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Integrated Marketing Communications

Breaking Down Barriers

Unique Solutions for
Common Exhibition
Attendance Barriers

A White Paper

By Barbara A. Myers, CAE
Chief Account Strategist
Frost Miller Group



www.frostmiller.com



Executive Summary

It's standard practice to research and identify the primary factors that drive attendance to an exhibition. Through a variety of methods, this information is ascertained and utilized for a number of purposes including the development of attendee acquisition strategies. While this information is necessary and valuable to that effort, it's not comprehensive on its own. A thoroughly crafted attendee acquisition strategy also incorporates and addresses the issues that are preventing exhibition attendance, or, in other words, creating attendance barriers.

While some attendance barriers are unique to each exhibition, many are universal. Some of the most common attendance barriers include cost, lack of time and fewer new products to view. If attendance barriers specific to an exhibition are unknown, it's highly likely that one or all of these are playing a role in preventing attendance, in some way, for most exhibitions.

Once identified, attendance barriers may seem irreparable. For example, if cost is identified as a barrier, simply reducing registration rates may not be an option. Adding to the challenge, due to organizational policies and/or processes, organizers may have limited authority over significant decisions related to the exhibition that are creating attendance barriers. There may also be misperceptions with accountability in terms of where the responsibility lies for removing an attendance barrier (with the organizer or the prospective attendee). All of these challenges may leave organizers feeling helpless in their ability to remove attendance barriers completely.

The goal, however, is not to succeed at completely removing a barrier (by making registration free for all). The goal is to find solutions that work around the barriers and help prospective attendees overcome them. Adopting this mindset and reviewing examples of innovative attendance barrier solutions can help show organizers successfully create strategies to begin breaking through attendance barriers specific to any exhibition.



Common Exhibition Attendance Barriers

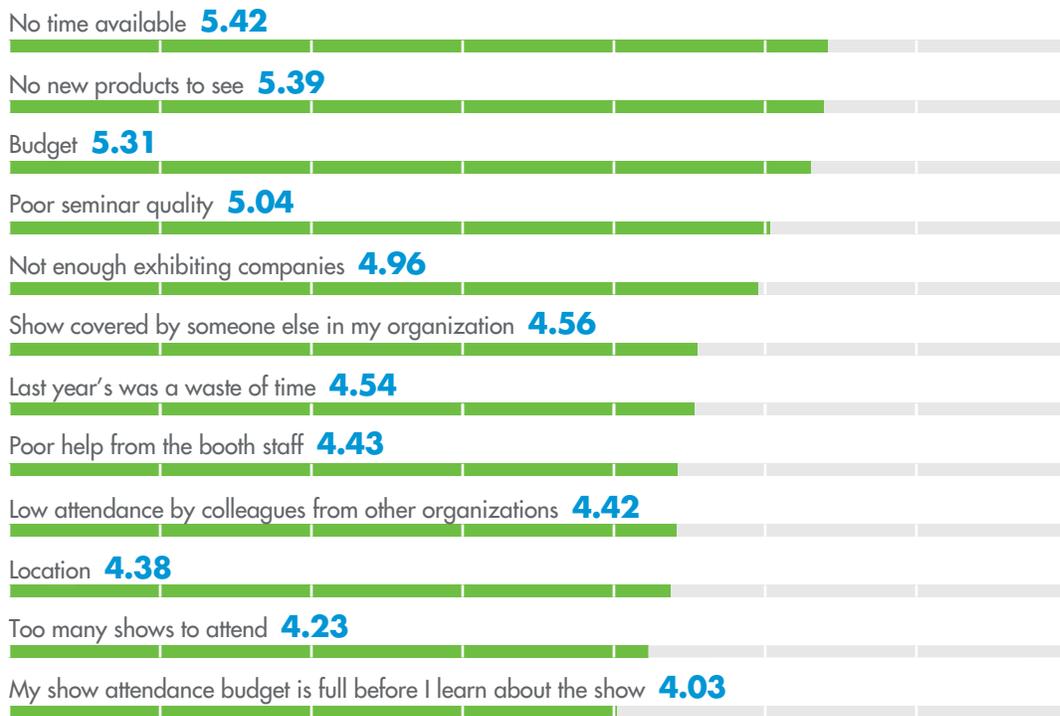
While it's important to research and identify the attendance barriers specific to an exhibition, this may not always be possible. Obtaining an understanding of some of the most common attendance barriers for exhibitions overall is the next best thing. This information is also helpful for developing research tools for determining attendance barriers specific to an exhibition. Organizers can include these common attendance barriers in a survey or poll and ask prospective attendees if any of these factors have played a role in their decision not to attend.

