

Recruiting & Retaining Exhibitors

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Recruiting and retaining prospective exhibitors for **state and regional** AACRAO meetings is an important part of the information exchange process as well as contributing to the financial success of the association's annual meeting. Deciding whether to attend a particular conference is a "**give/get**" decision for prospective exhibitors. Exhibitors are willing to "**give**" their money, expertise and time, but they also expect to "**get**" reasonable opportunities to establish and enhance valuable business relationships. Obviously, association officers and other volunteers have day jobs and limited amounts of time to donate to association chores. This primer is intended to identify areas that are important to prospective exhibitors and result in successful and mutually beneficial long-term partnerships with state and regional associations.

Broad Conference Planning Issues

Conference Site Selection:

One of the first duties of the association leadership is selecting a meeting site. Proximity to a regional airport is helpful so that driving time from the airport is minimized for out of state/region participants. Part of the selection process should include consideration of the exhibition area as well as the meeting rooms. The exhibit area should be spacious and well lit. Crowded booth space and poor lighting are not conducive to comfortable conversation. If it appears little consideration was given to these minimum needs, some exhibitors may not return. Of growing importance is the availability of telephone and modem connections. Facilities that do not have connections or facilities where connections are astronomically priced should be reconsidered. Always inquire if there is a charge for the exhibit area, tables and chairs. Those charges should be factored into the cost charged to exhibitors.

Exhibits Chair:

Selecting the exhibits chair: Selection of the Exhibits Chair is one of the most vital positions within your association. The exhibits chair serves as the "director of sales", "manager of customer service" and host for exhibitors during the conference. Finding the "right" individual with an entrepreneurial spirit is crucial. Because this position is about establishing long-term relationships, it may be useful to consider a multiple year appointment for the exhibits chair. (NOTE: It is helpful to have a job description when recruiting the next exhibits chair. A "trainee" should always be waiting in the wings.)

Responsibilities: Duties usually include sending invitations (sales) to prospective exhibitors, follow-up calls and providing any other information helpful to exhibitors. A prospectus or copies of the previous program provide useful information. When corresponding with potential exhibitors, consider listing the names member institutions attending the last meeting and the number of attendees. Last years exhibitors should be listed. Competitors don't want to be left behind. Consider inserting a short description of products and services in the association newsletter or website for exhibitors who sign up early.

Before the conference: Opportunities for sponsoring events and advertising in the conference program should be described. In some cases, exhibitors that are unable to attend will send a donation, if you offer to display their materials at an unattended table next to the Local Arrangements Committee (LAC) booth within the exhibit area. When an exhibitor signs up for your conference, the company name, brief company description, exhibitor name and URL should be linked to the conference web page.

During the conference: The exhibits chair, like a good host, (customer service) should make sure the conference is going well and that each exhibitor understands the meeting schedule and the times for social gatherings. First impressions are important. That first impression might be during the set up period. The exhibits chair should be on hand to direct exhibitors to their assigned booth and to assist with any logistical/equipment requirements. In some cases, an association member (chair-in-training) is assigned to first time exhibitors to show them the ropes and introduce them to the membership.

Exhibitors should leave the conference with positive impressions and a feeling that the association leadership understands and helped them promote their business agenda.

After the Conference: After the conclusion of the conference and after discussing the evaluations from exhibitors (both written and oral) a thank you note should be mailed to both the exhibitor/s and the corporate decision maker. This letter should serve as a thank you and as a recruitment letter for next year. The letter should summarize the benefits of participation. Number of conference attendees, number of institutions and the number of exhibitor visitation breaks should be summarized and highlighted. Indeed, if you ask association attendees to evaluate the

importance of talking with prospective suppliers (exhibitors), this information can be “quoted” and included in the letter. Don’t hesitate to think of this letter as a thoughtful sales document in which the important benefits of corporate participation are clearly described to your prospective “customers”, the exhibitors.

Developing an Exhibitor Database:

Each association will benefit from a database that identifies prospective and past exhibitors. This database will be ongoing since corporate contacts change, as do the representatives that actually attend the conference. Acquiring this information requires a little ingenuity. For example, individual members could be surveyed to discover names of suppliers that might benefit from exhibiting at your conference. Regional and national suppliers/companies are more likely to benefit than purely local suppliers.

Larger corporations require more effort because of their size and because their decision making procedures are more complex. Finding and contacting key/primary corporate decisionmakers may require some detective work. Once a prospect is confirmed, it is helpful to determine who will actually be attending the meeting and making sure they also receive conference materials.

