

## Exhibitor Training... Whose responsibility is it?

Yes, yes, yes. We all know that part of the responsibility for a successful show lies with the exhibitor. After all, we provide qualified attendees, a business-like atmosphere, first-rate traffic patterns and excellent service. The least they can do is learn to operate a stand, right? I mean, do we have to do everything?

On the other hand, did we expect our children to graduate from nappies with no guidance at all? Did our dog just magically learn to fetch the Sunday paper? Of course not.

Why then do organisers expect our exhibitors to recognise that it's them, not the show, that's performing poorly?

In a specialised age where even our toothbrushes come with instructions, we are expecting salespeople to somehow know that a sale is not made in the same way as a field sale. We expect them to design effective stands while assimilating volumes of display rules and regulations. Shouldn't they, just by nature, be able to qualify a sales lead in less than a minute?

As many show managers are finding out, it just doesn't work that way. Granted, the responsibility for effective standmanship should rest with the exhibitor. But if they're not going to do it, you may have to. After all, you're the one who's going to lose stand revenues if they don't exhibit next year.

Historically, consultants specialising in exhibitor education and training have worked directly with individual corporations. The last ten years however, have seen an explosive growth in the number of associations and show production companies hiring these trainers. Public show managers are lining up too, since retail sales habits don't transfer well to the show floor.

As a show manager, you create the ultimate "win-win" situation by providing exhibitor training. The exhibitor gets valuable "how-to" lessons for increasing on-site sales. The attendees accomplish more by dealing with professional exhibitors. And you get people, exhibitors and attendees, anxious to sign on for next year's event.

### Program Types

Although best estimates place the number of individuals and firms offering exhibitor training at over three dozen, there are only a handful with intimate knowledge of the exposition industry. These trainers typically offer seminars of two types, the exhibit sales training seminar, and the exhibitor marketing strategy seminar.

The sales training session focuses on developing the skills necessary to create a selling environment. We want them to walk away with a recognition of the mistakes they may be making, and ideas for correcting those mistakes to better utilise the show.

Generally a one-to-two hour session, it's currently the most popular program type. Held at the show site during a move-in day, it's also the easiest to implement. Exhibitors particularly like the program because the salespeople who will actually staff the stand can attend.

The objective of the sales training session is to raise awareness of the unique requirements of show selling in contrast to routine field sales techniques. You may have less than a minute to qualify someone on the show floor, so although a sales staff may be phenomenally successful elsewhere, that doesn't necessarily mean they will be in the stand.

By contrast, the exhibitor marketing seminars typically present complete show planning information. Beginning with budgeting and stand design, the programs include tips for pre-show promotion, on-site sales techniques and lead follow-up. Due to the nature of this program, it's usually held up to six months before the show.

Depending on need, this seminar ranges in length from four hours to two days. Attendees at this type of program usually include sales and marketing executives, exhibit managers, corporate executives and CEOs interested in exhibit marketing strategies. These in-depth programs are often presented in addition to the on-site training for stand personnel.

In addition to these "standard" programs, most of the training companies offer specialised sessions as well. For example, these is the "Super Session" in which exhibitors are briefed on the historical audience statistics of the show in which they're participating. The session also highlights specific needs and interests of the show's buyers based on previous years' attendance surveys.

Other special sessions can be held on the last day of the show to help exhibitors analyse show results, begin next year's planning, design lead follow-up programs and handle post-show promotions.

## **Analysing benefits**

Although total program costs can exceed \$5,000, after adding A/V, promotion expense, room rentals, etc., most show managers say they have no difficulty justifying their investment. In fact, the majority are repeat customers. The chief reason, successful exhibitors are loyal exhibitors. Any education my exhibitors receive will help them get the maximum return on their investment. The more sales they make on-site, the more critical our show becomes to them.

These seminars can also show exhibitors that success is linked to sales and marketing skills more than actual attendance numbers. If they don't know how to utilise the people we bring into the show, they won't see the show as a success no matter how large the attendance is. Similarly, the public relations benefits to show management are immediately useful. They help foster positive attitudes and build relationships.

Finally, show managers are using educational seminars as value-added features which help their shows compete in a crowded market. In effect, it can position your show in a leadership role. The high-tech industries use education this way all the time. When someone comes out with a new product, they offer a series of seminars on how to use it, and they establish themselves as the industry leader by doing so.

## **Implementation**

Implementing an educational program requires few decisions beyond the initial trainer selection. They fall into three categories; program content, promotion and budgeting.

Show managers may contribute to seminar content by pointing out problems to address or issues for inclusion.

Attendance numbers at show-sponsored seminars are directly proportional to promotional efforts. Show managers should promote the event with at least one exclusive mailing. Other avenues of promotion used by experienced seminar sponsors include flyers folded into all exhibitor correspondence, and a notice and registration form in the service manual.

Although exhibitor training prices are usually non-negotiable, seminar sponsors do have control over costs through various levels of seminar subsidy. Typically, the one-to-two-hour onsite sales training session is offered free-of-charge to promote attendance. The longer exhibit marketing strategy programs have been offered from \$100-to-\$300 per attendee.

Pricing structure depends upon a combination of budget limitations, how much exhibitors can reasonably afford, and philosophical ideas about perceived value. You can never offer a day-long seminar free, nobody will think it's worth coming to. Even more fiscally sound to charge \$175 for the all-day seminar, and uses any profits to subsidise the free pre-show sales training session.

## **Long-term planning**

Show managers considering exhibitor training need to plan for more than this year's program to realize anything more than PR benefits. As exhibitor sales staff turnover, and exhibiting companies come and go, it will take a few years to reach significant numbers.

So while the debate continues to rage over who is responsible for training exhibitors, consider the following scenario: You buy two computers from two different companies. The first is brought by a technician who teaches you to use it, while the second is shipped with an instruction manual. Although neither company was under any obligation to provide training, which company will you call when the time comes to buy a third computer? The events industry is beginning to realise they need to provide operating instructions.

## **You know you need an exhibitor education program when...**

- Exhibitors display the following behaviors during active show hours: sitting, not standing, in the stand; reading in the exhibit; constant "visiting" with other exhibitors; leaving their stands for long periods.
- You encounter repeated problems with display rule violations. Presentations that are too loud, selling in the aisles and site-line infractions, demonstrate a lack of understanding by the exhibitor of the necessity of show regulations. Impartial seminar speakers can reasonably point out the value of such rules for protecting the equality of all participants.
- Exhibitors are constantly complaining about attendance numbers. What they're really saying is that they're not getting the sales they need from the show. In many cases, it's not attendance numbers, but sales skills, that are lacking. Educational seminars can prove that sales success is linked directly to efficient planning and standmanship skills.

- Exhibitors begin rebelling at stand space prices. A seminar that focuses on getting more return on their investment, helps corporate exhibit managers justify show expenses and participation.
- Exhibitors start asking for an every-other-year show, rather than an annual event. The concern is audience quality, an issue that can be addressed in a positive way during the session.
- Increasing numbers of exhibitors express doubt about re-booking space. Exhibitors unsure of a show's value can learn skills that will result in more on-site sales, making them anxious for next year's event.