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Notes



Update on International Visas

By Michelle Bruno

U.S.-based trade show organizers with international attendees and exhibitors rely heavily on the extension of visas by the U.S. Bureau of Consular Affairs (U.S. Department of State). Since 9/11, the process has become time consuming and arduous with some visitors reporting that the process takes as long as 100 days—depending on the country of origin and circumstances of the applicant. There may be some relief on the horizon though.

The Center for Exhibition Industry Research characterized the visa problem in monetary terms in a 2010 report. Key findings of the research included:

- Visa issues precluded 116,000 international participants from attending US exhibitions. This includes 78,400 international attendees and 37,900 international exhibitors who were hindered from participating.
- With no visa barriers in place, the U.S. economy would realize increases in business sales tallying \$2.4 billion (\$2.6 billion including sales to foreign exhibitors). These gains include \$1.5 billion in business-to-business trade, \$540 million in registration fees and exhibition space spending, and a \$295 million boost to visitor spending.

- The new \$2.4 billion in sales would be able to sustain over 17,500 jobs directly, 43,000 jobs overall, and generate three-quarters of a billion dollars in state and federal taxes.

The International Association of Exhibitions and Events (IAEE) has taken a firm stand on the issue. IAEE President, Steven Hacker, addressed the National Press Club in Washington, DC last May to express “concerns about the barriers buyers and sellers around the world encounter due to federal visa issuance policies which negate progress in achieving President Obama’s National Export Initiative goal of doubling the value of U.S. exports by 2015.”

The current visa program only goes so far in reducing the congestion in consular offices around the world. Under the **Visa Waiver Program**, foreign nationals from 36 countries may travel to the U.S. for tourism or business and stay up to 90 days without having to obtain a visa. Unfortunately, the Visa Waiver Program doesn’t cover attendees and exhibitors from several of the emerging countries such as Russia, India, Brazil and China.

Recent initiatives discussed by President Obama could signal a change in the visa situation for international trade show visitors. In a recent address on jobs and tourism in

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Orlando, Florida, the President announced several changes in the existing programs and procedures:

Global Entry Program

The Global Entry Program (GEP) allows expedited clearance for pre-approved, low-risk travelers upon arrival in the United States. “Though intended for frequent international travelers, there is no minimum number of trips necessary to qualify for the program. Participants may enter the United States by using automated kiosks located at select airports,” says the program [website](#).

President Obama announced in a speech on jobs and tourism in January that the GEP program would be expanded. “It’s a great example of how we’re using new technology to maintain national security and boost tourism at the same time. And we’re now going to make it available to almost all international travelers coming to the United States. If they’re willing to submit themselves to the background checks necessary, we can make sure that we’re facilitating their easy travel into the United States,” he explained.

Visa Waiver Program

Although 60% of visitors to the U.S. don’t require a visa, President Obama has directed his administration to expand the list of countries covered by the program, particularly Taiwan. In his remarks, The President recognized the need for the visa waiver program to quickly encompass “countries with rapidly growing economies, huge populations, and emerging middle classes; countries like China and India, and especially important here in Florida, Brazil.”

Visa Processing

President Obama has authorized the State Department to accelerate the ability to process visas in China and Brazil by 40% this year. “We’ve already made incredible progress in this area. We’ve better staffed our embassies and our consulates. We’ve streamlined services with better technology.

Waiting times for a visa are down. But applications keep on going up—they are skyrocketing. People want to come here. And China and Brazil are the two countries which have some of the biggest backlogs,” he said.

JOLT Act

President Obama isn’t the only one working to relieve the backlog on visas and boost international travel to the U.S. A bipartisan group of Senators including Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.), Mike Lee (R-Utah), Amy Klobuchar (D-Minn.), Marco Rubio (R-Fla.), Barbara Mikulski (D-Md.), Roy Blunt (R-Mo.) and Mark Kirk (R-Ill.) have introduced legislation to streamline the visa rules. The Jobs Originated to Launching Travel (JOLT) Act would make a number of important changes to the existing process for obtaining visas:

- The bill asks the State Department to lower visa application fees during off-peak seasons to give travelers the incentive to apply for visas when demand is lower.
- The measure would allow the State Department to charge a fee for expediting some tourist and business travel visas. Under the bill, the State Department would issue a visa within three business days and, with the fee, increase capacity to more quickly process those visas in India, China and Brazil.
- The bill sets standards for visa processing, conducting interviews within 15 days of requesting an appointment and, after one year, lowers the wait time to 10 days.
- The legislation asks that Poland and other nations be allowed to join the Visa Waiver Program.

As the world economy improves, more buyers and exhibitors will want to participate in U.S. shows making the visa issue even more critical. The new initiatives from the Obama Administration and the Senate may represent the first real light at the end of a long dark tunnel for international show organizers.

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[Rogers Worldwide](#)

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