According to a recent study from the Center for Exhibition Industry Research (CEIR), an organization that promotes the image, value and growth of exhibitions through research studies, lack of time, fewer new products to view and limited budget dollars were the top three attendance barriers.

Other common exhibition attendance barriers include timing, awareness, content and duration.

Reasons for Not Attending Show

(mean score on a scale of 1 to 7)



Mean score on scale where seven is strong agreement that factor is important in decision not to attend show and one is strong disagreement with the importance of the factor in the decision not to attend. (Source: Organizational Learning and Exhibition Attendance, Center for Exhibition Industry Research [CEIR])



Many of these barriers might be perceived to be out of an organizer's control and therefore, insurmountable.

For some exhibitions, attendance barriers result from decisions made by outside committees and/or by rigid policies. This is especially common in associations. For example, a policy may dictate the location for an annual exhibition despite consistent feedback that the location is unpopular amongst prospective attendees.

For other exhibitions, attendance barriers may be perceived to be the responsibility of the prospective attendee to address and not the organizer. For example, lack of time. Organizers may question their role in removing that barrier completely.

Overall, organizers are left feeling helpless in their ability to remove attendance barriers completely. However, it's important to note that the goal is not to remove the barrier itself completely as that may not always be possible. The goal is to develop solutions that alleviate the issue as a barrier to attendance for prospective attendees.

Attendance Barrier Solutions

With the knowledge of some of the most common exhibition attendance barriers and the mindset that the goal is to create solutions around those barriers to encourage attendance, it's time to start developing solutions. Below are a number innovative and creative ways to approach some of the most common attendance barriers.

Cost/Budget

Economic downturn or not, cost is always a primary influencer in the decision to attend an exhibition. Organizers should look at cost comprehensively taking into account registration, hotel, travel and other associated costs prospective attendees will have to fund.

When cost is indicated as a primary barrier to attendance, the first and only solution organizers may be inclined to propose is rate reduction, however, this may not always be possible or practical. Additionally, it may not be effectual as the cost barrier could be a value barrier in disguise.

To illustrate this point, TED2013 charges a \$7500 registration rate and is still able to sell out. Clearly, cost is not a factor because the event delivers a high amount of value for the money spent to attend. Organizers should take steps to ensure that exhibitions are perceived as highly valuable to prospective attendees and align registration rates accordingly.

If the barrier is truly the result of a prospective attendee's inability to fund exhibition expenses, the following ideas may help them overcome the cost barrier.

Attendees are not selecting the cheapest events; they are selecting the most valuable events.

JUSTIFICATION TOOL-KITS

If prospective attendees require approval for attending an exhibition with their employer, help them justify the expense. A justification tool-kit provides prospective attendees with a number of resources for making a winning case to attend an exhibition. The tool-kit can be posted online and marketed directly to prospective and past attendees. Items in the tool-kit include:

- **Letter template** – Provide a document that outlines the costs and benefits of attending.
- **ROI list** – Develop a list for prospective attendees that outlines exactly what they will bring back from the exhibition to benefit the organization.
- **PowerPoint template** – With this template attendees can create a presentation to give to their colleagues and organization to share their experience and what they took away from exhibition.
- **Session materials** – Give attendees access to handouts and session materials online and encourage them to share the information with colleagues.
- **Travel tip list** – Create a travel tip list which contains ideas on how to travel economically. Include the official exhibition airline (if applicable), deadlines for special exhibition housing rates, discounted tickets or coupons for dining, etc.
- **Reduced registration options** – If the exhibition offers reduced registration for volunteers, students, young professionals or other groups, scholarship, or other types of reduced registration options, be sure to include all of this information in one area for prospective attendees to research.

