

The Defense Systems Trade Show

An Industry Perspective

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This is the third in a series of articles by the author on international defense sales. The first two appeared in the September–October 2014 and March–April 2015 issues of Defense AT&L magazine.

Industry spends significant capital on hundreds of trade shows and exhibitions throughout the United States and the world. This article discusses ways to gain the most benefit from trade show participation and attendance. The article is based on the author's experience in international arms sales, and the methodology discussed is intended to provide industry trade show attendees (and, to some degree, U.S. Government participants) an approach to trade shows and exhibitions in order to achieve maximum benefit.

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To appreciate the magnitude of industries' expenditure on exhibitions, one only has to attend the Paris Air Show at Le Bourget Airport in north Paris. Here you will find industry-sponsored two-story chalets assembled in a matter of days and occupying the equivalent of several football fields. These temporary structures decorated in the companies' liveries are equipped with formal restaurants, observation decks, cutting-edge displays, multiple meeting rooms, press accommodations along with strategically placed beverage bars throughout. Here multimillion-dollar deals are introduced, aggressively promoted and often signed.

My first exposure to a global defense trade show was the International Defence Exhibition and Conference (IDEX), billed as one of the world's largest defense systems exhibitions. The company displays occupied several huge exhibit halls and acres of real-estate at the International Exhibition Centre in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. There was excitement and intrigue attending such a massive display of global defense equipment—everything from camouflage, radios and revolvers to missiles, tanks and helicopters. I was awed by the hundreds of foreign government officials, military officers and seemingly endless numbers of businessmen meandering throughout the exhibit, all with an air of importance. I walked away from my first trade show having

accomplished little business but thrilled by the experience and the venue.

The Environment

Industry constantly seeks ways to quantify the benefit of trade show expenditures and often struggles with the lack of return on investment leading senior management to question: Should we have a presence at the show? Is it worth the cost? Should we reduce our footprint? What is the political impact if we do not exhibit? Should we even have employee attendance?

In reality, if the company is a major global player (e.g., Lockheed Martin, Boeing, Raytheon, BAE Systems, Airbus), its presence is expected at the larger shows. The absence of such a company would be noted. On the other hand, smaller trade shows often are attended as a matter of habit. The smaller shows become events in which the company has participated for years, maybe decades, and continues to take part in year after year with little forethought or return on investment.

Exhibit sponsors frequently expect company involvement—as does the exhibit's host government. Despite the potential political pitfall, more companies are seeking ways to trim expenses, which results in closer scrutiny of trade show and exhibit participation.



The larger and more diverse companies have staffs dedicated solely to trade shows. Their responsibilities include establishing exhibition specific campaigns, regional and country themes, and product or program display priorities—all while integrating corporate branding initiatives. Smaller companies often do not enjoy the luxury of dedicated staffs, and the responsibility falls to business development or program management.

Although industry remains skeptical about trade show effectiveness, companies continue to participate. But regardless of a company's size or bottom line, here is where the individual program and/or business development managers find themselves when either supporting their companies' trade show displays or when merely attending as a spectator. It has been my experience that they often are ill prepared and frequently attend without a plan or an objective.

Benefiting the Most

A trade show is so much more than static displays and exhibit booths. It is a gathering of customers and a rallying point for senior government, military and industry officials (both U.S. and foreign), industry partners and suppliers, company foreign representatives and consultants, and even competitors. It would take the better part of a year, not to mention considerable expense, to travel and individually meet with the assembled personalities and organizations in their home countries.

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The first action should be reading the prior event's after-action report. Although many shows occur in alternating years and the information may be outdated, studying such reports can provide insight into customer attendance, daily customer activity and any administration foul-ups or quirks.

Planning: Like a military operation, the more thorough and comprehensive the planning the easier the execution and the more likely a successful outcome. Planning starts with reviewing company pursuits and campaigns along with customer contact plans to ensure the near-term program priorities are addressed during the show.

Next, identify potential customers (both U.S. and international) who are likely to attend and then task the company's in-country representatives and consultants to determine which key foreign government decision makers and program personnel will be there. Ask domestic company field offices to aid in the determination of U.S. Government participation and to coordinate any meetings.

Review strategic industry teaming and partnering initiatives that directly support a pursuit, customer base or product. Determine if meeting with key industry officials during the show or exhibit will support these initiatives.

Identify customers equipped with the company's defense item(s) and ensure familiarity with each customer's likes and dislikes. Always be prepared to discuss, and consider being proactive to counter any customer concern while reinforcing company support.

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Committing to early planning, establishing objectives with measurable outcomes, timely meeting scheduling, continuous coordination eliminating schedule conflicts right up to and throughout the event, and executing each event day's activities in a disciplined manner will achieve the maximum utility from a trade show or exhibition. It is necessary for the managers who represent their companies to think of the event as a major business opportunity that demands detailed planning and disciplined execution.

Know and understand the company and program "hot button" issues that may impact customers even if the program is not a direct responsibility. Saying the wrong thing or responding inappropriately to an existing or potential customer may not only result in company embarrassment, but could have far reaching affects.

