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The US Discovery of International Trade Show Opportunities

Over the past 10 years, there has been a fast moving trend toward international trade shows for exhibiting companies as well as exhibit suppliers in the USA. This trend is the result of a growing American willingness to seriously consider new sales through the international marketplace. What took so long?

This trend may seem like a joke to people from Europe and Asia, or to some a threat, since most of the world has embraced international marketings as a common business practice long before the USA recently opened up its eyes to uncover opportunities abroad. Much of this eye opening experience for exhibit suppliers is due to their customer pressures to help them do so. With many corporate headquarters in the USA, the US marketing departments now wanted to control their international tactics and leaned on their US exhibit partners to help them. In 2005, exhibit supplier companies quickly scrambled to establish global partnerships with a trusted partner. Many simply selected a single partner for Europe and for Asia. These partnerships then grew to begin sharing project opportunities with each other, rather than going it alone.

During the EDPA ACCESS meeting in Palm Springs, CA / 2012, I presented the results of a survey conducted in October 2012. The survey was sent to the leading trade show suppliers in the seven regions of the world, many of which were IFES members. The survey question was asked-

“What percentage of your trade show exhibit business serves your clients outside of your country/region?”

Not a scientific survey, but I feel accurate enough for our purpose. Note that Canada was considered a part of North America, and Mexico was shifted to South America. Europe is a rounded figure since many suppliers do exhibit work in one of the many European countries. Most of Africa activity was South Africa. Egypt was shifted to Middle East.

The response:

Europe-	26%	Australia-	42%
Asia-	23%	South America-	27%
Middle East-	67%	North America-	5%
Africa-	15%		<i>(Why so small a percentage?)</i>

In 2012 the US marketplace was now beginning to take more seriously the idea of doing exhibits outside of North America. A small percentage of the largest US exhibit supplier companies (and OSPI Partners in the US) were already doing so due to their customer requests to help them consolidate their efforts and better control their marketing message across the globe.

With so many North American trade shows taking place, and plenty of business to keep an American exhibit company busy, why consider to do work internationally and take a greater risks? Kind of a dumb attitude, but was true. Fat cats who never run out of food never get hungry. Few US exhibit companies were aggressive about international before 2004. They were busy enough without it. Those that did are now leading the pack. Today in North America all exhibit companies are jumping on the band wagon for international business. Big companies who got involved late, like GES and Freeman, (who by the way were never considered exhibit builders, but as show and labor contractors) are moving even faster since they have greater influence with international exhibitors coming to the US. They also have financial resources beyond the average exhibit supplier company to service this new business. Their aggressive approach to assist international exhibitors borders on unfair, since they are the official gateway (as official show contractors) for most all shows in North America. When GES or Freeman are selected by the show organizers and associations to manage their US events, all services provided on the show floor must funnel through them. All freight must be unloaded and delivered to booth spaces only by the official show contractor. Electric, water/air services, catering, and carpet cleaning must be ordered through the official show contractor. All installation and AV service labor, outside of the official show contractor, must be approved in advance before a sub contractor can be used. Today both Freeman and GES design and build exhibits as well as providing their exclusive official show contractor services. Many exhibitors like the idea of working through a single source for a given show where the show contractor can package the exhibit and show services as a single offering. GES and Freeman both can design and produce a nice first class exhibit. They compete with all the other exhibit design companies in the world who exhibit at the shows where their own company serves the role as the show contractor. These major US show contractors are now expanding worldwide and have set up their own network of trusted international exhibit suppliers to work with. Some view show contractors, who also design and build exhibits, as creating a monopoly in the marketplace. At this time, the American show contractor companies try very hard to separate their exhibit design services from their show site services, but when placed in competitive situations, the show contractor has a trump card to play that are not in the deck of other suppliers.

For International companies exhibiting in the USA...

Considering the US is the land of the free, some things are not so free at trade shows. In any case, *it is what it is* regarding trade show management in the US and will not change in the short term. For now, deal with it. It still works for the American market and will not change until US companies refuse to attend trade shows due to cost. Time will tell here. In the meantime, a good alternative is to work with a local US exhibit supplier partner to analysis the alternatives for your exhibit designs in the US and guide

you through any hidden surprises. This will help to reduce the cost, give you peace of mind, and make the experience less painful. As long as success is achieved by exhibiting companies participating at US trade shows, the organizational model for managing trade shows in the US will not change quickly. Time will tell.