

# Guide to Successful Exhibition Planning

As with any organised event which involves schedules and deadlines, the planning and execution of an exhibition takes a lot of coordination and dedication in order for it to be successful. There are various steps that need to be completed in order for the exhibition to run smoothly, the majority of which are based around the exhibition planning team and coordinator. Exhibitions are primarily aimed at sharing something with a wider community, be it art, motor vehicles, music technology or lingerie. It is therefore essential that the aim and vision of the exhibition be clear and precise, in order to reach the target audience with full effect.

Steps in the preliminary planning of an exhibition should include:

- Setting up of an Exhibition Planning Committee.
- Accurate Budget Planning.
- Selection of an appropriate site venue.
- Negotiating agreements and contracts with all the necessary parties.
- Sourcing exhibitors and/or speakers relevant to the theme of the exhibition.
- Planning the program.
- Executing the exhibition plan.

The first and most logical step in exhibition planning is assembling a team of people who have the necessary skills and experience. Optimally these people should all be great team players, who can work responsibly and on their own initiative, whilst also carrying other people's interests at heart. It is good practice to make the size of your planning committee relevant to the scale of your exhibition. Having an understaffed committee can lead to stress and half completed work, while an oversized committee will lead to a lack of organisation and indecisiveness.

Once you have assembled your team, the next step is to appoint an exhibition coordinator. This role requires a great amount of responsibility, as most of the executive decisions will come down to the coordinator's discretion. You will need somebody with good organisational skills, is a good communicator of ideas, has a great eye for detail and can function well under stressful situations. Depending on the size of your exhibition, it might be necessary for the coordinator to appoint administrative staff or a secretary to deal with the extra administrative and clerical tasks.

An exhibition budget should be prepared through a thoughtful process involving the sponsor, planning committee and coordinator. The coordinator should be in full control of the budget, for if payments are approved by someone other than the coordinator, it will be difficult to hold him/her accountable for expenditures. A budget should not be seen as a financial document, but rather as a planning and management control document. It is a listing of all anticipated expenses, funding sources and projected revenue. Part of preparing a conference budget requires compiling a split folio. This is a division of expenses which lists the charges covered by the conference master account and individual guest charges, if there are to be any.

One of the most important aspects in planning an exhibition is choosing a suitable venue. This should be arranged as early in the planning process as possible in order to avoid any last minute nightmares. The more time you give yourself to choose a site, the better your options will be. Your site should be located as centrally as possible with regards to your target audience. It is pointless

having a textiles exhibition in the central business district, just as it is pointless having a technology fair in the countryside. Choosing the appropriate venue also has an influence on the overall theme and furnishings which you might use in your exhibition, so an early decision will make consequent planning more streamlined.

It is generally regarded good practice to enter into a formal contract agreement with the venue. The process of reaching this agreement may take time, but it will ensure that both parties will be protected against any unexpected changes in plan. It would be dreadful to be notified one week before the exhibition that you have been double booked because no formal documents were signed and the venue manager completely forgot about the conversation you had over the specified dates. It is also important to remember that negotiations should be handled professionally, as both parties want to gain maximum benefit from any arrangement.

Setting an appropriate theme for the show is very important, as it will eventually determine what image the public have of the exhibition. Choose one that is in line with the material you are exhibiting. An 'under the sea' experience will not bode well with potential invitees to a car show, but will perhaps draw more attention if used to market an exhibition on new children's toys or a pet show.

Next in the planning process is finding potential exhibitors to take part in your show. Sending out personal invitations is probably the most effective way to go. You can also advertise your intention to hold an exhibition in the early planning months, but this needs to be done amongst the social or industry circles relevant to your kind of exhibition. As an exhibition is primarily about marketing, finding willing participants should not be too much of a problem if the proper methods are used. In addition, in fields such as music or art, where there is an abundance of people jostling to display their works, you might need to do a certain amount of vetting in order to make sure your exhibitors meet the exact criteria for your exhibition.

Ultimately you want to draw as many people to your exhibition as possible, and a sure-fire way of increasing the amount of interest in your show is to offer a diverse range of activities. Offering seminars or interactive workshops is a great marketing technique to involve people who would normally be put off by the prospect of just going to an exhibition to look at stuff. Be sure to source speakers who will be able to deliver dynamic presentations on the relevant topics.

Publicity is of utmost importance in the planning of an exhibition. Use as many channels as are accessible to you. The internet is a very powerful marketing tool, and should be exploited to its maximum. Make sure you have an up to date website which is instantly identifiable with your theme and purpose. Furthermore, make use of show invites and advertisements, promotional gifts, flyers, brochures, visitor and press packs, staff badges, stand backdrops and signage, and internal documents and communications. Ensure that your supporting web pages and email address are listed on every single communication item used for the show. If possible, advertise the exhibition in local magazines and newspapers, as well as radio.

Once you have done all your preparation of advertising, budgeting and sourcing participants, it is time to plan the actual show and execute it. Planning of the show plays an important role, and should be coordinated carefully, because once a schedule is formed, great confusion can result if it is not adhered to. You might plan certain talks or workshops to coincide with specific days of the exhibition, and if these are unclear or mixed up, they might completely lose their desired effect, and end up just being a waste of time and money. Changes are sometimes unavoidable, but make sure that if a change has to be made to the schedule, that it is well publicised. During the exhibition it is

important to make good use of signs; this ensures that visitors and exhibitors never become disorientated with their surroundings. During the exhibition, the coordinator's time is in great demand. Delegation plays a key role in the smooth running of an exhibition, but is worth nothing without a well trained and informed group of staff members.

Once the show is complete, conducting some kind of evaluation will be very valuable in giving you an idea of what can be improved on in future events. The most common type of evaluation is to create a survey form. This can consist of yes/no questions, or wherein the various levels of satisfaction can be indicated, from low to high. It is worth noting that two separate evaluation forms can be set up, one to delve the interests of the exhibitors, and the other that of the visitors. And with that you have completed your exhibition! With the correct planning and dedication it can be an informative and exciting experience for all those concerned, and with the steps set out above you should have no problem achieving this.