

Resolving the Conundrum - How Audits Can Help You Select the Best Exhibitions

Determining Return on Investment (ROI) and Return on Objectives (ROO) has become a way of life in the world of exhibition and event marketing. Executive management has demanded better measurement of marketing initiatives, and expects definitive results on specific objectives. This can be a conundrum for event marketers, especially when trying to determine whether or not to commit to a show where they have never exhibited or at shows where they previously exhibited, seeking to maximize investment through improved performance. Exhibit managers must rely on solid data when selecting the best exhibitions for their companies.

Determining the right shows for your program begins with a thorough understanding of your company's target audience, or audiences. It is also important to understand your company's positioning and messaging within those audiences. Once that is complete, your job is to find the shows that you are confident will provide that target audience.

Gathering Information

Compile as much data as possible about the shows under consideration.

- If you have exhibited at a show before, simply review the data that was compiled from the year you exhibited, and that information will help influence the decision. But that is not enough information, especially now that shows are evolving to meet the needs of changing markets or merging with other shows and altering their direction.
- Talk to cohorts who have been to the show. Ask friends in the industry who have gone to some of the shows you are considering; their feedback can be helpful. Remember, your goals might be different from some of the other exhibitors, so keep your objectives in mind when making the final recommendations.
- Talk to your vendors. Your exhibit house, PR agency and advertising agency might have clients who have participated in the shows that you are considering. Listen to the general feedback they received from their clients.
- What are your competitors and partners doing? What shows are they selecting? By no means should you simply exhibit at the same shows as your competition or partners. In fact, you can have great success at shows where none of your competitors or partners exhibit. Still, knowing what your competition and partners are doing is information you should always have at your fingertips.

- Study the conference content. Many shows include conference tracks. Scrutinize those tracks to see if any of the content matches the interests of your target audience.
- Is there an award competition at the show? If the show is giving awards for your category of product(s), you can leverage a win (or even a finalist honor) from an integrated marketing communications perspective for a long time to come. You can show the award in your booth at future shows. A press announcement about the award can be released, prompting future articles in trade publications. The award logo can be added to your advertising and Web site. Your product will always be defined as "award-winning." And it ultimately helps your executive management understand the value of trade shows. That is certainly worth considering when selecting the right shows for your company!

Certified Audits - The Key to Your Conundrum

An audit is a report by an independent and certified auditor of registration data that objectively confirms the number of exhibit only and paid conference delegates who in actuality attended an event. Often there is additional information, but the attendance figures alone are extremely valuable.

When compiling information about exhibitions, it is imperative that you are able to accurately estimate the show's basic attendance expectations. By studying the previous year's audit, you can estimate the size of the show and how many attendees will be within your target market. Use this information and in cooperation with the show organizer, maximize your marketing to the target audience to ensure improved performance.

Some of you who are familiar with print advertising might have seen the audits that are common in that industry, detailing readership numbers. Virtually all major publications are independently audited. In the exhibition world, this has not been the case until recently. After a tremendous amount of time and effort by the Exhibition & Event Industry Audit Council (EEIAC), which includes representatives from show management and exhibitors, consistent standards were identified and defined for all independent auditors. Beginning with 2006 show audits, if you see the EEIAC "check mark," you can be confident that you are seeing a certified, independent audit.



The key words here are “independent” and “certified.” In the past, show management might have provided numbers and some even hired a third party company to do the calculations. Often they were called “audits.” However, there was no consistency between reports so it was similar to comparing apples and oranges. Now with the EEIAC certification, when a certified auditor obtains the numbers independently, you can be assured that the results are accurate, consistent and comparable.

What does an audit look like?

Basically, an audit will start with a statement of number verification methodology that looks much like this:

STATEMENT OF VERIFICATION METHODOLOGY:

All conference registrants were required to pick up their badges on-site before attending any conferences or visiting the exhibit hall. All advance exhibit only registrants who registered before January 14, 2005 were required to pick up their badge holders on-site before they could enter the exhibit hall. All other exhibit only registrants picked up their badge on-site. When a badge or badge holder is picked up the registrant is marked as verified.

