10 Strategies for Exhibitor Retention in the New Economic Landscape

A White Paper
By Barbara A. Myers, CAE
Chief Account Strategist
Frost Miller Group
Executive Summary

While the economy overall is still struggling to maintain a pulse, the exhibition industry has been reporting growth for nine consecutive quarters according to recent statistics. These trends are providing organizers with more confidence that the industry will continue to see consistent growth over the next few years. With the change in the economic landscape for exhibitions from downturn to recovery, the timing is ideal for organizers to consider implementing or updating existing exhibitor retention strategies aligned with exhibitors’ evolving needs.

Exhibitor retention strategies developed to counter the effects of a declining economy will not be as effective as the economy starts regaining momentum. Organizers should strive to get ahead of the curve by implementing strategies and tactics designed to promote growth as opposed to tactics designed for survival. This white paper presents 10 exhibitor retention strategies designed for the new economic landscape focused on education, marketing and communications, efficient operations and technology.
**The Opportunity**

For years, exhibitor retention strategies have focused on combating the effects of a downward spiraling economy. Organizers scrambled to find ways to convince exhibitors to keep coming back despite sharp declines in attendance and diminishing resources for exhibitors in terms of budgets and staffing. It was during this time that the phrase “flat is the new up” was coined suggesting that successful exhibitions were those that were simply able to maintain attendance and net square footage numbers during the recession as opposed to experiencing any decreases.

However, recent statistics indicate that the exhibition industry has reached a turning point. Therefore, the same tactics designed to retain exhibitors during an economic decline are not going to be successful during an economic recovery and into the future. Organizers need to start altering their mindset to prepare for an economic recovery and develop new strategies and tactics focused on growth as opposed to survival.

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, exhibitions have been experiencing growth for nine consecutive quarters and this trend is expected to continue over the next few years.

**CEIR Index for the Overall Exhibition Industry**

![CEIR Index for the Overall Exhibition Industry](image_url)

(Source: Center for Exhibition Industry Research [CEIR])
Understanding Exhibitor Motivations

In order to start developing exhibitor retention strategies aligned with the new economic landscape, the primary motivators for exhibiting at an exhibition should be identified. It’s also beneficial to identify what influences an exhibitor’s decision to upgrade their booth size, keep it the same or decrease it. One of the most common reasons a company chooses to increase booth size is for business growth reasons.

If organizers demonstrate that they are committed to assisting exhibitors with their business growth and other objectives, it’s likely that exhibitors will respond to their efforts by returning to the exhibition each year and even increasing their presence.

**Reasons for Increasing Booth Size**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Business growth reasons</td>
<td>28.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business is growing/expected to grow</td>
<td>24.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Space need reasons</td>
<td>20.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have more products to display</td>
<td>9.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We are adding more products/services</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More personnel/customers in space</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need more space</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Branding efforts</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To maintain/increase out exposure/viability</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Reasons for Same Booth Size

- Satisfied with current space **32.5%**
- Finance reasons **10.6%**
- Cost/budget constraints **9.5%**

### Reasons for Decreasing Booth Size

- Finance reasons **59.2%**
- Cost/budget constraints **44.4%**
- Decreased traffic/attendance at exhibitions **9.4%**
- Cost to exhibit is high **7.9%**
- Poor return/value on investment **5.5%**
- Exhibit space is expensive **4.9%**
- Recession/bad economy **3.0%**
Exhibitor Pain Points

In addition to having an understanding of what motivates an exhibitor’s presence at an exhibition, it’s also critical to have an understanding of their pain points. Organizers can easily determine what some of the primary exhibitor pain points are through surveys, polls or focus groups. Associations can seek feedback from exhibitor advisory boards or work in tandem with these groups to solicit feedback on the subject and work to correct for the future.

While it’s important to understand exhibitor concerns unique to an exhibition, there are some common sources of frustration for exhibitors across the board.

In 2008, the Maya Design and Expo Group released a white paper entitled, “The Invisible Exhibitor: What Your Exhibitors Aren’t Telling You (and Why That Matters for the Future of Your Show)” which investigated why some shows survive over the long term and why some fail. It also researched exhibitors perceptions of and experiences at exhibitions. This study discovered some common sources of frustration shared by a majority of the exhibitors interviewed. Their broad findings for exhibitor pain points included:

- **Anxiety** – Exhibitors felt anxious about all of the details they have to manage.
- **Cost** – Exhibitors felt helpless and confused with all of the expenses related to exhibiting.
- **Busyness** – Exhibitors had to manage a myriad of details for multiple shows and the responsibility was one of many duties on their plates.
- **Confusion** – Exhibitors expressed that they just did not understand all of the information they were given and felt they were on their own to figure it all out.

