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How to Streamline the Issuance of Visa Invitation Letters

by Michelle Bruno



It has become a standard practice for event organizers with international visitors—exhibitors or attendees—to issue letters of invitation to accompany the participant’s visa application. Years ago, original signed copies of the letters were issued manually. Through today’s digital wizardry and the help of registration companies, the process is automated and far less labor intensive.

Who Needs Visas?

Not everyone needs a visa or a letter of invitation. Individuals from countries covered under the Visa Waiver Program (38 countries are currently included) can travel to the United States without a visa for stays of 90 days or less, when they meet all requirements and have a valid **Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA)** approval prior to travel.

When a visa is required, exhibition organizers handle the process of delivering letters of invitation in a number of ways. Some automatically issue the letter to anyone who registers and has a foreign address. Others send a link to a request form once the individual has registered for the show.

A third group works through their registration companies to handle the issuance of the letter.

While a letter of invitation from the exhibition organizer doesn’t guarantee that the visitor will receive a visa, nor is it a requirement for the visa application process, “the goal of a visa letter of invitation is to show the US consular officer who reviews the visa application that the person has a specific plan to visit the United States. Anyone attending from outside the US can benefit from an invitation letter,” says Chrisse New, vice president, project management at event services company Experient.

How Registration Companies Can Help

Experient handles the request for a visa invitation letter during online registration. “We normally suggest that the process includes a prompt for visa letter data points after the registrant has provided his address information. We will only display the option to produce a visa letter and ask any pertinent questions to pre-fill on the letter, such as date of birth and passport number, if the user would like a visa letter of invitation,” New says.

Continued on page 2

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Actually, registration companies are uniquely qualified to help international exhibition organizers streamline the letter of invitation process. “We provide a lot of value by freeing up our clients from the tedious task of letter fulfillment by providing as many letters electronically as we can. The same system that produces an email confirmation can produce a visa letter, repopulate it with the proper text and data points, and provide it to the attendee without them ever having to contact our clients,” New says.

Registration companies can help international organizers in other ways too. They provide consultation and best practices on the topic, including what to do with countries that have a high rate of “registrants who are not legitimate members of the industry, never show up onsite, and take advantage of the process to get a visa letter,” New describes. For these groups, her firm suppresses the ability to request a letter and simply advises the registrant to contact Experient or the organizer for further assistance.

What’s In A Visa Letter Of Invitation?

Electronic letters of invitation are addressed to the attendee:

- Name of Individual
- Title
- Name of Company/Organization
- Street Address
- City, Region Postal Codes
- Country

The body of the letter provides details of the event and information on obtaining a visa:

- Dates and location of the exhibition
- Sponsoring organization
- Purpose of the exhibition
- Types of activities associated with the exhibition
- The exhibition website URL for further information

- Contact information for US. Department of State Bureau of Consular Affairs Visa Services at: http://travel.state.gov/visa_services.html.

The final touches on the letters help to establish authenticity. “Besides information on the nature of the event, our clients include their event letterhead or banner and an electronic signature from a specific person within their organization,” New explains. Most international attendees find electronic letters acceptable. “Some countries like China, as well as specific groups, request hard copy letters at times,” she adds.

Show Websites Can Provide More Details

Whether the process is handled by a third party or internally, organizers typically try to provide international visitors with as much information and support as they can to help streamline the visa process. Show websites contain links and advice like requesting a separate invitation letter for each person, registering with a name that is exactly as it appears on the registrant’s passport, and leaving plenty of time (60 to 90 days) to go through the process for obtaining an interview.

The climate for requiring visas for foreign visitors to the US has ebbed and flowed over the years. Certainly, since the September 11 2001 terrorist attacks, the requirements have tightened up and the impact on international trade shows has been profound. Automation is an excellent way to remove the administrative burden of providing visa letters of invitation from organizers’ shoulders. Registration companies, with their communication pipeline to attendees and their position as the “keepers of information” on participants, are the natural go-to companies for simplifying the process.

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