booth space? If you book a peninsula space instead of an island or take a 10x20 inline booth instead of a 10x30 you will save thousands of dollars. If you are concerned that your image may be tarnished if you scale down, try it every other show for half the savings. Put the money you save by reducing your booth size into a high profile sponsorship at the show. If you aren't concerned with saving money, but would like to increase your visibility, consider spreading three 10x10 booths around the floor with three different themes. That way you hit your targets three times instead of one.

Secret # 2: Order services early.

Nothing will drive costs up or wreck your budget like forgetting to order services or shipping properties late. These common blunders can easily be eliminated by assigning someone to open and read the exhibit kit as soon as it is received. Convention decorators and show services charge a premium for ordering late. Here are ways to avoid extra expenses.

- Take advantage of all early-bird discounts and call to confirm fax orders were received. This will save you up to 15%.
- Don't miss the notification requirements if you are hiring an outside contractor for I & D. Failing to file the necessary form 30 days prior to the set up date will prevent your crew from working the show and require you to use the show labor at a much higher cost.
- Send a drawing of your electrical floor plan along with your electric order for clarification. The electrical lines must be laid before the carpet can go down, so if the electrical installation is delayed your labor will be standing around with nothing to do.
- Don't forget to order the pad with the carpet.
- Consider buying plants locally, bringing your own portable vacuum and cleaning supplies, or buying carpet you can throw away after the show, because ordering these from show services is ridiculously expensive.
- Plan your shipping strategies well in advance to avoid last minute overnight rush charges.
- Ship all properties advance to the warehouse so your cases and crates will be in the booth ready to install. That way you can pinpoint your labor start time for maximum efficiency.
- Confirm the weight of everything you ship. Without confirmation you have no

- leverage to dispute overcharges on your shipping and drayage bill.
- Don't forget to budget for lift gates, forklifts, driver wait times and special deliver extras.
 - Assign someone to file the bill of lading at the service desk before leaving the show and wait for acknowledgement that it was received and correct. This oversight can trigger huge expenses when your freight is forced. Errors here will cause your shipper to be turned away and the decorator's preferred freight company will take your properties instead. You will be stuck paying for the services of both shippers.

Secret # 3: Assign someone to meet the installers at the booth before they begin.

You probably have no idea how this one omission in your exhibit plan can add thousands of dollars in extra fees to your labor bill. Here is a hypothetical scenario that illustrates how this vicious money wasting cycle unfolds:

Your installers arrive on time and begin to unpack your crates. They cannot find the set-up instructions. Every case is emptied, but no instructions, pictures or drawings are found to tell them how you want the display configured. There is no company representative in sight and no one answers the cell phone number they were given. Four guys, each getting paid \$75 an hour, stand around for 30 minutes waiting for instructions. The electrical lines are laid so they decide to install the carpet. No pad is listed on the work order and your representative is not there to notice that mistake. They begin erecting the display as best they can. They are not sure where the counters should go so they take a guess. It's too bad that your computer monitors will not reach the electric outlets. There are multiple sets of graphics with no indication as to which set should be used for this particular show. They try the cell phone again. No luck. Four hours later, as the installers are putting the finishing touches on the booth your representative finally arrives. She proceeds to loudly complain that the display is set up wrong and the graphics are not correct. She demands that the graphics be changed and the display be taken apart and put up correctly. Too bad the empty crates were sent to the warehouse and this crew has another booth to erect.

Here is a recap outlining how this one oversight could cost your company an estimated \$2,700.00 more than you budgeted for.

- 30 minutes of labor time lost when four guys waited around for instructions.
- Representative locates a set of instructions and pays to have them faxed to the show.
- Labor must pull the carpet so the electrician can move the lines.
- The electrician is busy. One hour later he moves the lines. Cha ching!
- The carpet pad, which was never ordered, is now purchased at the day-of-show pricing.