The report also discussed more narrow findings which revealed exhibitors frustrations with other aspects of the exhibiting experience including:

- Lodging
- Priority points
- Forms (exhibitor service forms)
- Crates and shipping
- Labor
- Services
- Positioning on show floor
- Information handling
Busyness Factor for an Exhibitor

What these findings tell us, other than that exhibiting seems to be one of life’s most unpleasant experiences, is that there is much room for improvement for show organizers and the industry to make exhibiting a worthwhile experience. Strategies for the new economic landscape, designed for growth, include abandoning the mindset that an exhibitor’s success is their own responsibility. Exhibitors are feeling that organizers are simply in it to cash in on their participation and then they are left to fend for themselves. Successful exhibitions will differentiate themselves from their competitors by taking steps to demonstrate their willingness to invest in their exhibitors’ success.
Exhibitor Retention Tactics

Moving into the future, exhibitor pain points need to continue to be addressed in more innovative ways. An exhibitor that consistently has a negative experience at an exhibition will certainly question their ROI. The differentiating factor between successful exhibitions and failing ones in the new economic landscape will still be the ability to prove strong ROI.

According to the IMEX Power of 10 Study, a study exploring the future of the global meetings industry over the next decade, **over 90% of respondents strongly agreed** that in order to reduce vulnerability to economic cycles the industry must demonstrate tangible return on investment for event owners, delegates, sponsors, exhibitors and other key stakeholders.

Below are ten fresh exhibitor retention strategies to get started.

### 1. EDUCATION

The more knowledgeable an exhibitor is about the exhibition, the greater their chances of success. The amount of details and information to manage and process for one exhibition can be overwhelming for anyone. Organizers can demonstrate their willingness to help exhibitors succeed by educating them. Examples on how to do this include:

- Exhibitor education webinars (hosted by larger exhibitors and show staff)
- Goal setting and measurement templates for exhibitors
- Tips for saving money and optimizing activities
- Providing a post-exhibition lead follow up plan
- **Explanation of cost factors especially for areas that are the source of most confusion such as drayage:**
  - **Show organizers should know what exhibitors are spending on drayage. Ask for usage reports to include all of the drayage rate categories. There are usually more than 17 categories, for example: Warehouse ST/ST; Warehouse ST/OT; Warehouse OT/OT; Warehouse Special Handling ST/ST)
  - Once organizers understand what exhibitors are spending, they can negotiate different rate structures with their contractors, such as: flat net rate (no surcharges); pay time & material and incorporate in space rates, per trip rates, etc. Evaluate and work with the contractor to come up with simpler, lower rates.
  - **Show organizers also should understand how the lower rates impact what they are paying for their show management decorating costs. There are consultants who can help show organizers with this type of analysis.
2. IMPROVE AND INCREASE COMMUNICATIONS

The care and handling of exhibitors does not end when they sign their agreement. This is when the exhibitors' perception of their overall experience and ROI begins to take shape. Often times, exhibitors receive a number of communications promoting the exhibition and once they sign up, the communication ends.

It’s more important now than ever to find ways to maintain engagement pre- and post-exhibition. This fact was also pointed out in the IMEX Power of 10 study where 62% of respondents agreed that a key strategic challenge for associations and commercial event owners over the next decade is to turn their events into platforms for year round engagement and revenue generation.

Organizers can initiate this effort by improving, customizing and increasing communications with exhibitors. Some ideas to get started include:

• Creating a monthly newsletter which includes important deadlines, featured sponsorships or advertising opportunities as well as other educational information on exhibiting best practices.

• During the exhibition have a senior level staff member or association officer visit with exhibitors in their booth to check in on their experience and to thank them directly for their support. If the exhibitor is having a positive experience, it’s an opportunity to collect a testimonial and take a quick photo. If the experience is not going so well, a personal visit will ensure that the organizer is aware of the issue and can address it immediately rather than remaining unaware and losing the exhibitor the next year as a result.

3. SOCIAL MEDIA

Exhibition managers are increasingly embracing social media and finding much success. It is a great way to engage with exhibitors on a year round basis. Online groups and forums can be established where interaction can take place amongst the exhibitors and with the organizer. The top reason exhibition organizers identified implementing social media tactics in their marketing strategies was to extend the reach of their marketing efforts (Source: Digital + Marketing Insights 2010: Improving Exhibition Marketing Performance Through Better Digital Integration, Center for Exhibition Industry Research (CEIR), 2010).

