

## How to Build International Exhibitor Participation in U.S. Shows

By Michelle Bruno

**T**here are a number of reasons why a U.S. show organization would want to expand its international exhibitor base: to beef up a show that has peaked domestically, expand the diversity of exhibitor offerings and boost revenues. How to expand was the subject of a presentation by industry leaders during the Annual Meeting of the International Association for Exhibitions and Events in early December titled, “How to Bring Exhibitors from Outside of the United States.” The panelists outlined six steps in the process.

### 1. Secure buy in from the entire organization

Creating the infrastructure for recruiting and retaining international exhibitors is a long-term proposition. “You aren’t getting involved in international sales so you can do it for a year and then drop it,” says Chris Nemchek, senior vice president, sales and exhibitions at the National Association for the Specialty Food Trade (NASFT). Nemchek suggests that trying to move ahead without board or senior management’s approval could lead to failure.

Rather, he advises, the organization needs to understand why it’s important, what the short-term and long-term costs will be, where the existing resources are best spent (some countries take longer than others to produce results) and when to pull the plug.

### 2. Target the right countries

When deciding which countries to approach first, Nemchek urges exhibition organizers to “go after the low-hanging fruit.” By targeting prospects first in countries with cultural and language similarities (Canada or Great Britain, for example), show producers can “earn early victories,” he says. Panelist, Daniel McKinnon, vice president of events, TradeFair Group, offers some additional advice: start with countries that are in tune with U.S. markets, such as Canada and Mexico, look at competitive shows in other regions to identify the primary influencers and use government census data to pinpoint (by tariff code) what goods are being imported into the U.S. in sufficient quantities.

*Continued on page 2*



### 3. Organize the right resources

In addition to allocating sufficient financial and human resources within the show organization, it's critical, the experts say, to work with outside consultants, government agencies and sales networks to identify funding and support for foreign companies interested in exhibiting in the U.S. "Even if the foreign government can't support a pavilion, recruit a network of sales agents with contacts in regions that offer funding of their own," Nemchek says. McKinnon suggests traveling to the target regions to speak directly with local exporters and trade associations to demonstrate the value of their products in the U.S.

There are also various levels of support available through the U.S. Government according to Cherif Moujabber, president of Creative Expos and Conferences, Inc. USAID, a government organization that provides financial assistance to developing countries, can provide financing to exhibitors in some cases. The Chicago International Trade Commissioners Association (CITCA), the network of U.S. embassies and consulates around the world and the Foreign Commercial Service based in Washington, DC can help provide information to prospective exhibitors.

### 4. Develop a network of in-country sales agents

Although websites and email can help U.S. organizers sell exhibit booths to international companies, a concerted and consistent effort provided by a network of in-country sales agents is the only way to guarantee long-term success. However, developing an international sales infrastructure is expensive and requires research. "Look at what you can afford. If you have multiple shows in multiple regions, having a group of qualified sales agents is worth it," says McKinnon.

When selecting sales representatives, organizers should also ask themselves what they're looking for. "Sometimes specialists know the industry, but not trade shows. Trade show specialists are better than industry specialists," Moujabber says. "Look at who they sell to, their

reasons for being in the industry and their provenance. Also, look at their ability to speak English. Decide whether you are comfortable with that person representing your organization," he adds.

### 5. Prepare exhibitors for U.S. trade shows

Exhibiting in the U.S. is different than exhibiting in many other countries. By preparing new-to-market companies for the rigors of exhibiting overseas, organizers can help them succeed (and return). There are a number of tactics that organizers can use to remove the friction for foreign participants:

- Offer educational seminars on shipping, exhibiting and selling
- Provide turnkey pavilion packages
- Share data about the show, market and buyer segments with exhibitors
- Set up an international lounge at the show
- Offer to arrange appointments, facilitate post-show entertainment and organize press conferences
- Employ floor managers with foreign language skills
- Translate parts of the exhibitor show manual into different languages

### 6. Address internal and external objections

Even with buy in from the beginning, experts say that senior-level managers and board members may later question programs that promote international exhibitor participation because they require considerable investment and the ROI is not immediately apparent. Daniel McKinnon reiterates the importance of "informing everyone involved about the program." Objections may also come from U.S. exhibitors—some wanting to protect the U.S. market from foreign competition and others competing for prime exhibit space. Having the appropriate responses to questions and objections can preserve the momentum of an international exhibit sales program until it achieves results and becomes mainstream.

Global View Notes is published by:  
Rogers Worldwide

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