

Exhibition Management

BY SAM LIPPMAN

'Exhibitor Satisfaction' is Too Important to Outsource

Most associations depend on their annual convention for 50 percent or more of their annual operating income, the majority of which comes from exhibit space and sponsorship sales. Exhibitors (and the revenue they generate)

are so important that organizers attending the 2007 Exhibition and Convention Executives Forum indicated that “downsizing of booths and reduction of sponsorship revenue” was one of the major threats to the success of their events.

Yet, once a space or sponsorship sale is made by highly compensated sales staff, many associations delegate exhibitor service to inexperienced and overworked operations staff. Because these staffers usually don't have the authority or knowledge to handle exhibitors' most difficult problems, they often have to pass them along to their official contractors and floor managers for resolution.

The result? Part of the vital responsibility of servicing exhibitors becomes an outsourced function beyond the direct control of an event organizer. Does that make sense to you? It's enough to keep an association executive awake at night.

Given the stakes involved, associations should assign this critical responsibility to their top executives because of their knowledge and experience in strategic planning, marketing, communications and financial management. Associations also should invest whatever is needed to ensure that everything exhibitors touch is designed to increase their satisfaction.

“Because exhibitor satisfaction is key to the success of our show,” said David

Ingemie, president of SnowSports Industries America (SIA), “most of our staff—not just the show department—goes through training with our general service contractor so that we all learn, first hand, how things work for our exhibitors.

“We also review our exhibitors' costs

■ **Simulate Your Exhibitors Experience.** The executive, sales, marketing and communications teams should “walk a mile in an exhibitor's shoes.” Staff cannot begin redesigning exhibitor materials and services until they understand—first hand—how confusing, scary and expensive (as well as physically and emotionally draining) it is to exhibit. Once they learn what exhibitors have to endure to participate in a show, they will be ready to help them save time and money before, during and after the show.



A warehouse storage program is offered to exhibitors at the SnowSports Industries America (SIA) show, pictured above.

and suggest ways they can save money, such as renting a display instead of buying it and using lighter display materials to cut their drayage costs,” he continued. “We also created our own warehouse storage program that we offer to our exhibitors at 50 percent off the going rate.”

To increase exhibitor satisfaction at *your* trade show, consider this game plan:

■ **Deconstruct Your Current Exhibitor Communications.** Commit to having everything that your association sends exhibitors re-evaluated in terms of what you've learned both from exhibitor feedback and your own research. That includes everything an exhibitor might see and need—space applications, floor plans, registration,

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housing and directory listing forms, rules and regulations, exhibitor service manuals and action bulletins. Marketing and promotional handbooks must be customer-friendly and easy to read. (Take this opportunity to "green" your exhibitor communications as well by using recycled paper and vegetable- or soy-based inks, printing on both sides of the page, and relying as much as possible on email, CDs and your Web site for the delivery of information.)

■ **Don't Ignore Official Contractors' Communications.** Follow suit with your contractors' communications. Insist that everything your official contractors and venues send exhibitors is well-written and designed. Write into your contracts with them that before

any of their forms, regulations and instructions are sent to your exhibitors, they be read by someone from outside the exhibition industry. If a third-party reader—one inexperienced about exhibiting—can understand the materials, then they can be sent to your exhibitors.

■ **Demand 'Customer-Centric' Solutions.** Associations work with a myriad of suppliers to produce their annual conventions. Demand that these suppliers work together to create a single package of the services that your exhibitors order most frequently. Market this package as a new exhibitor benefit, designed to save time and reduce stress. Remind your suppliers that exhibitors shouldn't

have to fill out multiple forms and deal with several suppliers; vendors should cooperate to offer a package that makes exhibiting easier.

While it's critical to address customer convenience on the front end, constant consideration also needs to be given to exhibitors' on-site needs. Don't let exhibitors feel as though they've been handed off from one staff person to another. Senior executives, sales and marketing personnel should be available and accessible on the show floor to shepherd exhibitors through any trouble-shooting problems. The extra effort will be recognized and appreciated.

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