A trade show is an opportunity to meet with suppliers. Solicit company supply chain to determine if any programs have



Paris Air Show.

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supplier issues or concerns that might impact an existing or potential customer. Also, consider collaborating with suppliers on product or system exhibit displays. If the company participating is a supplier, the exhibit is an excellent vehicle to meet with the prime(s) being supported and those identified as new opportunities.

Review the list of company in-country representatives and consultants who will attend the trade show and make sure that one-on-one meetings are scheduled. Require each to provide a comprehensive update on all country and/or customer activities involving ongoing pursuits, competition presence, existing customer concerns, potential customers' thinking and industrial teaming or partnering opportunities.

Plan for leadership involvement. A trade show is an excellent opportunity to introduce company leadership to industry counterparts, government and military leaders, customers and competitors along with the many diverse personalities who make the international and domestic defense business what it is. Company leadership presence sends a positive message to the government and defense industry communities (U.S. and foreign), while providing leaders an opportunity to forge critical business relationships.

Determine if any company or program newsworthy events can achieve leverage by timing the public release during the show, thereby gaining maximum exposure. Additionally, a trade show provides an opportunity to tell the company or program story through planned and spontaneous media interviews. Although an interview provides free publicity and should be considered a public affairs asset, caution should always be exercised when interacting with the media. Interviews must support the company's agenda and program objectives.

An important resource when planning is the U.S. Office of Defense Cooperation (ODC), part of the U.S. Ambassador's

Country Team in the exhibit's host country. The ODC is a good source for determining U.S. Government participation and normally is charged with coordinating the trade show involvement of the Defense Department, Combatant Commanders, military Services and other government agencies and organizations. Additionally, the office frequently tracks both U.S. and foreign industry attendance.

Finally, intelligence is essential to any operation and there is no better source than a trade show or exhibition. Collecting critical information requirements (CIRs) is crucial for trade show attendees. Part of early planning is soliciting CIRs from the program, business development, supply chain and engineering staffs in order to develop a comprehensive collection plan. It is necessary to be armed with the right questions in order to remain focused on the CIRs. This collection effort is neither clandestine nor covert; it is information gleaned from conversations, product displays and meetings. Never forget that intelligence gathering is a two-way street, and the competition is seeking the same information about your systems.

Objectives: Every meeting must have an objective. Even social gatherings should have a desired outcome. A simple sentence or phrase noted in the margin of the meeting calendar helps to maintain focus. Strive to make objectives measurable so outcomes can be accurately assessed. An example might be when meeting with a potential customer: Validate system quantities, discriminating technical requirements and program timeline; solicit customer concerns; and reinforce company solution and willingness to respond to identified needs.

Scheduling Meetings: Once the manager completes his or her initial planning the next challenge is securing the meeting with the right people on a day and time agreeable to all concerned. This is a daily occurrence for an executive assistant but often becomes a labor-intensive exercise for the individual manager. Much of the coordination should fall to the company's

in-country representatives, consultants and forward-deployed personnel. In the case of a domestic trade show, company field offices should be assigned the responsibility of scheduling and coordinating U.S. Government participation.

Additionally, when dealing with a potential or existing international customer, industry must determine if a U.S. Government presence is needed. If it is needed, coordination must be accomplished early as government participation is normally in high demand. As the show calendar becomes populated, each meeting should have an agenda, list of participants and a desired outcome.

Conducting Meetings: A properly arranged event calendar should be filled with meetings from start to finish. Although it generally is accepted that trade show meetings span a broad range of information, are short on detail and often limited to high-level discussions, every meeting has the potential to delve deeply into specifics, necessitating thorough meeting preparation. It is critically important that each hosted meeting be driven by an agenda. Even if the agenda cannot be shared, the host still needs to guide the topic of conversation, while remembering that listening to the customer is paramount. It also is important for the manager to have a notional agenda in his or her back pocket for those impromptu meetings that happen with little or no notice.

Reports and After Action Reviews: Finally, in order to capture the labors of the show, it is important to document the significant activities along with any unanswered customer questions and stated or implied commitments. The information provided

in an oral review or written report is perishable, so the content should be limited to those activities that impact the company's strategic and operational objectives, active pursuits, new business leads, customer concerns and competitors' presence. Critical information gathered needs to be disseminated promptly to those who generated the questions—including negative responses.

Conclusion

Defense trade shows provide rare opportunities for participants and attendees to meet, in a single location, government and industry professionals from around the world representing a variety of backgrounds and disciplines. Many such encounters result in lasting relationships, both personal and professional, and this key ingredient for any business arrangement should never be underestimated. Additionally, the exhibit provides an opportunity to cultivate existing relationships and rekindle those thought to be lost.

Much of what has been discussed may seem to be matters of common sense, but experience has proven otherwise. Senior management rarely demands accountability from its exhibit participants or attendees. Therefore, expectations are low for trade shows. Although exhibit participation can be controversial within industry, a little prior planning, disciplined execution and timely follow-up by business development and/or program managers who attend the shows can transform what could be three or four unproductive days into one of the year's biggest business opportunities. 

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