

# Partnering With Your Exhibitors to Increase Attendance

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## Introduction

Exhibitors and their databases of customers and prospects represent a huge, and often untapped, resource of brand-new attendee prospects. Our data shows that, on average, 92% of the people that exhibitors invite to attend a show are not in the show owner's house file beforehand (see below for more information on how the data in this article was collected). A successful exhibitor invitation system can result in hundreds, and in many cases thousands, of brand-new attendees.

## How the Data In This Article Was Collected

Exhibitor Invites is an exhibitor invitation system that has been deployed more than 200 times over the past four years, and was offered at 75 different shows in 2012, including some of the largest shows in the country. More than 16,000 exhibitors have used the system, sending out more than 101 million pre-show email invitations to more than 29 million unique attendee prospects, resulting in more than 151,000 registrants.

## Lessons Learned

Based on four years of offering our exhibitor invitation program, here are the key lessons that we have learned:

## Working with Exhibitors

Exhibitor personnel are very busy, and it is difficult to get their attention, and convince them to participate in any new show-related program. In addition, exhibitors don't want to pay to help market the show to their lists. Finally, exhibitors don't want to share their lists with show management.

Therefore, any exhibitor invitation program must be fast, free, and easy to use. In addition, the program must provide exhibitors a significant portion of the "real estate" in each html email that they can customize themselves.

(If you only offer a “VIP ticket” that includes very little information about the exhibitor it won’t work.) It is equally important that “real estate” in each html email is dedicated to convincing the recipients of the email that they should register and attend the show, since a huge percentage of them have never registered before.

The exhibitor invitation system should allow exhibitors, in one sitting, to create and schedule an integrated campaign of three different emails. If exhibitors are only able to create one email at a time, it is unlikely that they will come back and create a second or third email, and since they are inviting mostly brand-new attendee prospects, hitting them more than once will make it much more likely that they will actually register.

### **Convincing Attendee Prospects to Register, And Attend**

Since the vast majority of people that exhibitors are inviting to the show have never registered before, the most successful “offer” that you can allow exhibitors to extend to their customers is a free exhibit hall pass. Based on our experience, requiring attendees to pay anything – even a nominal fee of \$25 or \$50 – will result in significantly less people responding to the invitations and registering for the show.

The good news is that registrants who receive an invitation from an exhibitor, whether they register directly from that invitation or not, are more likely to actually get on a plane and attend the show -- on average, 10% more likely, based on our data. This is a powerful secondary benefit of an exhibitor invitation program.

### **Overcoming Exhibitor Objections**

Based on our data, exhibitor invitation programs that are supported by a dedicated calling team whose sole purpose is to convince exhibitors to use the program get an average of 20% of exhibitors to use the system in the first year, and 25% in the second year. Programs that are not supported by a dedicated calling team will get 5% to 10% of exhibitors to use the system in the first year.

Most exhibitors who choose not to use the system are concerned about their database of customer email addresses being misused in some way. It is important that the calling team has sufficient ammunition to overcome



this concern, and that they are able to assure exhibitors that their lists are completely safe, and will not be shared with anyone, not even show management.

We have found that it is very important for the show's exhibit sales team to be well-briefed on the exhibitor invitation program, because they often play a key role in getting more exhibitors to use the program. This does not require a significant amount of their time. When they are on the phone with exhibitors, if they are willing to "talk up the program" – let exhibitors know that it isn't a scam, that it really is free and unlimited, and that it will benefit the exhibitor if they choose to participate -- goes a long way to convincing exhibitors to engage.

The second most common objection is that the exhibitor doesn't have time to customize the emails and send them out. The calling team must be prepared to do everything possible to limit the amount of time the exhibitor needs to spend to participate in the program. In general, it would take an exhibitor 20-30 minutes to complete the process on their own, and 30-40 minutes for a caller to walk an exhibitor through the entire process.

Finally, the calling team must be armed with specific data about how the program will actually benefit exhibitors who participate. Based on our data, exhibitors who send out invitations get an average of 20% more booth traffic than exhibitors who don't participate. Their customers also respond to the invitations before the show, starting or continuing an interaction with the exhibitor.

## **Suggested Timeline**

### **11 months out**

- Send RFP for exhibitor invitation program.