ATTENDEE FUNDRAISERS

When the recession impacted training and travel budgets for public-safety agencies, the Association of Public-Safety Communications Officials (APCO) – International got creative and developed a way to help prospective attendees raise funds to purchase conference registrations. A packet was created that provided tools and tips for launching a local fundraiser and included items such as:

- **Letterhead** – To send invitations about fundraising events, or to create “friends and family” letters to gather donations, etc.
- **Email Template** – To use in the same way as the letterhead to get the word out.
- **Copy Points** – Facts and information about the conference that can be used to promote the fundraiser, create awareness about the show internally and/or within the local community, or to be shared on social media.
- **Fundraising Ideas** – Ways to raise funds to send people to the conference.

APCO International’s attendee fundraising packet was posted online and promoted to prospective attendees as a contest titled “Get Your Agency to Houston” (the title was based on the location of the exhibition each year). Public safety agencies utilized the resources in the packet to set up events locally to generate revenue to purchase registrations and fund travel expenses. Agencies that were interested in participating in the contest submitted videos and pictures documenting the fundraisers they held which included bake sales, BBQs and even duck races! The videos were reviewed by staff and the agencies that exhibited the most collaboration, creativity and team spirit with their fundraising efforts won special prizes. The top agency was recognized onsite during an awards ceremony in front of all of their peers.



TRAVEL COSTS

Registration rates are just one of the costs attendees have to consider. It may not be that registration rates are the issue, it could be that the cost to travel to the exhibition is simply too much for some. It's a good exercise for organizers to calculate the average cost to travel to an exhibition based on airfare, dining and exhibition hotel rates. This figure can then be evaluated to see if any adjustments need to be made to better match attendees' budgets. Some other things to consider are:

- **Hotel rates** – Make sure the exhibition hotel rates that are offered are the best available. Organizers negotiating rates and contracts on their own may benefit from the purchasing power and negotiating leverage of a third party housing provider.
- **Airfare** – Consider contracting with an official airline to provide attendees an option for discounted rates on airfare.
- **Car rental** – Car rental companies also partner with exhibitions to create special discount programs for attendees. For those attendees that wish to have a car during the exhibition, this is a great way to help them save.
- **Local discounts** – Work with the local convention and visitors bureau (CVB) to secure discounted tickets or coupons for local attractions, restaurants and entertainment.

Make sure that all of the efforts to help with reducing travel costs are promoted effectively. Often this information is buried online so prospective attendees are just not aware these options are available.

ATTENDEE REWARD PROGRAM

Instead of slashing prices to encourage registration, reward the individuals that choose to attend for the first time or the fortieth time. Create a tiered longevity program recognizing new attendees as well as old with special rewards—this recognizes their participation and engages them in event activities. An example of a rewards program may look like the following:

Rewards	First Time Returning Attendee (Year 2)	3–5 Years	5–10 Years
Recognition ribbon	■	■	■
Complimentary wifi access	■	■	■
Complimentary exhibit hall luncheon ticket		■	■
Complimentary drink ticket			■
VIP seating			■
VIP registration process			

It is important to create rewards that will resonate with an exhibition's target audience and that will add value to their experience.