You may wish to consider using Excel® or Access® or exploring commercial products like ACT or Microsoft Outlook® to record information about each exhibitor and prospect. Whichever path you select, the database should provide you with an easy way to record, store and sort corporate names, contacts, phone, fax and e-mail. Adequate space should be provided for ongoing notes and comments. Using this type of software will simplify mass and individual communication with prospective and returning exhibitors. Many members may already have Outlook® on their computer and it is easy to use. Collecting and growing strategic information during the conference is one of the essential duties of the exhibits chair. Once the database is created, it may be shared with other associations.

Association & Conference Web Presence:

Most state and regional associations have a web presence. Given the creativity and talent within the membership, every association should have a first class web page of its own. If this site is properly updated and maintained, it can play a valuable role in advertising and recruiting exhibitors. Much of the recruiting information that currently requires printing and postage can be transferred to your web site. Conference locations, dates, and programs can be posted, as can other important conference details. Once you acquire e-mail addresses for exhibitors, initial invitations and reminders can be sent via e-mail. Once this data is in your database, recruiting for next year is even easier. Given the opportunity, some exhibitors may opt to sign up on line via the web, much like student web registration.

Sometimes state and regional web sites are developed and hosted by an individual from a member institution. Complications occur only when the individual web manager, upon whom the responsibility is frequently placed, retires or changes employers. It may be helpful to consider separating hosting and maintenance. For example, AACRAO might consider hosting association web sites. Updating and maintenance of the web site could then become an assigned committee responsibility within the association.

Scheduling:

There are a number of organizations (AACRAO and non-AACRAO related) competing for exhibitor revenue and participation. Many scheduling conflicts can be avoided by looking at the “bigger picture.” Conference dates and locations should be announced, promoted and scheduled at least one-year in advance. The AACRAO web site provides a convenient clearinghouse for future meetings of state, regional and national organizations. Providing AACRAO with this information at the earliest possible time allows it to be posted and used by prospective exhibitors. Avoid last minute invitations to participate. Adequate lead-time permits exhibitors to plan their schedules and book flights.

Scheduling against national or regional meetings will usually place the state association at a disadvantage. Always check the AACRAO state and regional Website to determine if other associations may be meeting during the same time. Prospective exhibitors may not have adequate personnel to cover simultaneous meetings.

Attracting Exhibitors

Exhibitor Presentations:

Exhibitor presentations are a win/win proposition for information exchange. These can be identified as “exhibitor track” presentations or identified by program category, e.g. admissions, records, commencement, etc. Attendees have an opportunity to hear about latest product offerings and changes while exhibitors have an opportunity to identify individuals with a potential interest in their product or service. These programs should be scheduled

throughout the conference, rather than bunched, so that attendees can attend more than one presentation. Avoid placing presentations of competing exhibitors in the same time period. Pairing a user and supplier together as co-presenters provides another good reason for attending a session, as well as a good reason for a “maybe” exhibitor to attend the conference. Exhibitor presentations help make the corporate investment of time and money a good one, even if traffic to the booth is marginal.

Welcome Packet:

Explain to prospective exhibitors that they will receive a “welcome packet” detailing conference sessions, exhibit hall hours, social events and their name badge/s. In addition the packet usually includes necessary tickets, useful maps, tourist and local dining options. This is important for exhibitors from larger companies who may not receive conference details from corporate headquarters. A conference evaluation form should be included that encourages exhibitors to recognize your hard work and identify areas that could be improved upon. Exhibitors will always express gratitude when the conference is run well and they have received a fair return for their investment. If evaluation forms are not returned or only “nice” comments are recorded, you can assume that there is room for improvement before hosting the next conference. Personal conversations with exhibitors will elicit candid answers.

Name Badges:

Easily readable name badges, and even color coded to admissions, registration or exhibitor, are vitally important to attendees and exhibitors. **The first name should appear using the Arial 48 point bold font (or some other equally bold and readable font). The last name, position and institution should use the Arial 24 point bold font.** This type of badge provides a gentle mental prompt among colleagues and allows exhibitors to see with whom they are talking. Functional badges that are readable should supplement small photo ID badges. Perforated laser name badge sheets, such as Avery Laser Name Tag Form #5392, are readily available at office supply stores (See printed **Example I** below). Because attendee information will take most of the badge space, the association may wish to pre-print its name and logo using light ink that will not interfere with information about the attendee.

