



Taking Your Domestic Show International

by Michelle Bruno



Not every trade show organizer in the US is interested in, or in a position to, actively target overseas exhibitors. The reasons vary. Some trade associations advocate a more protectionist attitude toward inviting competition into shows that cater to their domestic members. Other events are too small or too niche to attract foreign companies. A few are satisfied with the size of the US market.

Stephanie Selesnick, president of International Trade Information, Inc. (ITI), an international trade show consulting group, says the challenge of moving from a domestic to a global event can be daunting. “A lot of time, organizers put off going international. It takes three to four years to develop an international customer base.”

Those organizations that have taken the plunge into international waters have done so with a focused effort. “When we look at the successful groups, these are all people who have put in lots of staff, resources and executive support to make the program successful,” Selesnick explains. The organizations that don’t have the internal expertise at the outset often bring in experts, such as ITI, to get the program off the ground.

While Selesnick’s success in recruiting international exhibitors takes into account her existing network of connections—she has worked in the industry since she was ten years old—there is a process and standard “to do” list, she says, associated with going international:

Research. While there are a number of resources available to exhibition organizers to determine whether a specific region of the world is worth targeting, Selesnick suggests looking at the Country Commercial Guides prepared by the US Commercial Service (USCS) and available through the export.gov website.

USCS maintains a vast library of market research on nearly every country in the world. And, although the reports are specifically written for US companies wanting to export, i.e. they focus on the burgeoning industries that may need US products, they also contain vast amounts of data on trade groups and industries that can be of use to show organizers in the US.

Cull the existing exhibitor database. The current list of exhibitors for a domestic show can be immensely helpful and revealing, Selesnick says. Many shows already

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Stephanie Selesnick

A second-generation trade show enthusiast, Stephanie began working trade shows at the tender age of 10, her first international show at 14, and joined ITI full time in 1993, becoming President in March 2009. ITI helps US show organizers who want to internationalize their brands – either bringing exhibitors and visitors in, or taking their brand offshore through pavilions and exhibitions.

She has worked on exhibitions in the agricultural, apparel, consumer electronics, energy, food and beverage, high tech construction, baby, juvenile & maternity, renewables, shoe, and travel industries all over the world.

Stephanie is a frequent domestic and global speaker and trainer for associations, private companies and exhibition industry associations and just recently returned from Thailand as a finalist in a MICE blogging competition.

She blogs weekly for Expo Magazine, on occasion for Exhibition World and InfoSalons.com, is a founder and sometime moderator for ExpoChat (on Twitter), and is the Community Engagement Ringleader for SISO.

have international exhibitors—companies that found them. “Reach out to them and ask them who they know. They can often recommend ‘friends’ in the same sectors,” she suggests. In addition, patterns often begin to emerge around product

groups or countries. A small handful of companies can represent an emerging trend.

Look for contact from non-exhibitors. Exhibitors aren’t the only interesting elements of an organizer’s database, Selesnick asserts. “You have to look for other companies in the database that no one paid attention to,” she explains. On a recent project, she went contact and by contact in the client’s database attempting to determine if any of the companies listed could offer insight about potential exhibitors. “You look at what kinds or organizations they are, whether they have boards or belong to chambers of commerce or promote exports from other countries. Sometimes it’s about just reaching out and asking whether they know of companies interested in exporting,” she says.

Connect with sister organizations. Reaching out to trade associations or chambers of commerce (chambers occupy a much different, more high-profile international role in other countries) to discuss list exchanges or pavilions in each other’s shows is a great way to establish partnerships and do more research into potential markets. Often you have to give something to get something, Selesnick suggests. Organizing a pavilion (a much easier and more common practice for US-based trade associations) in an overseas show can open the door to hosting a pavilion from the same group in a US show.

Getting international companies to exhibit is only scratching the surface of what’s required of show organizers in the U.S. “You have to offer packages that include booth space rental, hard wall exhibits, furniture and drayage,” Selesnick says. Adding, “most international companies don’t like pipe and drape and don’t understand drayage. Offering packaged space is very important.” Having an experienced freight forwarder on board to handle shipping and customs is important as well, she says.

There’s more to going international than just dialing for dollars, Selesnick admits. “You have to start somewhere and set goals. You may get ten exhibitors the first year and twenty the second, but it will happen if you plan well.”

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