SCHOLARSHIPS

Creating a scholarship program for an exhibition has a number of benefits in addition to attracting new attendees. These programs can also be excellent sponsorship opportunities and also demonstrate an exhibition's philanthropic commitment. Here are a few ways to execute a successful scholarship program:

- **Sponsorship** – Offer scholarship opportunities as a sponsorship. Companies can sponsor an individual to attend the conference which can include covering registration costs only or all costs to attend including travel.
- **Essay writing contest** – Young professionals, students, or other segment can be asked to write an essay on a subject relevant to the exhibition. Winners can receive prizes such as coverage of all costs (including travel) to attend the exhibition. Funds to cover these expenses can be obtained through a sponsorship or industry foundation. Winners can also be recognized onsite, along with the sponsor to further enhance the prestige of the contest and experience for the winner and sponsor.

DISCOUNTS

Once the value question of an exhibition is addressed, then discounting rates can be discussed. It's important to note that discounts should be applied strategically in order to encourage registration for a particular segment. Below are some registration discount ideas that have proved successful for some exhibitions:

- **Student/Young Professional discount** – Implement a discount program for students, or young professionals. Encouraging them to attend early in their careers establishes a positive relationship with them and provides their information to the organizer for future marketing.
- **First time attendee discount** – Give first time attendees a free registration! Earn their loyalty from their first experience. This also demonstrates confidence in the value of the exhibition.
- **Group discounts** – Sometimes an organization can only afford to send one or two people. Encourage more participation by discounting or offering complimentary registrations for groups attending from the same organization.
- **Volunteer program** – Especially for associations, if attendees are willing to donate some of their time as an event volunteer, reward them with a complimentary day pass, or discounted registration. This is an excellent program to promote locally where individuals can easily drive in to volunteer.



Lack of Time

Now, more than ever, attendees are struggling to maintain an appropriate work-life balance and simply can't afford extended time out of the office or away from personal responsibilities. While cost can be a value barrier in disguise, so can lack of time. If an exhibition was perceived to be a "can't miss" opportunity, prospective attendees would make it a priority to attend.

Lack of time is also one of those barriers that organizers may feel is up to the prospective attendee to address on their own. Again, the goal is not to remove the barrier completely, but rather to help attendees get around it. Below are some ways to help attendees overcome the lack of time barrier.

FAMILY-FRIENDLY EXHIBITIONS

Fact: the average American parent spends the majority of his or her time at work. According to the "2011 American Time Use Survey" conducted by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, employed adults spent an average of 7.6 hours a day working. Adults living in households with children under the age of six spent an average of just two hours per day providing primary childcare. Those with children between the ages of six and 17 spent only an average of 47 minutes per day providing primary care.

With parents already strapped for time it's hard for them to justify the additional time away attending an exhibition. For some it's just not logistically feasible and for others, they just cannot risk the amount of work they would come home to after being away from the office for a few days. Smart organizers, however, are turning the lack of time barrier into an opportunity.

"We are definitely seeing more requests and have more conversations these days about adding more family components to our clients' incentive and meeting programs," says Megan Barry, lead travel buyer for Maritz Travel. "Allowing people to bring their families is helping them drive attendance and achieve their business objectives and sales goals at the same time." (Source: *The Rise of the Family Friendly Meeting, Successful Meeting, 2012*)

No Time for Attending

Working Adults with Children Under 6



2 hours per day providing primary childcare.

Working Adults with Children 6 to 17



47 minutes per day providing primary childcare.



Here are some ideas to help make an exhibition more family friendly:

- **Pre/post activities** – Negotiate hotel rates and discounted tickets or activities to encourage stays before and after the exhibition. With the current economic conditions, families can save by combining personal and business travel. Attendees can earn continuing education credits while spending a couple of days vacationing with the family before or after the exhibition.
- **Child care services** – Providing child care will allow parents who otherwise would not be able to travel, the option to attend the exhibition.
- **Locations** – Choose locations for your exhibition that offer a variety of family friendly activities and infrastructure.
- **Planned Family Programs** – Negotiate group tours or activities for spouses while attendees work. Find activities that are appealing to all generations as increasingly, grandparents are also accompanying attendees to exhibitions to provide child care for attendees' children.
- **Timing** – Is the target audience going to have issues with attending exhibitions that fall over the weekend, or, are they in an industry where that would be preferable? Make sure that the timing of the exhibition matches the preferences and availability of the attendees. Simply having the exhibition over the weekend may be preventing a large contingency from attending.

