

A-Z tips for planning your first international exhibition

Exhibiting outside North America should not be difficult. What it takes is a plan, a good partner and a platform to launch your global exhibit program. Finding reliable strategic partners may not be easy if you are trying to use your own overseas vendors. In fact, finding a trusted partner here in the US will allow you to work with one point of contact no matter where your event is held.

You need people who know your program and who not only can cope with times zones and linguistic variances but who also have their own networks of worldwide vendors.

Here are some A-Z tips to consider

Appointments – Schedule appointments! Don't expect visitors just to walk into your booth space. Don't plan on 'working the aisles.' Identify your potential prospects and set up meetings. If you need help identifying prospects, contact the fair organizers (they provide match making services), consult business directories, major industry magazines, or ask your distributors' network. Do an internet search. Make appointments well in advance with a written invitation 2-3 months prior to the show. Allow enough time for each appointment.

Business Codes and Etiquette – While working abroad it is important to observe proper work ethics and etiquette. The American focus on quick decisions, rapid implementation, and efficient completion is far removed from many other countries' business practices. Germans, for example, believe that extensive background information is needed to find a valid and effective solution or to make an important decision. Their thinking is systematic, deductive, logical and analytical. Germans do not feel pressured to obtain immediate results; their strategy will often be 'long term.' Seen through American eyes, Germans can be 'rude' because of their frank, direct ways. They do not hide negative issues but will tell you what they think. It is more important to be considered credible, objective and truthful than to avoid conflict and be socially accepted, or liked.

Clear and Concise Communication – Never assume anything. When communicating with your overseas stand builders, be specific about what you want: types of materials, colors etc. Email reference photos of what you are looking for. Google Images is a great resource to use for communicating visuals. Always ask for photos of available rental furnishings. Remember, a picture is worth a thousand words. When it comes to literature, adapt and translate your collateral. When presenting your product, avoid exaggerations, 'hype' and too many superlatives.

Design – Booth spaces tend to be more ‘closed’ when compared to those in the US. Closed areas are common: quiet places--conference rooms, seating or café areas--where people can enjoy refreshments and have discussions. Raised wooden platform floors are standard to allow for all electrical wiring and cabling; exhibitors are not allowed to run cables under carpet alone. When you order carpet, do not expect US quality carpet and padding. Walls are likely to be high and run all the way to the aisles; even in an inline booth, you should expect 8 ft. walls extending to neighboring sides. Since hospitality is crucial, your exhibit might need a fully equipped kitchen area with sink, dishwasher, refrigerator, working space and storage. Don’t make your storage too small. Consider your staff’s laptops, hand luggage, and coats as well as your brochures, give-aways, tableware, beverages, and food supplies.

Electricity – Telecommunication standards are different around the world. The United States and Canada use 110-volt electricity. Most countries outside North America use 220-volt electricity. Arrange for converters if you plan to use US laptops or other AV equipment. If you bring US formatted DVDs (and your rented DVD player is European), your DVDs must be formatted properly to the DVD player that is provided. Smaller electrical converters that will work for your hairdryer or your laptop at the hotel can be found at the airport, but don’t count on them for your laptops on the show floor. **Plug Adapters** do not convert electricity. They simply allow a dual-voltage appliance, a transformer or a converter from one country to be plugged into the wall outlet of another country. Phone line adaptors for internet connection are hard to find. Best advice: buy a ‘European Converter Kit’ at Amazon.com.

Formality – Accustomed to US informality, your staff will need to be more formal and polite when addressing international visitors. Don’t use first names; use titles. Business attire is expected on the show floor for both women and men, even when the hall is extremely hot. (There is often no air conditioning.) Avoid bringing emotional or private life experiences into business situations. Be friendly, but not overwhelmingly friendly and extroverted. You don’t want to be perceived as superficial.

