

Eight Habits of Highly Ineffective Staffers

Your staffers can turn a dynamic exhibit into a dysfunctional booth faster than you can hand out a branded pen. Here, six exhibit experts identify the worst traits of sabotaging staffers, and prescribe the fixes to get them back on track. *By Charles Pappas*

It didn't take long for staffers inside a mining-technology exhibit at the Australian International Mining & Exploration Exhibition in Sydney to give their company the shaft. Serving beer to their visitors — and themselves — the staff quickly turned the open-bar booth into a combination of "Cheers" and "Girls Gone Wild" when one of the hostesses stripped off her top to go au naturel. The topless turvy lasted until show security SWAT-swarmed the booth and escorted the shirtless staffer away, leaving the company looking like, well, a bunch of boobs.

Unfortunately that brazen — not to mention braless — example of booth staff turning a sizzling exhibit effort into a smoking ruin isn't exactly an event of Hope Diamond rarity.

This scenario may seem as unusual as it is over the top, but it shines a light on a trade show truism: Your exhibit is only as good as its weakest link, and that link, more often than not, is your staff. But like any problem, the most effective approach is to isolate the most



egregious behaviors, then prescribe antidotes to help. So we asked six of the trade show industry's top experts, with a combined experience of more than a century, to pinpoint the most ineffective habits of booth staff, from the self-evident to the subtle, and prescribe advice on how to stop them.

1 Personalizing the Booth Space

For many booth staffers, the exhibit is a home away from home — literally. Maybe that's why a newbie staffer for an information-services business at the American Bar Association Annual Meeting brought along her knitting. When the traffic was slow, she knit one and purled two. But knitting is just one small instance of this insidious habit — it's also marked by talking or texting on cell phones, chatting to associates about weekend plans, playing sudoku, or even Rip Van Winkling. Staffers who manifest this bad habit typically ignore any attendees as long as those visitors

don't encroach on their personal space. You can also spot them by their defensive body language: arms crossed high and tight across the chest, and backs to visitors when they're on their phones or busy solving the mysteries of Japanese puzzles.

"Staffers assigned to specific areas often become very possessive and territorial of 'their' area, and they often misread their responsibilities as only extending 3 feet around them," says Matt Hill, founder of San Jose, CA-headquartered The Hill Group, which provides booth-staff training. "I do instruct staffers to treat the booth like their own home by greeting visitors promptly and politely, but some take that a little too far by unprofessionally personalizing their own space and by not feeling any responsibility for the success of the rest of the booth."

How to fix it: "Implementing a no-cell-phone policy is a start toward solving this problem," Hill says, "with exceptions made for work-related calls outside the booth when it isn't busy." But Hill also suggests pre-show training should include communicating the essential role individual staffers plays in the overall success of the show and the investment it takes to have them in the booth. "By setting the standards for professional behavior early on, you show that you just expect it," he says. In his years of experience, Hill has learned that most staffers will try to meet any expectation for their conduct that you set clearly and unambiguously.

2 Bad-Mouthing the Competition

Imagine hiring Triumph, the Insult Comic Dog, for your booth, then letting the name-calling canine off its leash. That's along the lines of what happened at a recent Supercomm show: The employees manning a software provider's exhibit decided



that knocking down their rivals was a better strategy than building up their own products. Once staffers got to conversing with visitors, they injected the names of the business's key competitors into the conversation, forecasting the abject failure of their products — if the visitor were IQ-challenged enough to use their goods in the first place. The cherry on top of this insult feast was the use of “Yo’ mamma jokes” customized, as it were, for the company’s rivals.

“While this may have been more intentionally coordinated than most examples of trade show Schadenfreude, this level of mudslinging is more likely to occur during economic downturns when everyone’s competing for a smaller piece of a shrinking pie,” notes Barry Siskind, president of the International Training and Management Co. based in Toronto. “A booth becomes a point of engagement where buyers and sellers have a dialogue that, hopefully, leads to a mutually satisfactory solution. But an uncivil war of words, or any kind of negativity, destroys that fragile encounter quickly.”

How to fix it: Once bad-mouthing begins, it’s extremely difficult to stop, in a locking-the-barn-door-after-the-horse-has-gone kind of way. Although many in-booth infractions require nothing more than a quiet word or a subtle fix, Siskind suggests that this one might require a heavier hand. He recommends dedicating a portion of your pre-show meetings to this topic in order to underscore its importance.

