

Exhibiting Abroad: Don't Try to Pretend It's the Same!



8 tips for adapting your U.S. exhibiting strategies to the international stage

By Larry Kulchawik

The biggest mistake that U.S. companies make when taking their U.S. [trade show](#) experiences abroad is assuming that their formula for success in the U.S. will work the same internationally. Marketing tactics and exhibit designs that are effective in one country don't always work in another. Exhibiting abroad requires a *recalculation of thinking* and a different exhibit strategy for both exhibit design and engagement styles. Here are some tips for American exhibitors when taking their brand and message abroad.

1. Don't go it alone. Find an experienced partner from the region, or one who is familiar with the venue, culture, and the event. Work with them to create an exhibit layout that meets the regulations and expectations for the event. Note that exhibit floor spaces abroad are not necessarily available in tidy 10-foot-by-10-foot increments like in the U.S. Don't be surprised by odd shapes and metric measurements. (Communicate inches/centimeters with your partner—it will save time and confusion.) Your partner will be also helpful in understanding how the destination and venue approaches freight and material handling, labor, other show services, and the required pre-payment and taxes. Show service contractors, as we know them in the U.S., are not the same abroad.

2. Carefully consider if your exhibit design works for this international region.

Do you plan on a raised floor or carpet? A raised floor in Europe is not necessarily used to hide electric cords and create a level floor. It is often viewed by the exhibitor as a stage that invites guests to their “kingdom.” Other design questions that should be asked: Are hanging ID signs permitted? Is the lighting above or within the booth? What are the electrical requirements? Bar area and kitchen? Catering or not? Private seating areas or open? Live presentation or one-on-one discussions? If uncertain, go back to point #1 above.

3. Tailor your product or service offering to the needs of the international region in which you’re exhibiting. Does your product or service have the same demand or attraction for this region of the world as it does in the U.S.? What unique value proposition does it offer? Promoting American designer shoes in Italy may be a hard sell.

4. Be sensitive to cultural differences. As an exhibitor working the stand, learn about local topics to discuss (sports, art, attractions, history), as well as topics to avoid (religion and politics). Your product, services, and exhibit design may be great, but how you engage with an international audience can make or break your chances to attract new buyers. *The Culture Map* by Erin Meyer is a good primer for learning what is different about communication and protocol in the countries in which you’re exhibiting. As Meyer says in the book, “Just as fish don’t know they’re in water, people often find it difficult to see and recognize their own culture until they start comparing it with others.”

5. Consider to hire a receptionist from the country in which you are exhibiting. Many European and Asian trade shows will have visitors attending from neighboring countries, so a receptionist who speaks several languages will be extremely useful. They are also skilled at the art of engaging with your visitors to make a good first impression, from the visitors’ point of view. A pre-show briefing of your company’s value offering is usually all that is required of a reception temp since your team will be nearby to provide technical knowledge.

6. Translations are a sign of respect. Take the time to print your business cards in two languages. Although many attendees will speak English, a dual-language card demonstrates your sensitivity and your seriousness about marketing in their country. Along the same lines, you may want to translate the graphics on your exhibit stand as well. This does not apply to your logo or tag line, but will help clarify the messaging about your product or service benefits. Translations should be proofread by a bilingual expert who is familiar with your industry.

7. Not all international shows require a badge for entry, especially at auto, boat, or consumer shows open to the public. Without badges, it’s more difficult to identify potential buyers. A quick evaluation will be necessary. If show badges are not provided for visitors and exhibitors, make your own for your booth staff. At least attendees will know who *you* are.

8. Be aware how to dress for the show. The casual golf shirts with logos worn by exhibitors at many shows in the U.S. might not be appropriate for a show in Europe or Asia, where more formal attire is worn. Ask the show organizer or your exhibit partner for advice here. Your first impression can be a lasting impression.

Lastly, after giving yourself a heavy doze of awareness, be yourself. People appreciate genuineness and will see that you are trying. Your first impressions help, but in the end, the visitor must be convinced that the product and service you are promoting is of value in their region.

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