Graphics – Adapt your graphics to your visitors’ expectations. You might have to rewrite the copy on your product graphics so that it is more detailed, factual, content rich and less ‘glamorous’ in some countries and more glamorous in others. Ask your stand builder what the accepted file format should be for receiving production files. Specify the materials you want to use, identify critical PMS colors and build enough time in your timeline to have the graphics properly prepared in the US by your designer or agency and allow the time necessary to produce the graphics prior to your stand builder’s load out date.

Hospitality – The barstools, café tables and lounge areas are probably the most obvious contrast to the US tradeshow floor! Visitors at international fairs expect to be taken care of. It is common to offer coffee, soft drinks, and water to visitors as well as alcoholic beverages, including beer and wine. Although small booths (10x10/3x3m) are usually not expected to offer refreshments, depending on booth size, you can be expected to provide finger food or snacks such as sandwiches, fruit, sweets--or, in some cases, fully catered meals. It is important to provide a pleasant atmosphere, to spend a great deal of time with your visitor, and to show sincere interest in being in his/her company. A potential client is likely to make an appointment and come back several times throughout the show. Bring enough staff members to take care of several visitors at a time. Staff members need to have time and space to prepare for second and third visits. To accommodate your visitors' expectations, consider hiring additional hostesses who can schedule appointments, guide your visitors to the meeting or lounge area, serve refreshments etc. Don't forget to thank your visitors for being your guest.

Insurance – Check that you have corporate liability and accident insurance that covers your needs: visitors, staff members, exhibit components, products, AV. Most international shows offer relatively inexpensive full coverage options that can be ordered through the venue. However, check first with your internal risk management groups; your company more than likely has a general liability policy that will satisfy all the requirements.

Jokes – Be very careful with humor or politically uncomfortable subjects. If you cannot think of anything, local beer and soccer are always good, 'safe' conversational topics.

Kilogram, dates, measurement, time and driving One US pound is equivalent to .4536 kilograms (454g), approximately half a kilo (1kg = 1000g). Dates are written 'backwards' indicating the day, the month and the year—for instance, 01.10.09 would be October 1st 2009. Outside the US, the metric system prevails: 1 meter equals 3.28 feet. 1,609.344 meters equals 1 mile. Most countries use the 24 hour clock, not the 12 hour clock. If you want a dinner reservation at 7 pm, make sure you request 1900 hours. In you are renting a car overseas and need to purchase gasoline, there are 3.785411 liters per gallon and 1.6 kilometers equals 1 mile.

Language – When addressing your visitors in English, use simple, direct language without slang or industry jargon. Be aware of the fact that the end of your sentence is important. Don't snap off halfway. Avoid hype and exaggerations. Keep eye contact to make sure that you signal that you are sincerely interested and serious about your conversation.

Marketing – Success in the marketplace depends on your staying power. Willingness to plan, prepare and rework is essential. A long term commitment is critical. It is better to have a small presence at a show three times in a row than to make one big splash. Concentrate on quality over quantity; spend more time thinking about who can help you sell your product than on your give aways, collateral, or the quantity of your leads. Adapt your marketing to the region where you are exhibiting. Do some research to make sure that your strategy, price point, norms and standards are in sync with the country. Focus on performance and product; relationships are important but not as important to many international attendees as they are to US customers. Also visit a couple of websites of the country before you leave. Knowing a minimum of the local history and the current state of social, political and economic affairs will increase your credibility.

No rush – Slow down! The pace on an exhibition floors in many other countries is much slower than in the US. Visitors do not wear badges and cannot immediately be identified or approached as prospects. The key word is patience. Expect to spend quality time with each visitor. Be advised that an exhibit hall may be quiet in the afternoon in tropical destinations.

Opportunities – A wide range of promotional services are provided by the exhibition venue/show organizer, and many of them are free. Promotional material such as stickers, posters, logo downloads, city guides, visitor guides, and maps are available for most shows, as are invitation mailing and voucher services. If you wish to advertise within the fairgrounds - banners, light-boxes, floor graphics, posters - consider the location of your hall within the fairground, the hall entrances, the traffic flow from the subway, the taxi stands, etc.