• One case study of an exhibition that embraced social media for the first time and experienced great success was MINExpo. The National Mining Association (NMA) felt confident they were reaching domestic attendees, but wanted to enhance their international reach. While still effective, international direct mail can be costly and slow, so a social media campaign was launched on Facebook and Twitter that reached constituents in Russia, Australia, Brazil and other mining countries. It enabled MINExpo to engage in a regular dialogue with attendees and exhibitors, rather than just push out one or two direct mail pieces. The pages launched in January 2012, and in the nine months leading up to the show, gained more than 1,000 followers, built up excitement and buzz around the event and most importantly for NMA’s needs, pushed the messages to people in more than two dozen countries. They were also a key tool during the show for sharing show news and reminders as well as adding to the excitement with photos and videos.
• Digestive Disease Week (DDW) Social Media Brochure – Digestive Disease Week® (DDW®) represents four medical societies that organize an event with 15,000 attendees and 2,000—3,000 exhibitors. In an effort to help attendees and exhibitors adopt social media, DDW created a new social media brochure that was distributed onsite. The purpose of the brochure was to help educate attendees and exhibitors about all of the various social media platforms that DDW was present on and how it would benefit and enhance their experience if they participated as well.

4. EXHIBITOR RENEWAL CAMPAIGN

Associations know it’s easier and less expensive to retain members than acquire new ones. Show organizers can learn a thing or two about retention from their association membership colleagues. Many mistakenly approach exhibitor marketing with a “one size fits all” mentality for both new and existing exhibitors. Exhibitor marketing plans include a number of campaigns and tactics without any thought to audience segmentation based on exhibiting status (current or new). As a result, exhibit sales may remain flat or even begin to decline.

The primary way to retain exhibitors is to clearly demonstrate the value of exhibiting on a daily basis. Finding the value for each segment of the exhibit base, or, better yet, each individual exhibitor, will lead to successful renewal efforts. In addition, here are a few sample tactics to consider:

• Personalized attention: Understand that an exhibitor retention plan should exist on its own. Discussions, ideas, research, measurement and evaluation should all focus specifically on the current exhibitor base each year.

• Research: Survey existing exhibitors to find out what their specific pain points are so they can be addressed directly. This information is key to developing tactics that are on target and will get results.

• Set goals and objectives: Plans are a map for getting to an end goal. Establish clear goals and objectives for exhibitor retention efforts. A primary goal is establishing a retention percentage that is both challenging and realistic based on the industry and resources.

• Identify target audiences: Specific campaigns can be developed for segments of the exhibit base with customized messaging, tactics and promotions just as would be done for different types of attendees. Examples of ways to segment include:
  • First-time exhibitors
  • Long-term exhibitors
  • Industry type
• **Tactics:** With data, goals and target audiences identified, it’s time to get creative. Develop tactics for the plan tailored to specific audiences based on their feedback and industry research utilizing the complete realm of print, advertising and digital campaigns. Example tactics include:

  - Targeted exhibitor renewal email campaign. A three-part email campaign—one email sent each week to remind people of exhibiting discount deadlines and to extol the many benefits of exhibiting. The messages in the emails will vary depending on the target audience.
  
  - Exhibitor renewal direct mail. A direct mail to exhibitors who do not sign up after the email attempt. The messaging would be more urgent and hard selling.
  
  - Exhibitor renewal telemarketing campaign. A phone campaign calling exhibitors who did not sign up following the email and direct mail campaigns to inquire if they have questions or need additional information about the 20XX exhibition.
  
  - Personal phone call from a senior level organizational leader to thank them for exhibiting and to encourage them to exhibit again next year (separate initiative from renewal telemarketing campaign).
  
  - Special advertisements listing promotions specific to returning exhibitors should be featured in relevant publications.
  
  - A “welcome back” promotional campaign for first time exhibitors from the prior year.

• **Timeline:** Once you have identified your tactics, map out when they will be rolled out.

• **Budget:** Develop a realistic budget for the overall effort.

• **Implementation and evaluation:** Conduct regular meetings to evaluate the effectiveness of the plan and to determine if any tweaks in strategy are necessary. When the plan is complete, be sure to take the time to review the tactics implemented to determine their effectiveness.

5. **THE PARETO PRINCIPLE**

According to the Pareto principle, or 80-20 rule, 80% of the effects come from 20% of the causes. When applied to exhibitions, it’s an economical equation for the distribution of exhibitor revenue suggesting that 80% of all exhibitor revenue comes from 20% of the exhibitors. While this principle may not be exact for all exhibitions, most will have a group of key exhibitors that constitute a significant portion of an exhibition’s overall revenue. These are the exhibitors that need to be identified and converted into strategic partners with the host organization as opposed to just customers. If relationships with key exhibitors are tenuous, a sudden decision to leave the exhibition or even decrease their presence could have disastrous ramifications to exhibition finances.

