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How To Evaluate And Choose An Exhibit House

WHITEPAPER

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How To Evaluate And Choose An Exhibit House

Searching for a new exhibit house can feel like a daunting task. It represents a significant change for you and your brand, whether you're new to the trade show industry and looking for your first booth designer, or you're a seasoned pro that's ready for a change. Either way, the good news is, you're looking because you're excited to make a big impact at your next trade show.

The right exhibit house for you is one that brings your marketing goals to life, works with you as a partner, stays within your budget, and supports you every step of the way. But, how do you find an exhibit house like that? This white paper will teach you how.

HERE'S WHAT YOU'LL FIND INSIDE:

- Why the Standard RFP Process Doesn't Work
- What to Do Before You Start Looking
- The Search
- Running an Alternative RFP That Works
- Setting Your New Relationship Up for Success
- Conclusion: How to Work With Your New Partner

Why the Standard RFP Process **Doesn't Work**

In theory, a Request for Proposal (RFP) is a great tool for marketing professionals who are shopping around for a new exhibit house for their next trade show booth. The RFP intends to secure concept and cost. Ideally, it acts as a test drive, so the marketing team can get an idea of what different houses can offer. But in practice, the standard RFP procedure doesn't work for a lot of reasons. Later, we'll show you a revised RFP process that does work. For now, here's why the standard process doesn't help you or the exhibit house.



1. TOO MANY PARTICIPANTS

In most cases, an RFP goes out to approximately five houses. Those five houses can choose to devote resources away from their existing customers to compete for the job, or they can let the opportunity pass.

It's a lose-lose situation. A marketing manager won't choose a house that doesn't respond, so they'll pick a house that's willing to sacrifice client resources for a relatively small chance at new business.

2. NO RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

Designing the best possible exhibit rental is a process that should be shared by the supplier and the brand. All too often, marketing pros submit RFPs but aren't available to discuss questions a supplier might have.

Connecting with a potential supplier's team gives an exhibit manager insight into what a working relationship would be like. It also gives suppliers an opportunity to create a design that's better aligned with your marketing goals.

3. THE WRONG QUESTIONS

When you send out RFPs to nearly a dozen suppliers, comparing the responses becomes a daunting task. To digest that return of information, marketing teams resort to asking easily comparable questions. But easily comparable questions, like how many full-time employees a house has, aren't applicable. In addition to being off-topic, brands should be aware that these sorts of questions can lead to easily manipulated answers.

4. BLIND ON BUDGET

If an RFP intends to secure concept and cost, then providing a budget is a critical piece of information for suppliers looking to respond. By providing a budget, creative teams can do their best work in creating a final design that you can afford. The result is a faster, more direct RFP process that results in fewer surprises for both the supplier and the brand.

5. WRONG PEOPLE IN CONTROL

While having a budget is critical, financial teams shouldn't lead the charge in managing an RFP process. Ultimately, booths are used by a brand's marketing department to achieve their goals for the business. RFPs that are led by procurement teams create problems further down the road because the wrong teams are talking to one another. RFPs should have input from procurement teams to establish a budget and should be directed by the marketing team who will actually use the booth.

Ultimately, the standard RFP process fails because it focuses too heavily on a single event, a single booth, a single idea. Instead, an RFP process should help you find an ideal exhibit house partnership that you can rely on for every event you attend, year after year.

What to Do Before You Start Looking

Finding the right exhibit house takes patience. Before you begin your search, take some time to reflect on what you're looking for in an ideal partnership.

LOOK BACK

Past experiences with other exhibit houses are your best reference points for defining your new search. Here are some questions to help you get started.

Did your last Exhibit House ...

- Help you achieve your marketing goals with a great design?
- Stay on budget?
- Provide you with a clear process, so you always knew what came next?
- Work with you as a collaborative partner?
- Make your exhibit design process fun?
- Deliver your exhibit on time?
- Provide logistical support before, during, and after the show?

As a part of this process, have an honest conversation with other key stakeholders about why you're changing exhibit houses. Ask what went well and what went wrong, and ask for feedback from other departments to come up with a well-rounded idea of what you're looking for in a new partner.

With the answers to these questions in mind, you can start to draw up an idea of what your ideal exhibit house relationship looks like.