Prepare Timelines – Depending on the complexity of your overseas exhibiting needs, it is not unrealistic to start planning a year in advance of the show. Begin researching the shows you'd like to attend, evaluate exhibit hall spaces available, develop marketing objectives and begin defining your budgets.

Questions – Be prepared for detailed questions. Be ready to provide serious, objective, extensive information about your products or services. Bring statistics, case studies and examples to back up your words. Quick presentations are likely to be perceived as superficial and non-effective.

Rules and Regulations – Safety regulations are strict at many international exhibitions around the world. Be sure to ask your exhibit house to arrange for design approvals, structural permits and submit necessary documentation to meet the published safety codes.

Shipping – In almost every case, it is more cost-efficient to rent your exhibit locally than to ship your existing booth from the US and send a supervisor. If you need to send products, samples, collateral, etc., allow at least 2 months for ocean shipments, and 3-4 weeks for air-shipments. Use an experienced carrier who can advise you on the required paperwork (carnets) and who knows the custom procedures very well. Ask your exhibit house if it is worth shipping existing graphics; most likely, it is less expensive to reproduce the artwork with your vendor locally.

Translations – Even though English is widely spoken at International Congresses, some business executives might prefer to negotiate in their language. It is recommended to find out what the 'official' language is for the conference so that you can plan accordingly. Inquire about this in advance of the show so you can arrange to have one of your bilingual staff members in the booth. If you do not have a bilingual staff member, consider having an interpreter on-site for any important scheduled meetings. It is common courtesy to address the local visitors in their own language and have literature available in (several) local languages. It is considered common courtesy to translate your graphics. This step will signal that you are a serious player in the global market

Unions and labor – Unlike the US, no official contractors must be used for set-up, dismantle, electrical, or sanitary labor. All labor is likely to be performed by your local stand builder and should be part of your contract. Traditionally there is no such thing as material handling; however more and more countries are adapting the American ways of charging for this service.

VAT – Consider local taxes (VAT) in your overall budget. This amount is refundable for US-based companies. Make sure that all invoices have your US company address. Keep your original receipts from hotels, restaurants, taxi companies, airfares, shopping centers, etc. The refund process is long and will require support of an authorized tax-lawyer. In some instances, consider using a stand builder from another country to bring in your exhibit properties. The cost savings could be significant.

Waste Management – Environmental concern is 'in.' Recycling is important. More and more countries are becoming environmentally responsible. In many European countries, exhibitors are responsible for collecting and sorting all waste related to their exhibit spaces. Ask your exhibit house to arrange for waste disposal. Typically, you will need four (4) different wastebaskets in your storage room: one for paper (blue), one for plastic (green), one for food (yellow), and one for mixed waste (gray). Paper or plastic supplies are 'out.' Real dishware is preferred to disposable, and tableware can be rented through a show contractor. If you do not have a fully equipped kitchen in your exhibit, a cleaning service can be ordered; used tableware will be picked up every night and new tableware will be delivered every morning. Remember that your storage room should be able to accommodate the tableware.

Xpectations – The larger congresses mean long hours for longer periods of time. It is not unusual for a fair to last more than one week. Given the amount of time they will be away from the office, it is a good idea to prepare a brief which will familiarize the staff with the country they are traveling to. Offer information such as how to get to the hotel from the airport, options to get to the venue from the hotel, proper etiquette for business transactions, basic information on local customs, official language, time zones and currency conversion.

Youth – Respect hierarchy and seniority. Professional titles are important; hierarchy and status are much more respected outside of the U.S. Understand what is considered proper etiquette for the country you are in. In China, for example, when conducting business, it is common practice that a surname precedes the personal name because traditionally the family name is viewed as the more important name than the individual's name.

ZZZ – Factor in jet-lag. Allow an extra day for your staff that travel great distances to get to your show. Don't expect them to be ready to perform the morning after they arrive. If you wish to stay in a particular hotel, you might have to arrange for hotel accommodations several months—in some case, years—in advance. The same goes for flights. If hotels are booked, consider bed and breakfast options. They are often closer to the fair ground, and less expensive.