In order to cultivate these relationships a few steps can be taken:

• Conduct annual (or more frequent) face-to-face meeting with key exhibitors to discuss their long-term sales and marketing objectives and how the exhibition can continue to support their efforts.

• Create multi-year contracts

• Create an advisory group comprised of key exhibitors

• Create social media groups for key exhibitors to join where show organizers can engage on a year-round basis and solicit feedback on exhibition planning activities.
6. **Simplify Processes**

Exhibitors are busy. Don’t lose them because they simply cannot manage all of the details. Evaluate administrative processes to determine if there is any room to streamline including:

- One point of contact at show site for ordering services
- Retiring priority points
- Aiming for transparency
- Revising processes to focus on the individual managing the exhibit and not the show organizer

7. **On-Site Traffic Promotion**

Take responsibility for the exhibitors’ success by driving traffic to the exhibit floor. There are a number of ways to accomplish this—here are just a few:

- Exclusive exhibit hall hours
- Special presentations on the show floor
- Meal functions on the show floor
- Gamification – drawings and other special events on the show floor
- Event design – meetings and events located near or around the exhibit hall
- Host registration inside the exhibit hall

8. **Document the Experience**

Sometimes exhibitors are just too busy to capture and evaluate everything they did at an exhibition. Help them understand exactly what they received for their investment by creating a post-exhibition portfolio for larger, smaller or every exhibitor if feasible. The portfolio can includes items such as:

- Pictures of their booth (preferably with attendees in it)
- Pictures of sponsorship signage
- Pictures of booth staff with a visiting representative from the host organization
- Exhibition performance data (number of attendees, etc.)
- Attendee lists
- Letters of thanks from executives or board members
- Shameless promotion of next year’s exhibition with a contract if they have not yet signed up
- Any other items that would reflect all of the positive aspects of their experience
9. PROMOTIONS/REWARDS/RECOGNITION PROGRAM FOR RETURNING EXHIBITORS

Create a recognition program rewarding exhibitors for their loyalty outside of just priority points, or replace priority points completely with a new program that rewards loyalty by providing exhibitors with perks that will positively impact their ROI.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rewards</th>
<th>Returning Exhibitor (Year 2)</th>
<th>3–5 years</th>
<th>5–10 years</th>
<th>10–20 years</th>
<th>20+ years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ribbon</td>
<td>■</td>
<td>■</td>
<td>■</td>
<td>■</td>
<td>■</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognition at Special General Session</td>
<td>■</td>
<td>■</td>
<td>■</td>
<td>■</td>
<td>■</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complimentary Wifi</td>
<td>■</td>
<td>■</td>
<td>■</td>
<td>■</td>
<td>■</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complimentary Lodging (1 staff member)</td>
<td>■</td>
<td>■</td>
<td>■</td>
<td>■</td>
<td>■</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complimentary Meeting Room Space</td>
<td>■</td>
<td>■</td>
<td>■</td>
<td>■</td>
<td>■</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complimentary Lodging (1 addition staff member – 2 ROOMS TOTAL)</td>
<td>■</td>
<td>■</td>
<td>■</td>
<td>■</td>
<td>■</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIP Seating at Special Events</td>
<td>■</td>
<td>■</td>
<td>■</td>
<td>■</td>
<td>■</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complimentary Lodging for 2 ADDITIONAL STAFF members (total 3 rooms) and VIP Suite Executive Upgrade</td>
<td>■</td>
<td>■</td>
<td>■</td>
<td>■</td>
<td>■</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

10. FACILITATE CONNECTIONS

Exhibitors are there to make connections and generate business. Help them out by facilitating connections with their target audiences.

- Attendee matching and appointment setting
- Smaller/component companies with larger/parent brands

The economic outlook is positive for exhibitions. With the right mindset, information and tactics, organizers can begin to start focusing on growing their exhibitions instead of just sustaining them. Exhibitor retention tactics for the new economic landscape should focus on prolonged engagement, demonstrative ROI, education and accountability overall for exhibitors success. With the right mix of these ideas, exhibitions will continue to be one of the most effective marketing platforms in the future.

Special thanks to:

B.J. Enright, President, Tradeshow Logics
Lawson Hockman, Vice President, Association Services, IMN Solutions
References

The Role and Value of Face-To-Face Interaction, Center for Exhibition Industry Research (CEIR), 2012.


The IMEX Power of 10 Study, IMEX, 2012


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.

More information is available at www.frostmiller.com or on Twitter @frostmiller.