### **9 months out**

- Select vendor/contractor.
- Schedule meeting with vendor and marketing, exhibit sales, and registration departments
- Start exhibitor communication campaign.



## 6 months out

- Confirm special offer that exhibitors can extend to their customers and prospects.
- Draft show marketing text and create show marketing graphics as part of the html templates that exhibitors will customize.
- Design and code at least three html templates, with significant real estate for both exhibitor branding/messaging and show branding/messaging.
- Build the online user interface that allows exhibitors to quickly and easily upload their lists, customize the html templates, and send out the email invitations. The system should encourage exhibitors to send an integrated campaign of three different emails to their database.
- Decide whether to suppress against the pre-reg file. There are pros and cons to this: registrants may feel like they are getting extraneous email, but on the other hand, we have proven that invitations from exhibitors have an impact on the overall verification rate.
- Decide whether to offer an incentive to exhibitors. We have found that offering a value added benefit to all exhibitors who schedule an invitation campaign by a certain date can be very effective in encouraging exhibitors to use the system.
- Work with your registration company to develop all necessary coding (so that prospective attendees can click on a link in the html email and be taken directly into the show registration system).
- Continue exhibitor communication.

## 3 months out

- Make the system available to exhibitors.
- Begin dedicated calling campaign: *budget at least 30 minutes total calling time per exhibitor. In other words, if your show has 400 exhibitors, the calling team should spend at least 200 hours working with the exhibitor community to convince them to participate in the program.*
- Continue exhibitor communication.
- Work on messaging with the exhibitor sales team to “talk up” the program.



## 1 month out

- Most exhibitors will focus on the program in the last 30 days leading up to the show – *staff customer service team accordingly.*
- Continue outbound calling effort.
- Continue exhibitor communication.
- Exhibit sales team continue to “talk up” the program.
- Start tracking registrations generated by the program.

## Key Features That Your Exhibitor Invitation Program Should Include:

1. A dedicated calling team whose sole purpose is to convince exhibitors to send invitations to their customers and prospects.
2. A dedicated customer service team to work with exhibitors and the calling team to make sure that exhibitors actually use the program.
3. At least three different html email invitation templates, all part of an integrated campaign, that exhibitors can customize and send to an unlimited number of their customers and prospects.
4. In each template, around 50% of the real estate is allocated for exhibitor branding/messaging, and 50% is for show branding/messaging.
5. An easy, intuitive user interface that allows exhibitors to quickly and easily upload their lists, customize the html templates, and send out the email invitations. The system should encourage exhibitors to send all three emails to their customers, not just one, by allowing them to create the entire campaign in one sitting.
6. The ability to suppress against the pre-reg file in real time, if the show management team decides that this is important (see timeline above).
7. The email distribution system (ie, the outgoing servers) should be managed by a professional team that understands all the intricacies of email marketing, including the CAN SPAM act, white lists, black lists, and list security.
8. The email distribution system should allow for immediate processing of unsubscribe requests, and speedy resolution of spam complaints.



## **About the Author**

Evan Shubin has been in the trade show industry for more than 20 years. He started his career at Graphic Arts Show Company (producers of PRINT and GRAPH EXPO), and then served for four years at CES, including stints as Director of Marketing and then Vice President of Sales and Marketing. He then spent eight years in a variety of roles at SUPERCOMM, including Head of Sponsorship Sales and Director of Marketing. He currently serves as Vice President, Sales and Group Show Director for the Electronic Retailing Association, and as President and co-Founder of Exhibitor Invites LLC.

## **About Exhibitor Invites, LLC**

Exhibitor Invites makes it free and easy for exhibitors to upload their lists to a third-party email distribution service, and send out customized invitations to their customers/prospects. Since 2009, the Exhibitor Invites program has been offered at 200 shows. 16,000 exhibitors have used the system; sending out 101 million pre-show email invitations to 29 million unique prospects, resulting in more than 151,000 registrants. On average, 92% of those prospects – customers of the exhibitor community – were not in the show owner's house file. Exhibitor Invites, LLC also offers Exhibitor Outreach, a program that allows exhibitors to send pre-show or post-show emails to the registration file, without actually getting access to the email addresses, and Exhibitor Lead Converter, which allows exhibitors to send a post-show follow-up email to people who visited their booth.