“Describe the behavior you want stopped and spell out the consequences should the policy against vilifying the competition be violated,” Siskind says. If a manager can’t be in the booth all the time, he advises visibly placing the most senior booth staffer in charge of ensuring the policy



is followed. While that person may not want to rat out co-workers if they start slinging sneers, his or her example and authority should be sufficient to muzzle the slurs.

3 Actively Ignoring Attendees

A staffer for a solar-energy company at the Power-Gen International show in Las Vegas stood on the edge of her booth, seemingly ready to engage one of the many prospects swarming down the aisles. But instead of proactively engaging, she let them pass by without so much as a “hello.”

Ignoring attendees and being a reluctant engager leaves the booth staffer in an observer role, conveying little interest in doing business or communicating with attendees.

“Shy staffers make eye contact, smile, and nod agreeably, but they never actually engage,” says Susan Brauer, the head of Minneapolis-based Brauer Consulting Group, a trade show consulting firm that helps companies train their booth staff. Normally outgoing, these employees freeze like a Minnesota winter when they’re asked to work the booth, and become as talkative as Marcel Marceau. You staff’s failure to launch a conversation with visitors means

attendees’ initial encounter with your booth workers is off-putting at worst or unrealized at best.

There’s more than one species of the avoiding-attentess habit, however. Take for example the staffer for a software maker at the International Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas. He shunned human booth visitors as if he was invisible. When he was inevitably cornered by an attendee with a question about the company’s products, he responded with an info dump that would fill the Grand Canyon.

More proficient at information than intimacy, these robo staffers tend to position themselves with their backs to aisles, laser focused on any screen in their vicinity. They will constantly tweak machine knobs and fidget with software, or, barring those items, fuss with your products, all to avoid any encounter of the human kind.

“These kinds of reluctant engagers often are subject matter experts and possess a deep knowledge of their products. They can do a great job imparting details about features and benefits, but can’t relate well to people at all,” says Marc Goldberg, CME, and founder of Marketech360, a training and performance measurement company based in Westboro, MA. Goldberg notes that reluctant engagers can rattle off a head-spinning amount of data in response to any attendee question. However, this communication style makes them come off more like a chatbot on a help line than an actual person who’s interested in visitors as flesh-and-blood people with needs.

How to fix it: Help your team by arming them with a stockpile of opening lines they can have ready. The cheat sheet should have five to 10 conversation openers staffers can choose from, such as:

- ▶ “I see you work for [insert company’s name]. Tell me what you do.”
- ▶ “Do you currently use our products?” If yes, “How are you using them?” If no, “What products are you currently using?”
- ▶ “What’s the most interesting thing you’ve seen at the show so far?”

“Supplying your employees with prepared icebreakers takes the burden off them,” Brauer says, “and offers a variety of approaches as individual as attendees themselves.”

That remedy may work for those who suffer from a case of cat-got-their-tongue. Unfortunately, the solution for attendee-avoiding staffers isn’t as simple as pressing Ctrl-Alt-Del. When their presence in your booth is a necessity, Goldberg suggests providing special pre-event training

pleasant, conversational ways that work their technical knowledge into responses that are conversational and form the basis of a dialogue, not an information-dump-like monologue.

4 **Partying Like it’s 1999**

The moment some staffers arrive at a trade show, they shuck off their inhibitions like Gypsy Rose Lee, armed with a firm what-happens-in-Vegas-stays-in-Vegas attitude. That was the case with a staffer for a well-known handgun manufacturer at the Shooting, Hunting, Outdoor Trade (SHOT) Show and Conference in Sin City. Each night after show hours, he bolted out the convention center’s doors to succumb to the neon sirens of the Strip, cruising and carousing as if he’d been qualifying leads at the OK Corral.

an immediate effect of detracting from your brand and reducing quality leads.” Aggravating this bad habit is the belief among some booth staff that what they do after show hours is their own business, and as long as they show up on time and work their shift, they’re fulfilling their job expectations.