CONDENSED FORMAT

Exhibitions are being designed to look more like short sprints instead of ultra-marathons. Recent statistics show that the average length of stay for an attendee at an exhibition is only 2.4 days (Source: "How Much Time Attendees Spend at Exhibitions, Center for Exhibition Industry Research, CEIR 2012). Prospective attendees may be willing to attend an exhibition for a few days, but, may not be able to commit a full week of their time. Help them by creating a conference schedule that will allow them to accomplish their objectives in a time-frame that accommodates their schedules. Below are some things to look at:

- **Sunsetting events** – Is that banquet that's been around for the last 100 years really serving it's purpose still? Evaluate social events to determine if it's time for them to retire, or to be reinvented in a way that is valuable for prospective attendees.
- **Consolidating business activities** – There may be exhibition business or meetings that currently take place over a number of events. Redesign event programs to see if activities can be consolidated into one event.
- **Trimming the fat on trade show hours** – Recent statistics also show that the average time spent viewing exhibitions is 8.7 hours (Source: "How Much Time Attendees Spend at Exhibitions, Center for Exhibition Industry Research, CEIR 2012). Research your trade show hours to determine the times with the lowest attendance and remove those hours.



TECHNOLOGY

Implement technologies that help attendees make the most of their time. Utilized correctly, technology has the ability to enhance exhibitions as opposed to diminishing their value.

- **Digital signage and show mapping** – These can easily help attendees plan their time and navigate the exhibition ahead of time so business can get done quickly and efficiently.
- **Mobile apps** – For attendance promotion, they are a great way to engage prospective attendees before the event. There are many fun and innovative ways mobile apps can be utilized including polling, games, social media management and as a communications vehicle for important event updates.
- **Virtual Conferences** – There are a number of platforms available to stream all, or parts of the exhibition for a discounted registration fee for potential attendees that otherwise would not be able to attend.
- **Customization** – Customize the experience for specific segments of the audience so people know exactly what track or education sessions are for them. For example, this can be done by organizing and identifying educational tracks by industry level (beginning, intermediate, or advanced) and reserving one day of sessions for each group.

Fewer New Products to See

NEW PRODUCT SHOWCASE

Encourage exhibitors to showcase products or services that are new to market as part of a new product showcase. This is an area where attendees can gather to see exactly what new products have arrived. In addition to onsite, prospective attendees can visit the new product showcase listing online to see which companies and products will be featured at the exhibition. Exhibitors pay a fee to be listed, so it's also a revenue generator. This is a program to get creative with as well:

- **Sponsorship** – Have companies that are participating sponsor a reception in the new product showcase booth for first time attendees only. This can be a promotion to encourage those prospective attendees on the fence to register.
- **Highlight new products** – In pre-show emails and other attendee marketing and communications vehicles. Share one new product that will be featured at the exhibition each month on social media outlets.
- **On-site new product live build** – Have companies that participated in the showcase create live demonstrations of their new products on the trade show floor, or work together to create a “model for the future” by integrating products with other exhibitors. Competitions can be set up for different groups. For additional revenue generation, this activity can be offered as a sponsorship to interested companies. This is also an excellent traffic builder in that attendees are excited to experience the live demonstrations.



Fun Ideas

WEATHER PERMITTING

Sometimes the exhibition's location or an undesirable climate (southern locations in the summer or northern locations in the winter). can prevent individuals from attending an exhibition. If it's a barrier that is unable to be changed, then work on changing the perception about the location.