DEFINE YOUR MUST-HAVES

Based on your past experiences and your future goals, think about what you must have in a new partnership. After all, you're not just getting a new booth, you're looking for logistics support, ideas, trends, and insight. You want good cost management, flexibility, and a partner who you love working

- **What does your ideal partnership look like?** Do you want a house who works closely with your designers, or do you want a more hands-off approach with a house that does most of the work on their own?
- **What kind of design are you looking for?** Modern? Warm and inviting? Highly technical with lots of unique features? Consider that some houses specialize in certain types of booths.
- **What booth features do you want?** A second floor? Integrated storage rooms? LED tiles and SEG fabric features? Based on these answers, you can search for a house who has experience working with the booth features that are most important to you.
- **What's your budget?** A clear budget will help you land a much clearer return when you begin your RFP process.
- **What kind of support do you want?** Consider that support — for booths you buy vs. booths you rent — can vary significantly. The quality of support you receive from a booth seller might go down over time, because they're interested in selling new booths, not servicing old ones. With a rental, an exhibit house is dedicated to providing you with a quality exhibit and incredible support for every event you attend, because their success relies on your repeat business.

DEFINE YOUR YOUR GOALS

Your booth design should fully support your marketing goals. Before you begin your search, gather with your core decision-making team and create a worksheet that outlines each of your goals. Align sales and marketing objectives into a concrete set of trade show goals and then use those to define your search. When creating your list of goals, keep in mind what defines a good goal. Here's what we've found works best. Your goals should be **SMART** (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Time Bound).

Think about goals that you can directly impact at the trade show. For example, setting a goal for more sales isn't useful if you aren't selling anything until after the trade show. But, setting a target of 300 product demos could be a perfect goal for you and your team. Here are more examples of good goals and bad goals.

BAD GOALS

- **Qualified Leads** — Qualified leads depend on the work of your sales team, not your trade show experience.
- **Revenue Generated** — Revenue happens long after the trade show, when correlation with your booth's design is too hard to demonstrate.
- **Brand Awareness** — Brand awareness is too broad to quantify. It's not measurable.

GOOD GOALS

- **A.E.R. (Activity Engagement Rate)** — The number of product demos and meetings scheduled meets all the criteria of a SMART goal.
- **Social Media Activity** — Social media activity is a better version of brand awareness, because Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook have direct tools for measurement.
- **Press Mentions** — Press mentions resulting from a trade show directly tie in to your performance on the show floor, and they can offer specific insight into what worked, like your booth design, staff competency, or demo effectiveness.

The Search

Once you have an idea of what your ideal exhibit house looks like, you can begin your search. As you work with a list of potential candidates, keep your list of goals and must-haves close at hand, so you can eliminate houses that aren't a clear match for your needs.

AREAS OF EXPERTISE

While many exhibit houses dabble in booths of all sizes, most specialize in one specific style of exhibit (even though they say they can do everything). Think about what kind of booth you're looking for, and then choose a house whose experience matches your needs. Here are a few specializations that exhibit houses often have:



Purchase — When you choose to buy a custom-built booth, there's no limit to what you can do. Designers will work with you to customize every element of your exhibit, for a price. Keep in mind, those benefits come at a cost. Most marketing teams that purchase a custom booth typically have to use the same design for five years to offset the initial cost.



Permanent Installations — Some exhibit designers focus on permanent installations that are set up at your house's facility. These permanent installations can function as long-term product demo and launch areas but aren't ideal for use at trade shows because they aren't designed to be taken apart and set up multiple times.



Custom Rental — A custom rental offers you the flexibility of a custom build, without the up-front cost of a custom, owned booth. With a rental, you can also change your design for each show, so your budget and marketing goals always match your booth design. And, as an added bonus, rental houses often take care of logistics and provide on-site support before, during, and after the show.



Portables — Sometimes, small is all you need. For exhibits that you can easily take on the road and set up on your own, look for an exhibit designer that focuses on portables. In most cases, this includes everything from tabletop setups to booths that are 10x10 and smaller.

WHERE TO FIND THE BEST CANDIDATES



Word of Mouth: Recommendations from other event marketers are a shortcut to vetting exhibit houses.



In-Person Research: If you plan on visiting a trade show soon, make a point of walking the show floor to find booths you like, and then asking their owners what house they worked with. This method offers you an up-close look at an exhibit house's finished, working product.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS TO LOOK FOR

As you're conducting your initial research, it's important to know a few concrete ways to compare different houses. Here are a few key characteristics to consider. Each one should help you narrow down your list to a smaller number of exhibit houses you're interested in.

