



Strategies for Avoiding the Pitfalls of Organizing Tradeshows Overseas

By Michelle Bruno

Learning how to kiss, bow or shake hands around the world is one aspect of doing business overseas, but the challenges don't end there. Work practices can differ considerably from those that American exhibition organizers are accustomed to. The key to avoiding costly mistakes is to anticipate them. Here are some common issues that can arise in the course of planning an exhibition overseas and what to do about them before they escalate into problems that affect the show or the bottom line.

Suppliers that overpromise and under deliver

In some cultures, it is acceptable for service providers from trucking companies to customs brokers to promise a level of service that they cannot consistently deliver. Poor economic conditions, complex logistics, government bureaucracy, low-wage workers and operating on a shoe-string budget can prevent them from delivering on time or on budget. The desire "not to disappoint" also compels them to make promises that are difficult to keep. To avoid these situations before they happen, exhibition organizers can take a number of steps:

- Select service providers that are specialists in a product or service. In emerging markets, it's not

unusual to find small companies that provide a range of services (think travel agency, stand builder, security firm). They may not be as reliable as firms that do one thing and do it well.

- Plan for the inevitable service failure with a Plan B. The more important the service—room blocks or bus transportation, for example—the more reason to have a contingency plan in place.
- "Pad" the time frame for a service to be performed with enough time to implement Plan B and still be on time for the show opening.

Exhibitors with incomplete exhibits when the show opens

In many countries—especially those with a high supply of unskilled workers and inexpensive materials—exhibitors take the liberty of building exhibits from scratch (vs. pre-fabricated exhibits). Sometimes, they don't finish construction by the time the show opens. While it may not occur to a U.S. show organizer to require details about ex-

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hibitors' exhibits (arrival time, building materials, timeline for build, etc.), it could be a good idea to ask for such information in an overseas show and have additional laborers and equipment available to help when companies fall behind schedule.



Venues—conference centers and hotels—that require cash up front

In some countries, especially in the Middle East, it's not unusual for event organizers to be required to pay in advance for services, such as hotel room blocks or exhibition space rentals. Even with the financial resources to accommodate such a request, the notion that payment cannot be withheld in the event of non-performance or that a refund for overpayment could involve a lengthy wait, some organizers may elect to take precautions:

- Try to negotiate out of any payment in advance clauses, if possible. A local attorney or in-country partner may be more effective in negotiations of this kind.
- Establish or utilize existing relationships with the international sales representative of the hotel chain or convention property. They may be able to advocate for more reasonable payment terms.
- Develop projections for room requirements and exhibit space that are as conservative as possible to avoid overpaying.
- Inquire about event cancellation insurance that covers these types of expenses.

Service providers that fail to respond to emails

Not everyone in the world responds to email right away, especially when he or she doesn't have an answer. In emerging countries, Internet connections can be spotty and sometimes several employees share a computer. When

emails to service providers fail to produce a response, organizers should call or fax the same question. Most office staffers have access to a telephone line.

Price lists with mysterious, incalculable charges

Most overseas suppliers provide customers with a tariff for services to be performed; however, they aren't always in English (unless that is stipulated in an agreement ahead of time). Even if they are in English, they may contain charges that don't exist in the U.S. (such as Value Added Tax) or be difficult to calculate. One way to understand tariffs and use them to develop show budgets is to ask for a "pro-forma invoice" from the service provider. This "sample" invoice based upon an actual service scenario can offer clues about how to calculate charges in advance.

Workers who ask for "tips" as a condition of providing services

An unsolicited tip offered to an employee (after the fact) can be a good way to acknowledge him for exceptional service. When a worker asks for compensation as a condition of performing a service or as a guarantee that the organizer will receive special consideration, it could be considered a bribe. Putting the legal issues aside, bribes can become a "slippery slope." They do not guarantee—despite what the would-be recipient says—that the service will be provided faster or better. Bribes can be a poor reflection on the show and on the employees giving and getting them. Most legitimate companies frown upon the practice and advise against it.

Work practices differ from country to country. One way for a U.S.-based exhibition organizer to avoid surprises is to engage a local partner (legal counsel if necessary) to negotiate on the organization's behalf, secure the services of companies with U.S. representatives to make communication easier and establish as many direct, personal relationships with overseas service providers (company owners and rank-and-file staff) as possible.

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