

As a Matter of Fact

"Statistically speaking, the average human has one breast and one testicle."

— Humorist and author, Des McHale

For the past six months, I've been on a statistical grail quest, hunting for a report issued by the Environmental Protection Agency that claims trade shows are the second biggest source of commercial waste in the United States. That sound bite has spurred discussion — even panic — as some fear the EPA report will put our industry in the eco-spotlight, resulting in environmental regulations that could cause tectonic shifts in how we do business.

I first read this startling stat in a Trade Show Week article from December 2007. A few months later, I heard it during a Peer2Peer Roundtable discussion at EXHIBITOR2008. By the time the statistic came across my desk in a press release last week promoting a new sustainable exhibit option, it had clearly reached critical mass. With so many people citing the same report, no one stopped to question its validity. But the commonly accepted stat did raise more questions than it answered: What was the No. 1 source of commercial waste? How did the EPA arrive at this finding? What other tidbits of information did the report contain?

To help get to the bottom of things, I began corresponding with the EPA in an unsuccessful attempt to locate the report. Next, I tried prodding a few folks who were propagating the stat. Several communications later,



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multiple sources tracked the statistic back to that same Trade Show Week article from December.

So I phoned Lisa Plummer, the freelancer who wrote the story, and my grail quest came to a screeching halt. The truth is, the alleged EPA report does not exist. In reality, the sound bite is an anecdotal opinion from a third-party source. Still, I personally witnessed dozens of people quoting this "fact" as gospel. Trade Show Week even issued a retraction in its March 3 edition, but as is often the case with retractions, no one seemed to notice.

So how did an unfounded, retracted statistic make its way to the moon and back without anyone questioning it enough to vet, verify, and validate it? Because when it comes to Green exhibiting, everyone — including EXHIBITOR — is hungry for answers and data. As the exhibition industry continues to trudge through what is, no doubt, an evolutionary progression to Greener exhibit pastures, there will be plenty of sound bites that will be easy to digest and regurgitate. But if we don't know where they came from or how credible they are, we walk a dangerous path.

Now I'm not pointing this out to put the kibosh on the Green discussion — nor am I doing so to embarrass Ms. Plummer (whom I can say from personal experience is a talented writer). I also don't mean to dispute the fact that our industry generates a tremendous amount of waste. My point is simply that we can't rely on sound bites alone or they'll end up biting us in the biodegradable ass.

The truth is, Green exhibiting is a tad scary on several levels. Many exhibitors are justifiably afraid of being perceived as Greenwashers, the majority of suppliers are unsure what constitutes a Green exhibit in the first place, and everyone's more than a little apprehensive about the sizeable initial investment it allegedly takes to go Green (a 26-percent premium, according to "An Inconvenient Booth"). And that brings us full circle with yet another statistic.

Ultimately, it's up to you to determine which stats and sound bites are worthy of being passed along. But in the words of author Rex Stout, "There are two kinds of statistics: the kind you look up and the kind you make up." Be careful which kind you cling to. Seek out sources you trust. And don't believe everything you read. After all, according to an EPA report, 89 percent of statistics are made up anyway. ■

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