- **Diversion** – On the exhibition website and in the marketing materials, thank attendees for “braving the elements” along with their peers to obtain the best education for the industry and focus on what the primary benefits of the exhibition are taking some “heat” off of the destination choice.
- **Humor** – If weather/climate are an issue, turn any perceived attendee discomfort into sources of humor and camaraderie amongst attendees. Help alleviate attendees' suffering and provide some levity to the situation by including coolie towels in attendee bags for warmer destinations and hand warmers as a giveaway for colder gatherings.

CONTENT DEMOCRACY

If the educational component of the exhibition is consistently receiving failing grades, consider letting prospective attendees weigh in on the content. This can be implemented by having attendees vote on several keynote speakers the exhibition is considering, the educational tracks or on educational session times, formats, etc.

Allowing prospective attendees to have a voice in the development of the educational portion is a great way to engage prospective attendees before the event, build some pre-show buzz and increase educational satisfaction ratings.

THE MORE THE MERRIER

Invite strategic partners to conduct a session, track or co-locate their event with the exhibition.

EXHIBITION MARKETING THROUGH COMPONENTS

Offer to send promotional materials about the conference to any chapter, regional or component events, or to attendees that are willing to promote the event through local organizations and events.

WORK WITH THE LOCAL CONVENTION AND VISITORS BUREAU (CVB)

There are a number of support services that CVBs are willing to provide and/or negotiate that can assist with promoting attendance including:

- **Marketing the event locally** – This can help combat the “awareness barrier” in that they may have contacts or lists of prospective attendees that may not be accessible to the organizer.
- **Assist with cost reduction** – So that organizers can pass along savings to attendees such as discounted shuttle service, facilities or marketing.



Implementation

One Step at a Time

With attendance barriers identified and prioritized, it's time to start implementing new ideas to help prospective attendees overcome them. It's important to start small and build upon successes over time as just one new solution may require a number of additional resources to manage. Alleviating attendance barriers takes time and strategies and solutions should be considered long-term. For example, if cost is identified as a primary attendance barrier and an attendee fundraising promotion is established, it's important to track the number of individuals that registered as a result of that effort so it can be measured. If 100 new attendees indicated that they attended because their organization secured funds through a local fundraising program, it's a good idea to continue to evolve that program while maybe adding a new strategy the following year as well.

Over-communicate

Half the battle from a marketing perspective is communicating to both attendees and prospects that their feedback is being taken seriously, their problems are being addressed and refinements to the exhibition are being made in order to provide the highest value for their registration. Promoting what an exhibition is doing as a result of attendee feedback gives an exhibition an edge over the competition by making attendees feel their feedback and ideas are being heard and valued.

When an attendance barrier tactic is implemented, make sure that it is being communicated effectively. This includes being highlighted on all print, digital, advertising and social media campaigns. One way to do this is by branding the attendance barrier tactic as a "You talked, we listened" campaign that highlights changes to the exhibition that were made as a result of direct attendee feedback.

Evaluate

At the end of the exhibition, take the time to evaluate the effectiveness of the attendance barrier tactics that were implemented. One way to do this is by capturing registration methods via a source code or other tracking mechanism that identifies and tracks attendees that register through a specific promotion. If that is not applicable or feasible, be sure to include a question that asks respondents if it was their first time attending. If so, create a questionnaire tailored to learn what influenced their decision to attend. Include the attendance barrier tactics implemented to learn if any were a factor in their decision making process.

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About Frost Miller Group

Founded in 1992, Bethesda, MD-based integrated marketing communications agency Frost Miller Group provides strategy, branding, graphic design, copywriting, digital marketing and web development, social media, public relations, and media planning to its regional, national and international clients. Among its clients are National Mining Association, Association for Public Safety Communications Officials, Potomac Valley Brick's BrickStainable Design Competition, National Venture Capital Association and Naylor/CMG. Frost Miller Group is listed on the Washington Business Journal's List of the region's Top Advertising Agencies.

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