Technology Challenges of International Trade Shows

by Michelle Bruno

Organizing a trade show overseas brings with it a number of challenges. Technology is chief among them. Using systems and platforms designed for use in the US, mixing and matching (local and international) equipment and neglecting to test technology ahead of time are the most common causes of failure.

An easy way to avoid some of the difficulties is to use equipment, software and systems procured locally and backed up by local tech support, but that isn't always possible. The technology infrastructure, particularly in developing countries, can be unreliable. And, maintaining data collection standards from one country to another may not be possible without equipment and solutions that travel from the US to the international show. Would-be organizers have a number of a number of issues to consider.

Registration

Registration platforms can be a major concern for organizers. Eric Rozenberg, president of Swantegy, an international meetings management and design firm, explains that in most regions of the world, registration technology is on par with offerings in the US. That said, something as minor as "getting a printer in Europe to print on badge stock from the US is a challenge," he says.

Another consideration for show organizers is database compatibility. Those intending to export data collected from an overseas trade show to a database (CRM) system in the U.S. have to make sure that the data fields in one system are mapped to the appropriate fields in the other. Naming conventions are part of the problem. For example, attendees in Latin America often have two last names. In Asia, names are written last name first.

Because of privacy laws in some countries, very little data is collected from overseas visitors compared to the mountain of personal information that is extracted from attendees and exhibitors in the US. Establishing data requirements, print-

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ing badges in foreign language characters and implementing data standards are among the registration technology challenges that international organizers have to face.

Wi-Fi

Even in Europe, Eric Rozenberg says, reliable Internet connections and consistent bandwidth in the venues is a challenge. "Some venues are old and have thick walls. If you want Internet access everywhere, it can be very expensive and you have to put that cost into your budget," he says. Planners looking for Wi-Fi availability for outside the trade show can't make assumptions either. "Wi-Fi is available everywhere in Tel Aviv. In Brussels you won't find it anywhere," he adds.
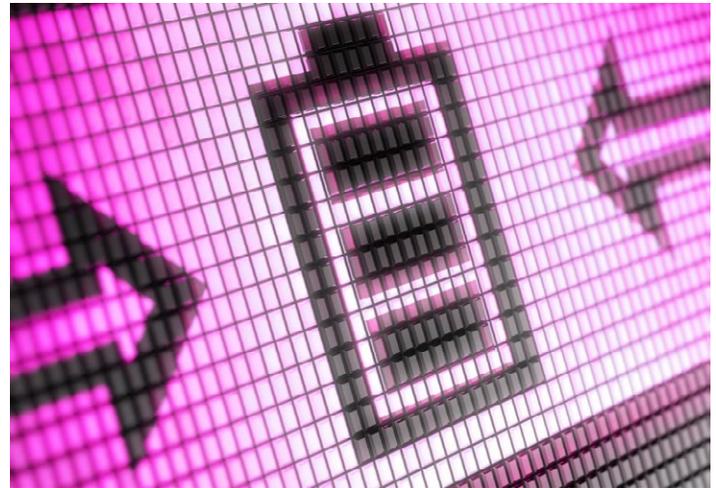
Mobile

The use of mobile apps to help attendees navigate, network, evaluate and consume content during a trade show is becoming commonplace in US shows where the majority of participants—exhibitors and attendees—are from the US. The applications are easy to download and mobile users can access them with ease and at a low cost.

Overseas, the mobile scenario around an international trade show can change considerably. "Data roaming charges are very expensive [for international visitors]," Eric Rozenberg says, explaining that in the absence of Wi-Fi, most mobile users won't pay to download or use the designated show app. In addition, he adds, "depending on the country you are accessing it from, you may not be able to download the app from iTunes because of copyright or licensing issues."

Reliable power

With few exceptions, the availability and reliability of electricity inside the venue is never an issue for a US trade show organizer. The same is not true outside North America. In emerging nations, such as India, power outages in con-

vention centers, hotels and throughout the city are commonplace. Show organizers have to provide for these inevitable occurrences with auxiliary generators and uninterrupted power supply backup systems to protect data and keep exhibitors online.

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Of all of the challenges international trade show organizers face—language barriers, cultural norms, transportation logistics and local infrastructure—technology is among the most complex. Solid research into the requirements and limitations of every destination, working with reputable local companies to provide support when possible and having a realistic backup plan when systems fail can help show producers avoid some of the most common technology pitfalls that come with organizing shows overseas.