

Tradeshhow Tip Sheet

This month: The Custom Exhibit R.F.P.

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Issuing A Custom Request for Proposal

So you're going to build a custom exhibit. Congratulations! With the proper preparation and a competent exhibit house, you'll have a unique exhibit to show off your wares. And it'll stand out simply because no one else will have anything like it. Your branding will be on full display. Your products and/or services will be shown to their full glory.

And why not? If you're ready to invest in this kind of marketing commitment, you should be able to get all that you want out of an exhibit. So, let's do it right. Get together with your key team members, come up with a plan, a budget and flesh out the details that will make your exhibit exactly what you want.

Before you sit down to piece together your RFP (Request for Proposal), think about all of the various elements you'll need, what important (and secondary) functionalities you'll need. The more information you can offer prospective exhibit designers and fabricators, the faster and more efficient the process should be.

A custom exhibit booth should last several years. With modifications down the road, chances are you can squeeze some extra life out of it. The more thought you put into it up front, the happier you (and your successors) will be with the booth.

What's in the RFP?

While you may think you know exactly what you want, it is still important to document those desires and needs. Start with the size(s) of rental spaces you'll want to exhibit in over the next few years. Will you need a booth that breaks down from a 20x30 to a 10x20? Should it be expandable from a 20x20 island to a 30x40 island? You can't accurately predict the future, but you can judge possibilities for booth size.

Next, know what absolute necessities you'll need, whether it's lap-top work stations, small meeting areas, food sampling areas or information kiosks. Define the needs for each area: storage, electricity, product display, number of workers the spaces will need to accommodate and approximate sizes of those spaces.

If you require storage for products, make an educated estimate on how much space you'll need.



Figure out what questions you'll need to answer to ensure that your exhibit booth RFP is complete.



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The more conclusions you can come to before issuing an RFP, the better results you're likely to have.

Offer a Realistic Target Budget

It may sound simple, but to end up with an exhibit that fits your budget and functions well, you'll need to offer a realistic target budget to your exhibit designer and fabrication shop. Realistic is the key word here, from both sides of the fence. From your side as the company commissioning the exhibit, you don't want to bust your budget, but you also don't want to leave your exhibit short of what you fully expect and desire.

From the contractor's point of view, the budget is necessary so that they can plan a design that meets those needs and the target budget range. Often a company will not have a realistic perspective of what custom exhibits cost in the real world. It's good to look at industry averages for island and in-line custom booths and confirm that your planned expenditures for the exhibit will

come close to what the industry averages truly represent.

If you plan on a sleek, no-bells-and-whistles exhibit your budget may come in significantly less than industry averages. Conversely, if you want a lot of technology (LCD screens, computer software, interactive displays, etc.) the budget may end up being more than what industry averages may indicate. And often a budget range is a key factor to the exhibit firm in their decision on whether or not to pursue a project.



Put Your RFP into Action

Now that you've determined what you want and how much you can spend, it's time to write it down for distribution. Clearly explain your goals for the exhibit. Breakdown the various areas such as branding, function, building materials, budget – even describe a certain look if you have come to a conclusion about that. The more conclusions you can make before issuing your RFP or exhibit brief, the better results you're likely to have. Key department heads should review the document before it goes out to make sure that your various goals are not in conflict.

Once your RFP is complete, send it to a handful of

exhibit houses. Too many and you'll be overwhelmed by responses. Too few and you may not get a response that meets your goals. Ideally the RFP should go to at least three firms, but probably no more than six or seven. Even then, word will get out about the brief, so be prepared to send it to other firms if they request it. There's nothing like an enthusiastic company that wants to please you!

Bottom Line

A Request for Proposal isn't the end-all-be-all answer to getting a great custom tradeshow exhibit. Still, it's probably the best way to condense your company's wants, needs, goals and objectives into a single document. At the least it will give you a better understanding of what the challenges are to getting a custom exhibit built. Once you've made a short list of two or three firms, interview them with an eye to gauging how

you might work and interact with them on a personal level. No matter how great the firm is, if your people don't mesh well with them, the project won't be comfortable. Remember, you'll be interacting with them for several months through concept, design, material decisions, graphic layout and production to final fabrication.