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Overcoming the cultural divide

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Written by Sabine Weigand

International exhibit and trade show opportunities are not the luxury business junket they once were; they've become an extension of the daily challenge to build market share worldwide.

Formerly far-flung destinations such as Barcelona and Dubai are now mainstream venues, drawing more attention and more marketing effort than anyone imagined just a few years ago.

The common oversight for many American exhibitors outside the country is not realizing that trade show expectations may be completely different in foreign lands. What works in the United States may not work in China. Anyone can find an exhibit vendor overseas and rent a small booth, which is exactly where the pitfalls begin. The real challenge is to build a marketing presence that melds with cultural differences, navigates logistic entanglements and understands the fundamentally different way that foreign exhibits work.

In Europe, for example, a trade show means just that: they are held to conduct trade. In America, we often focus on product demonstrations and build exhibit booths to deliver information. But the primary focus in Europe is all about projecting an image and closing deals. European shows revolve around prearranged meetings to meet with ready buyers, so hospitality at the booth is more important than the product specialist. And because visitors already have appointments, exhibits are built with a reception desk and waiting lounge backed by high-end kitchen catering that features silverware, dishwashers and a fully stocked bar.

Another key difference is that many U.S. companies build trade show properties to be amortized and re-used for several years. Most companies in the rest of the world do not. They work with exhibit houses that use a large inventory of rental properties to create ever-changing custom exhibits. The design sensibility in one foreign country may use laminates for a more economical facade, whereas rentals in another country might call for high-end hardwood joinery and solid marble. While branding efforts of technologically oriented American companies tend to focus up close-on products, many foreign cultures build a display to emphasize corporate identity in simple striking eloquence.

Construction also differs in the way trade shows are managed overseas. The core structure may include raised flooring to accommodate electrical and plumbing distribution, which the exhibitor's own crew will install. Your hired crew may handle everything from screw guns to unloading crates and driving the forklift. There are none of the union regulations that put carpenter-electrician requests in the way of getting a job done. Show setup is much less stressful when staging is handled by people you've hired to understand your requirements.

The single most important success factor in international exhibiting is the quality of partnerships a company relies on for local expertise. The temptation to single handedly plan long distance work with foreign vendors is a difficult and costly approach. The better strategy is to leverage an exhibit design house locally in the United States, one that understands foreign venues. Their expertise will streamline logistics and reduce extraneous costs, such as value-added tax (VAT) schemes that can otherwise ambush a budget.

The idea is to achieve a turnkey program using a strategic partner who can leverage industry connections to save time and money, reducing the total cost to well below what a client would pay on his own.

It's crucial to work with a partner who understands foreign arenas and has established the cultural bridges and business alliances to carry your branding into new lands. Not every exhibit design house in the United States is positioned or practiced in this role.

For example, reinforcing brand image overseas can be a challenge. If the design house works with an unknown foreign vendor, the local firm could take liberties with the design and not recreate the properties as developed. This is where the partnership and experience of your chosen design house pays off. It will reinforce existing branding and imagery to make sure it's conveyed to foreign partners who deliver. They become advisors and "ministers of foreign affairs," accounting for cultural differences and avoiding the mistakes that arise through local customs or misunderstandings.

One caveat is to realize that international exhibitions take longer to plan than they do here. There are simply more layers of organization involved. Work with a partner who has the expertise in depth to match yours and has a proven network of foreign vendor relations. Then your place in the global market will be a success.

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Sabine Weigand is the international director for Elevation Exhibits (www.elevationexhibits.com), a full-service exhibit design firm based in Shrewsbury, Mass., specializing in custom-design and custom-rental trade show booths.

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