Location, Location, Location:

The ideal conference facility would permit the location of booths/exhibits around the perimeter of a single large room with refreshments located in the center of the room. Multiple room exhibit areas should be avoided. Duplication increases conference costs because coffee, ice cream, etc. must be in both locations. Wasted food (for which the hotel is only too glad to charge) creates an additional and unnecessary expense. It also creates unnecessary fairness issues among the exhibitors when LAC activities are located in one room or the other. Smaller conferences occasionally are forced to place exhibitors in hallways. Hallways can work if the aisles are wide and the area well lit. However, after-hours security may be necessary since some exhibitors use expensive electronics. Always try to avoid locating exhibitors away from the meeting rooms or, worse yet, on a different floor.

Local arrangements and the exhibits chair should determine the area for each booth or tabletop display and make this information available to prospective exhibitors. Many of the larger exhibitors have freestanding displays that are designed for a 10 X 10 booth area. If exhibit space is limited to small six-foot tables this should be stated clearly in the letter of invitation. Six-foot tables should be avoided, if possible, since they do not allow adequate space for display, conversation and handout materials. **NOTE:** Competing companies should not be close to one another. Also, when there are clearly superior locations, those locations may be given to exhibitors who register early, have provided extra financial support and/or are exhibitors who return year-after-year.

Pricing and choice of display location may be used as strategies to encourage early exhibitor registration. Event planning sometimes revolves around anticipated exhibitor revenue. Adding 10% to the current exhibitor's fee may allow the association to stimulate early registration by offering a 10% “early bird” discount. It is a modest amount, but it works. A preference in booth location for early registrants may also be offered. Determining this information early in the planning process permits the association to estimate more accurately what type of program it can afford. If a choice of booth location is offered an exhibit area diagram is necessary so that exhibitors can see what locations are available. Also, don't hesitate to send a list of exhibitors and booth locations to prospects that have not yet registered. Competing exhibitors don't want to be left out!

Scheduled Breaks With Exhibitors:

Scheduled visitation breaks provide important opportunities for exhibitors to begin a dialogue with interested individuals of your membership. One of the major functions of an annual conference is to bring new ideas and information back to the campus. Responsible exhibitors are there to provide information about new ideas, services and products. The opportunity to establish mutually beneficial relationships is the lifeblood of exhibitors participating in the conference. If space is available, providing a break room for exhibitors is appreciated.

Remember, exhibitors are paying a fee to have access to your membership and to establish and maintain business relationships. **Breaks that allow only enough time for a trip to the bathroom and a drink before the next program session are not exhibitor friendly.** Permitting the membership to spend quality time with exhibitors is an important part of the “give/get” equation. **Minimum breaks of 30 minutes are essential.** Some associations offer a 45-minute break when two breaks in the morning or afternoon are not possible.

Activities in the Exhibit Area:

Drawing attendees to the exhibit area is one of the vital responsibilities of the exhibits chair and the local arrangements committee. The LAC is usually located in the back of exhibit area so attendees will necessarily need to come into the exhibit area. Door prize drawings, a continental breakfast and ongoing refreshments always attract attendees into the exhibit area. Organizing a special event, such as an opening reception or conference registration can be held in the exhibit hall.

Games & Icebreakers:

To help break the ice and attract members to various exhibit booths, many associations devise a game that requires attendees to collect signatures or stickers from the exhibitors they visit. **It is not necessary that every attendee visit every exhibitor.** Usually attendees must visit no more than **half** of the exhibitors to qualify for the door prize that is drawn toward the end of the conference.

Inclusion:

The most important expectation of exhibitors is the opportunity to establish and nurture business relationships. By informing and including exhibitors in social activities you provide opportunities for both attendees and exhibitors to meet, talk and share ideas in a relaxed atmosphere. Information about this practice should be included in the initial and subsequent recruitment correspondence. As a general rule, the exhibitor fee automatically includes participation in meals and social activities for at least one person. Not all exhibitors want to participate in the numerous social opportunities at the conference, but they should have every opportunity to be included.

Recognition:

Providing exhibitor verbal and printed recognition at the beginning of the conference is always appreciated. Recognition should be given for exhibitor financial participation and their product knowledge during the opening session. Best of all, there is no extra program cost for this simple courtesy. Repeated recognition during general meetings and/or during meals allows the organization to reinforce the importance of exhibitor participation to the membership. Always remind the attendees where the exhibitors are located, exhibit hours, and urge them to talk with exhibitors of interest. If you are printing a program, a short description of each exhibitor will help your members decide which exhibitors to visit.

How the association leadership describes and presents the exhibitor role during the opening session, and subsequent conference gatherings, sets the tone for the entire meeting. The exhibitors you invite to your conference should be experts in their respective fields and be willing and able to share that knowledge with your membership. Exhibitors who fail to offer value to your conference should NOT be invited to return!