How to fix it: Set high expectations and communicate clear performance requirements for working the exhibit. While it’s difficult — maybe even impossible — to police your employees after hours, you should have a written policy that addresses this issue in clear, even stark, terms. Deliver your policy in writing before the show and review your expectations at your pre-show briefing. According to Goldberg, it should state clearly that the appearance of being unprofessional, arriving late, or showing up impaired due to a night on the town is grounds for being sent home, at their own expense, with possible disciplinary measures to come. If, however, that’s not feasible, you might wish to harness their partying habits by assigning them to hospitality functions such as dinners, customer events, and the like.

For those who have a tendency for tardiness early in the morning, you could schedule them for booth shifts later in the day. Or create a competition for “best booth staffer” that includes being on time and being professional. The prize has to be valuable in the eyes of the staffers in order for them to change their behavior.

5 **Smelling Like it’s 1399**

You want your booth staff to be memorable — but not for a lack of hygiene that would bring tears to a crocodile. Linda Musgrove, president of Trade-Show Teacher Inc. in Aventura, FL, still can’t get the stench of a pipe-smoking staffer at the LegalTech New York show out of her mind. His teeth as



using real-life role-playing to help techies and other reluctant staffers get into a comfort zone of engaging and probing. “Getting techies comfortable is the key,” Goldberg says. “For example, in these training sessions, have someone assume the role of an attendee asking the staffer open- and close-ended questions they would typically receive working the show.” Then, coach staffers to answer in

Eyes bleary and bloodshot, dressed in the same clothes as the previous day that were now rumpled and rank, he showed up late for booth duty sporting unexplained facial cuts and a chipped tooth that made a whistling sound when he talked to booth visitors.

“While they may be there in body, they’re not in mind,” Goldberg says. “Visitors avoid them because of their obviously impaired status, which has

yellow as a corpse, the staff member for a communication-services company constantly took breaks to indulge his tobacco jones, then returned to the booth spewing his sulfurous, rotten-egg breath on Musgrove and a slew of other visibly blanching attendees.

Whether it's too much smoke or too little soap, individuals with pungency issues are usually so accustomed to their odor that they have no clue others around them find it noxious. For some, it may be an acute problem, such as binge drinking, that will leave them redolent of alcohol the next day in the booth. For others, it may be a recurring problem that goes unnoticed until the close confines of a trade show booth bring it to the attention of everybody's nostrils.

How to fix it: "Smelly workers are a topic booth managers often avoid, because it can be a touchy subject and

Musgrove recommends reminders before the show as to what is acceptable booth hygiene, including brushing their teeth and showering a minimum of once a day, as well as using deodorant.

Reminding your crew en masse by company-wide e-mails, briefings, or handouts will avoid embarrassing individuals by singling anyone out. But if a problem occurs at a show, Musgrove advises taking olfactory offenders aside for a private conversation and giving them specific instructions — e.g., brush your teeth, apply deodorant, acquaint yourself with Irish Spring — before allowing violators to return to booth duty.

6 Dressing for Lack of Success

At Comic-Com International in San Diego, where Princess Leia slave girl outfits are as de rigueur as three-piece

emblazoned with the words, "Ask me about my explosive diarrhea," it became clear that the only brand she was being consistent with was her own.

"To some staffers, booth duty is like a weekend party, with similar dress codes," says Doug MacLean, of Columbia, SC-based staff-training firm MacLean Marketing. "They wouldn't think of dressing up for it any more than they would for a Saturday night in their own living room." Practitioners of this habit show up for booth duty in everything from improper shoes — sandals, stiletto heels, or just stinky old sneakers — to ripped jeans, enough bling to blind Jay-Z, and T-shirts that advertise more cleavage than the Adult Entertainment Expo. Even those who opt for more conservative attire may show up in blouses and shirts stained like a painter's dropcloth with everything from nail polish to taco sauce.

How to fix it: According to MacLean, you can head off wardrobe malfunctions by establishing sartorial guidelines, or simply adopting a basic booth uniform. "Generally, staffers like having a casual-nice dress code that focuses on being as predictable as it is comfortable," he says. "The key is to establish the ground rules clearly, well before the show, so that everyone knows what to expect. That way, you have enough time to field objections or handle special accommodations."