AUDITED ATTENDANCE ANALYSIS:

Year	Conference Attendance	Exhibit Only	Total Conference and Exhibit Only	Speakers*	Press *	Registered Exhibitors*	Special Programs*	Grand Total
2005	1,047	4,448	5,495	139	216	1,999	513	8,362

**Not audited. Provided by show organizer.*

Note that the results are categorized, so you know how many of the attendees were exhibitors, conference attendees, speakers, press, etc. That is useful information because you can extract the numbers that apply to your business objectives and use them for planning purposes.

Many audits include the job function of the attendees.

JOB FUNCTION

Job Function	Total Verified Exhibit Only & Conference Attendees	Percent of Total
Academic Head/University Faculty/Professor	81	1.5
Attorney	32	0.6
CEO	217	3.9
Chief Financial Officer	20	0.4
CIO, CTO, CSO, COO	206	3.7
Consultant	514	9.4
IT/MIS Management/Director	407	7.4
Finance-Accounting-VC	80	1.5

This data is valuable because you can further hone your target attendees based on job function. For example, if you were marketing a product or service that targeted IT/MIS Management/Directors, you would know that 7.4 percent of the total audience is your primary target.

Many of you work for companies that market products and services to customer companies of a specific size, based on the number of employees. Many audits include that data as shown below:

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES IN COMPANY/ORGANIZATION

Number of Employees	Total Verified Exhibit Only & Conference Attendees	Percent of Total
Under 50	1,665	30.3
50 – 99	340	6.2
100 – 499	546	9.9
500 – 999	302	5.5
1,000 – 4,999	499	9.1
5,000 – 9,999	257	4.7
10,000 or more	982	17.9
Do Not Know	624	11.3
Not Identified	280	5.1
Total	5,495	100.0

Show selection is the most strategic decision that you will make, but the audit, especially when combined with independent attendee research data, provides other benefits that will help you plan and maximize performance. The audit coupled with research will help you:

- Obtain investment levels justified to reach your targets.
- Determine what products/solutions to exhibit and emphasize.
- Understand how best to meet attendee needs and align messaging.
- Justify to senior management the importance of exhibiting at a particular show.
- Develop show strategy and realistic objectives.

Ask for the Audit

The reason many show organizers do not obtain certified audits is because exhibitors do not ask for them and the assumption is that the information must not be important to the exhibitor. Now that you know how valuable audits are to your exhibition program, remember to ask for the audit!

Do not be shy about contacting the top executives of the show management or event organizing company. They typically welcome and appreciate customer feedback. And just as importantly, remember to take the time to call these folks and thank them when they do provide a certified audit. They want and need to know that you are informed and that you care!

About the Exhibition & Event Industry Audit Council (EEIAC)

The Exhibition & Event Industry Audit Council (EEIAC) is an independent organization composed of exhibitor and event organizer personnel who are charged with monitoring a consistent set of event audit standards which independent auditors must follow in order to have their audits certified.

For More Information About Audits

Please visit the EEIAC Web site: www.exhibitionaudits.org

About the Author

Marilyn R. Kroner is president of Kroner Communications, a marketing communications consulting company that specializes in integrated marketing communications and trade show strategy, planning, execution and staff training. She has been involved in the Technology trade show industry for more than 20 years, planning, managing, and implementing trade show programs for small, medium and large companies including Quantum Corp., Storage Technology Corp., Exabyte Corp. and Benchmark Storage Innovations. Marilyn is probably best known for her contributions toward making independent audits a standard in the Technology event

marketing industry. Marilyn currently serves on the Exhibitor Conference Advisory Board and the Exhibition & Event Industry Audit Council. She is a past president of the Computer Event Marketing Association (CEMA).