



So Many Exhibits, So Little Time:

The Value of an Exhibition Freight Forwarder

By Michelle Bruno

International Freight forwarders are the unsung heroes of overseas trade shows. Through their networks of offices and agents around the world, they are responsible for the physical logistics of getting exhibits and equipment from the exhibitor's warehouse to the stand and back—no easy feat considering the miles, borders, customs requirements, changing regulations and fluctuating economic conditions around the world. Freight forwarders that specialize in exhibitions possess a unique skill set that many exhibition organizers find valuable. Having one as a team member has some important benefits.

What freight forwarders do

Some sources place the origin of the freight forwarding profession as far back as 1836 when modern modes of transportation created a demand for experts in supply chain management. Although some forwarders own their own equipment (usually trucks for local pick-up and delivery), most are brokers, contracting with the carriers of all modes of transportation—air, sea, surface—to arrange

a seamless, end-to-end sequence of movements and transactions that result in the delivery of the exhibits to the show. Some forwarders generalize in all types of freight movements. Others specialize in fairs and exhibitions, large freight (power plants and industrial projects), high-value shipments (art, museum exhibits) or sensitive cargo (food, weapons, alcohol).

How exhibition forwarding differs from general forwarding

Many general freight forwarders choose not to handle exhibition shipments on a regular basis for good reason. Trade show exhibits are time sensitive, making them more difficult (and costly) to manage within the normal workflow of a general freight forwarding operation. In contrast, international exhibition forwarders build their work processes around the time sensitivity and unusual conditions of overseas trade shows. Exhibition forwarders also provide services that general forwarders don't offer:

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- Delivery of the exhibits to the stand
- Supervision of the lifting and positioning of exhibits on the stand
- Unpacking and repacking of shipments
- Removal and storage of empty cases
- Provision of personnel to assist exhibitors on site

There are some other qualities of exhibition freight forwarders that set them apart from general forwarders. General forwarders are organized around departments: air freight, ocean freight and surface shipments. Exhibition forwarders are organized around shows and whatever personnel and resources—air, ocean, surface, custom brokers, on-site labor and equipment—are needed to get the shipments to the stands and set-up on time. Exhibitors may count on a single point of contact in the U.S. to work with them from start to finish, shepherding them through the shipping process and confirming delivery to the stand.

Forwarders rely on international agents and offices

Because the core competency of international freight forwarders is supply chain management, they rely on a global network of partners—agents or offices—that provide in-country services on the U.S. forwarder's behalf. The local companies organize customs clearances, delivery to show site, on-site services and handling of empties as well as re-exportation of the exhibits back to the U.S. Although the originating forwarders control the shipments, local representatives coordinate the physical movements after the freight arrives overseas.

Why trade show organizers may want a freight forwarder on the team

As with other contractors in the exhibition industry, freight forwarders provide services to the exhibitors, but the exhibition organizers appoint them. The appointments provide exhibitors with the support and guidance of professionals who have been vetted by the organization and they give the organizers access to a level of international expertise that they may not otherwise have. Seasoned

forwarders have knowledge of specific markets, venues and local resources. They can change course quickly when problems arise. They also keep their ears to the ground for any changes in local conditions that might affect the show.

How to find an exhibition freight forwarder

There are a number of places to find qualified international exhibition freight forwarders other than Google. The International Association of Exhibitions and Events (IAEE) includes them as members. Other international exhibition organizers can make recommendations. Membership in the International Exhibition Logistics Association (IELA) is also an excellent indicator of competence and professionalism. In order to be accepted for membership, IELA applicants are required to submit the following information and documentation:



- List of owners and the percentage of ownership
- Amount of freight (tonnage) handled over the past two years
- Revenue for the past two years
- Primary contact persons
- List of official show appointments
- Financial statements for the past two years
- Letters of recommendation from two existing IELA members
- Membership fee

An experienced international exhibition freight forwarder can make a very complex set of tasks appear easy to exhibitors and organizers. In reality, much occurs behind the scenes involving multiple companies, carriers, government authorities and people. Forwarders play a much larger role in overseas exhibitions because they perform more services and contribute more to the success of the event. Having a strong forwarder as part of the contractor team benefits the show organizer in ways that go above and beyond freight logistics.

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