- Labor installs pad and re-tapes carpet.
- The display is disassembled, moved and reconfigured.
- The counters are moved and the monitors relocated.
- There will be another drayage fee to retrieve the crates containing the other set of graphics that were already taken back to the warehouse.
- Another 4 hour minimum is required for the labor crew to make the changes.
- It is now 5:15 so overtime pay kicks in. You are now charged time and a half times four.

Reduce your stress and preserve your budget (and maybe your job) by assigning a representative to meet the foreman at the booth before your hired installation labor crew starts the job.

Here are a few other tips for saving time and money:

- Send a copy of the assembly instructions and floor plan to the installers two weeks ahead of the show.
- Include photos showing the booth exactly as you wish it to be erected and how the graphics should look when installed.
- Put a duplicate copy of the assembly drawings and instructions in your crates. Provide an additional copy to your representative to bring to the show.
- Put all your graphic artwork files on a disc and bring it to the show in case any graphics are lost or damaged so you can quickly get them reprinted.
- Double check all booth service orders for errors a week before the show.

Secret # 4: Establish rules of conduct for the booth staff.

What would you do if your top salesperson arrived at the booth one hour after the show opened? Would you be upset if that person was drunk? Would it matter to you if the entire staff left the booth before the show closed even though customers were still on the floor? Unfortunately, these scenarios can be witnesses every day at shows all across the country. These unacceptable behaviors inconvenience customers, frustrate prospects and tarnish your company image.

When you send your staff off to an exciting city to work a show for three days, the night life is tempting, the boutiques are beckoning and the lure of the golf course is strong. It would be a good idea to outline some company policies for your team that cover behavior both during work hours and on personal time. They are, after all, getting paid and representing you the entire time they are at the show, so reinforce their purpose by dictating specific work hours, adding a curfew and reminding them that their actions both day and night, reflect back on the company.

A little bit of sales training wouldn't hurt either. Give your staff a clear purpose for being there by establishing a list of goals to accomplish at the show. Inject a little competition into their duties and offer incentives for exceptional performance. Develop a concise sales presentation for each person to use. By scripting your marketing message and selling propositions you will guarantee that every attendee who enters your booth will leave with consistent information about your company, products and services. Make lead generation a priority.

Secret # 5: Limit your giveaways and literature.

It is difficult to calculate how many brochures, flyers, sales slicks and give-a-ways you should bring to the show. Most exhibitors have a tendency to over-estimate the number needed. When it comes to collateral it makes sense to create an inexpensive marketing flyer that includes a show special on one-side and company contact information on the other. You can cheaply print up hundreds of these and save your expensive full color brochures for high quality prospects. Packing two hundred pieces for every one thousand attendees is a good rule of thumb. You can increase that number if your sales staff has been trained to include the distribution of collateral to every prospect they engage on the show floor, otherwise expect them to set on the table until someone happens to pick one up.

In addition, boxes of literature take up a lot of space in the booth and are often stacked unattractively in view of attendees. Be aware that it is not uncommon for booth staff to conveniently forget boxes full of color catalogs and company brochures at the show. When they neglect to pass them out they don't want to ship home the tell-tale evidence. Using a cheap-to-print flyer gets the word out and allows you to toss away the leftovers without guilt instead of shipping them back.

There are similar issues when dealing with give-a-ways. They require more boxes to contend with. You could rent an accessible storage space which allows you to retrieve your boxes when you need them, but this will cost you \$150-\$200 per day. The sheer volume of T-shirts, pens, calculators, bags or post it notes exhibitors ship to the show is usually excessive. The other problem is that the distribution methods are faulty and wasteful. If you've ever seen enthusiastic salespeople mindlessly handing out trinkets at the edge of their booth without even one qualifying question asked, then you've experienced this phenomenon.

Companies seem to have forgotten that the purpose of a premium gift is to reward the prospect for giving you something you want. When attendees give you a lead, watch a video, participate in a demonstration or take a survey the give-away serves as a small token of thanks. Use them; don't waste them.