Building Trust through Transparency
By Kenya McCullum

To audit or not to audit? This question has become a hot topic in the trade show industry as more and more companies decide to take the leap into this form of transparency. Although organizers that have not used audits in the past may be reluctant to reveal the numbers lurking behind the dark curtain—fearing an audit will prove that their estimates were too high—they find that once the first audit is completed, the benefits are invaluable. For about the price of a 10x10 booth, you can obtain a greater level of trust with both current and prospective exhibitors, as well as gaining a valuable sales tool.

Unfortunately for the many honest trade show organizers out there, the industry has gotten a bad rap thanks to the rotten apples that have grossly inflated their numbers.

"There is a tremendous propensity, whether intentional or not, that numbers are either inflated or perceived to be inflated. There are shows out there, unfortunately, that absolutely inflate their numbers and that's an insult to attendees, and to everyone affected by the show. It's flat out unethical to inflate one's numbers. An audit ensures that what a show is telling you is true," said Dan Cole, Vice President of Sales and Business Development at CES. The company produces the International Electronics Show in Las Vegas, which was the first technology trade show in the industry to undergo the auditing process back in 1997.

You can also think of an audit as a signed, sealed and delivered form of credibility and transparency that can be used as a sales tool.

"There are certain exhibitors who really care about the audit," said Melinda Kendall of IDG World Expo. "For them, it just takes out a layer of discussion and a layer of distrust, so you can get to the point—and that's been incredibly useful. It's great to sit across from someone and show them numbers and not have that 'look'—that 'yeah, yeah, but you're a trade show guy' look. You skip that and you get straight into the value of the event, and you don't have to worry about whether they believe the numbers, because you know they do."

Although it may sound daunting, once you get a reliable procedure in place, an audit is quite manageable. First, a trade show needs to develop a way of verifying attendance, such as mailing badges to registrants that can be swiped when they check into the show. Once that is implemented, you must hire a company that conducts audits—preferably one certified by the Exhibition and Event Industry Audit Council—to come to the show, collect the database, and complete the verification process. This process—which includes contacting attendees listed on the show's database—can take a few weeks to complete and when it's all said and done, you will be happy with the results. Keep in mind there will be a discrepancy between the number of attendees you had previously quoted and the audited number, but it's usually nothing to worry about.

"Most of us in the industry who've gone from not auditing to auditing have gone through that and discovered it's no big deal," said Kendall. "The exhibitors knew that you were estimating all along and they're happy that you're now coming up with a more accurate way of counting."

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