- ✓ **Industry Experience** — Ask how long the design firm has been in business, how many booths and displays they make each year, and how much repeat business the house gets.
- ✓ **Help With Design Aspects** — Some firms focusing on exhibit building do not handle the design phase of the project. They simply take the client's specs and build to suit them. Other houses offer a full range of services covering every part of the design and building of trade show exhibits. If you've never put together an exhibit before, you can benefit from the help provided by a comprehensive booth designer.
- ✓ **Who Builds the Display** — Not all exhibit houses actually create their displays. Some houses in the field may hire subcontractors, and you could end up with an unknown provider working on your project.
- ✓ **House References** — Ask for references from customers who have received their service and verify those references before signing an agreement.
- ✓ **Website** — A reliable exhibit house will have a website for potential clients to view, and a properly designed website gives the customer insight into the services the house provides.
- ✓ **Portfolio** — A portfolio of past booths gives you insight into a house's work and tells you if you can get the results you need from their designer.
- ✓ **Ability to Work Within Your Timeline** — Make sure your exhibit house is capable of working within your designated timeline. As a general tip, it's best to start looking for an exhibit house as soon as you decide to attend an event.
- ✓ **Guaranteed Pricing That's Inclusive** — A good exhibit house should know what your project is going to cost. Don't accept estimates and guesses. Get guaranteed pricing that's inclusive of costs like shipping, storage, and handling. If you plan on buying a booth, don't forget about the costs of booth maintenance, setup, and teardown. If you're renting, ask about additional fees for on-site support and other services.
- ✓ **Physical Business Location** — Don't assume an exhibit builder with a sharp, official-looking website is a reliable, honest, and ethical business. Ensure you're working with the actual crew that will design and build your trade show exhibit. If possible, ask for an on-site meeting to determine what type of house you're working with.
- ✓ **Great Customer Service** — Pay particular attention to their customer service. You should feel valued, and the house you're considering should be easy to communicate with.

KEY QUESTIONS TO ASK

As you begin to reach out to individual houses, consider key questions that will help you narrow your search down from a wide field of houses to a narrow list of possible candidates. Here are just a few of the critical questions you should ask:

- Do they have any other clients at the show you're planning on attending?
- Do they offer full turnkey services?
- What type of contract options do they offer?
- Do they do multi-show contracts/multi-year contracts?
- Do they offer rental options?
- Do they offer purchase options?
- Do they offer storage?



Running an Alternative RFP That Works

Instead of the usual RFP process, which results in a lose-lose situation for you and the exhibit house, consider this alternative approach.

- STEP 1** | Select a small, internal team to review candidate houses and make a decision.
- STEP 2** | Select three of your favorite houses from your initial search.
- STEP 3** | Speak or visit each house, and ask your key questions (identified in The Search).
- STEP 4** | Narrow down your list to your favorite one or two houses.
- STEP 5** | Send out an RFP with clear deadlines and a budget, and be prepared to answer individual questions from each house.
- STEP 6** | Review the completed RFPs with your internal teams.
- STEP 7** | Make your decision and immediately inform all houses, including those you didn't select.

The Value of an In-Person Meeting: If you want an exhibit house that you trust with your marketing goals year after year, an in-person meeting is a critical first step. You wouldn't hire essential staff without meeting them. Choosing your exhibit house partner is no different. Visit their office and get to know them, so you can choose a house that you love working with. After all, it's more fun to work with someone you like.

THE BENEFITS OF THIS ALTERNATIVE RFP INCLUDE:

- Creation of a positive initial relationship with your house
- A more detailed RFP that reflects your budget
- Clear idea of what it would be like to work with each house
- Less risk of alienating houses that won't devote resources to an RFP process that they're statistically unlikely to win

Setting Your New Relationship Up for Success

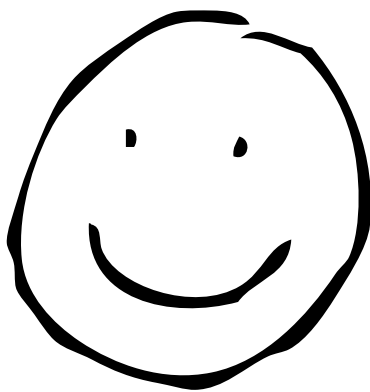
Once you've chosen your new exhibit house, take a proactive approach to fostering a great working relationship. Here are just a few ways you can ensure that your new partnership gets off to a great start.

- **Prioritize clear communication**, especially surrounding your budget and marketing goals.
 - **Establish clear goals and expectations** early on.
 - **Align on the design process with full transparency**, from your initial brainstorming sessions through to your build.
 - **Get excited about the design process.** When you're excited, your exhibit house will feed off that energy and that makes the entire design process more enjoyable.
 - **Have fun!** Designing your new exhibit should always be fun, never stressful.
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Conclusion

Searching for a new exhibit house is a good thing. It means you're looking for something better for your brand, and you're willing to put in the effort to make it happen.

Start your search with a thorough review of what you're looking for, and do as much research as possible before you conduct an RFP process that respects your time and your exhibit house's time. Think of the RFP process as the first step toward a great, new relationship. Carry that consideration through your design, and you're sure to foster a connection with an exhibit house that's invested in your marketing goals and your brand.



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