If you do run into problems on site, our experts suggest a no-tolerance policy for serious dress-code violations. After all, the exhibit is a work environment. So if an outfit would be out of place at the home office, it most certainly isn't acceptable at a trade show filled with clients and prospects. As long as you set the expectations early and communicate them clearly, you're well within your bounds as an exhibit manager to send them back to their hotel rooms to change.



difficult to deal with," says Musgrove. For smokers, you can set rules that allow for smoke breaks but also require that after each break, they must at least wash their hands and brush their teeth or chew on a breath mint before returning to the booth. For others,

suits in a law firm, booth-staff attire tends to be more unusual than uniform. Even so, it's important to project an image that's consistent with your brand. But when a staffer for an entertainment company appeared for booth duty wearing flip-flops, cutoffs, and a T-shirt

7 Pocketing the Lead Forms

A technology company at a proprietary Microsoft Corp. trade show offered free T-shirts to attendees who filled out a lead form. But even that simple two-step process disintegrated quickly when the staff moved from collecting those forms from attendees to only collecting business cards to finally just handing out the shirts without collecting any data. Before long, the booth took on the free-for-all aura of a Somali pirate raid. When one attendee asked if she really had to fill in the lead form to get a shirt, a staffer answered: "You either have to fill in the lead form or bring me a piece of cake from the food cart over there." The attendee soon brought three pieces of cake in exchange for two shirts — and never filled out the form, either.

"Many staffers start out by diligently asking questions and filling out the forms, but by the middle of the day they're tired of asking the questions and simply ignore the process," Musgrove says.

While some staffers treat leads lazily, others approach them larcenously. Sales staff, occasionally, will simply pocket the leads, so they get the eventual credit, as opposed to the exhibit manager. "It's more likely to occur if staffers come from other divisions, such as sales, that don't report directly to the booth manager," MacLean says. These lead thieves also tend to strike in companies where leads are collected in aggregate and then randomly assigned to salespeople after the show. Rather than risk losing hot leads to a co-worker, sales staff have been known to pocket lead forms to ensure they get the commission should those leads result in a sale.

How to fix it: Emphasize the impact of leads during pre-show training, and solicit staff input for how to make the

lead collection — and distribution — process better, easier, and fair. Musgrove favors the carrot in place of the stick, recommending a rewards program for the staffer who acquires, for example, the greatest number of fully completed lead forms per day and overall, as well as additional rewards



for garnering any special kinds of leads the company is targeting. The prizes should be handed out daily as soon as the exhibit hall shuts down to reinforce the good behavior.

MacLean suggests addressing the matter of pilfered leads in a company-wide meeting where you formally state that any leads coming out of a show must go through the exhibit manager. Any leads later on that appear to have come through the show, yet did not originate via the manager, will be scrutinized closely. But MacLean cautions any such statement must not feel defensive or punitive. "I would suggest positive rewards — prizes, perhaps, such as gift cards, as well as personal recognition — for gathering leads," says MacLean, who also believes exhibitors should use the honor system. "By openly expecting your employees to do the right thing, they're much more likely to comply than if you create an atmosphere of suspicion."

8 Checking Out Early

When the entire staff for a medical company ditched their booth early at the Anti-Aging Conference and Exhibition in Orlando, FL, it may have been unprofessional, but it wasn't unusual. This habit accelerates easily because most staffers share the same problems: They need to pack up, check out of the hotel, and sprint to the airport. But ducking out early is as damaging as it is ubiquitous.

Indeed, Musgrove considers the unauthorized desertion of a trade show booth stealing from the company. "I have seen many times that the last visitor turns out to be one of the best leads," Musgrove says. And it makes sense, as that last visitor may have been shopping the show, with plans to ink a deal before returning home. "This means if the staff vacates the booth, they're effectively losing the company money by not being in the exhibit to collect that lead."

How to fix it: Musgrove prescribes a hard-and-fast rule set formally before the show via e-mail and in person, and reinforced it at the show by the same media: No leaving the booth until the show officially closes, or until the exhibit manager says it's OK to depart. Staff should be reminded to man the booth until the last attendee has left, with a written set of consequences that the exhibit workers sign off on.

Some readers may recognize a few of these behaviors in their staff. But by replacing ineffective habits with effective ones, starting with the advice given here, those habits will become, as writer, Frank Crane, once said, "Safer than rules; you don't have to watch them. And you don't have to keep them, either. They keep you." ■

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