Invitation to Previous Exhibitors and Prospective Exhibitors:

Once the issues enumerated above are settled, you are ready to construct a model letter of invitation to prospective exhibitors. **Consider yourself the sales and customer service representative for your association.** In this role, it is important that you present a clear description of benefits your association provides to a prospective exhibitor. Using the guidelines enumerated below also allows the association to ascertain if it is providing good value for the revenue it hopes to receive from the exhibitor. Remember, successful and long-term business relationships are built around “**win-win**” environments.

An early invitation is always better. Indeed, don’t miss the opportunity to recruit current exhibitors for next year with a brief printed form that covers the what, where and when before they dismantle their displays. Always try to get “tentative” exhibitor participation for next year

Invitations containing vital information are more likely to receive favorable consideration than one that is incomplete and poorly conceived. The information noted below is important because it anticipates the questions and the information that prospective exhibitors need to make their decisions in a timely manner. The following information is basic and can be presented in bullet form so it can be easily modified each year:

- Meeting dates:
- Meeting location:

- Association Website:
- Number of institutions represented last year
- Projected number of attendees:
- Number of attendees last year:
- Total number of association members:
- Number of breaks:
- Length of breaks:
- Location of refreshment breaks: (describe)
- Exhibit area hours:
- Size and facilities of display area:
- 6 ft. covered tabletop 8 ft. covered tabletop
- 10 X10 booths with (details) Other booth options (details)
- Electricity provided (details)
- Modem or phone available (details)
- Attendee mailing/e-mail list provided in advance of meeting
- List of conference attendees provided to exhibitors during conference
- Opportunity for exhibitor presentation (describe)
- Opportunity for exhibitor to sponsor break/meal, etc. (describe)
- Opportunity to sponsor other gifts (describe)
- Date and time for display setup:
- Date and time for dismantling display:
- Describe exhibit hall security:
- Number of exhibitors last year:
- Number of exhibitor spaces
- Exhibitor fee: \$ (detail what is included)
- Fee for each additional exhibitor: \$
- Conference hotel & rates:
 - Regular rooms:
 - Executive level:
- Conference hotel Website, delivery address, fax and phone number:

Self-Assessment and Data Retention:

Team Effort: It is not uncommon for the President, the President-elect and other association officers to meet the exhibitors and express their appreciation for their support and attendance. The exhibits chair may also circulate in the exhibit area and initiate one-on-one assessment conversations with each of the exhibitors. Sometime during the conference, association officers may schedule a group assessment session and meet with all of the exhibitors. This type of “give and take” meeting can be scheduled in between breaks, rather than at the end of the conference when exhibitors are tearing down and departing.

At the end of the conference the Exhibits Chair and the LAC should formally evaluate and enumerate the success of exhibitor participation. Any shortcomings should be identified and corrected before next year. For example, were there knowledge gaps that should be addressed by companies that did not attend? Asking the membership about these gaps may provide leads for identifying new exhibitors for next year.

An association “**how to**” book should be created and amended each year before it is passed along to the incoming exhibit chair. A running “scorecard” should be created that allows the collection of quantifiable data that can be graphed and compared to previous years. Examples might include:

- Number of exhibitors:
- Exhibitor registration dollars:
- Exhibitor sponsorships dollars: (detail categories)
- Total exhibitor generated dollars
- First time exhibitors (recognize who recruited new exhibitors)
- Number of non-returning exhibitors (find out why)
- Types/categories of exhibitors
- Name, contact/s, e-mail of each exhibitor:

- Number of conference attendees (membership only)
- Number of door prizes

Example I: Attendee Name Badge Design Examples:

The name badge is used to facilitate and enhance communication between conference attendees--the membership and the exhibitors. Large and bold fonts increase readability from a distance.

Joe

Joe Barrington
Registrar
Buckeye State University
Cincinnati, OH

James

James Smith
Director of Admissions
Buckeye State University
Cincinnati, OH

Sallee

Sallee Jones
Enrollment Manager
Buckeye State University
Cincinnati, OH

Barb

Barb Jankowski
Admissions Counselor
Buckeye State University
Cincinnati, OH

Alice

Alice Overton
Associate Registrar
Buckeye State University
Cincinnati, OH

Bill

Bill Casio
Assistant Registrar
Buckeye State University
Cincinnati, OH

Work-in-Progress (04.2003) Please email your additions and revisions to jeorn@scrip-safe.com so that we may update this document for the state & regional meeting next year.