



To err is human, and trade show and event managers are no exception. Here, six exhibiting professionals recount the major gaffes that taught them important industry lessons. *By Brian Dukerschein*





## BUDGET BREAKDOWN

While I was working with the U.S. and international finance teams to close out the budget of an overseas show, we encountered an incongruity in the numbers — to the tune of about \$75,000. This was the first time I managed this particular show from start to finish, so I felt a tremendous amount of responsibility. I had a reputation for accurately budgeting to the penny, so imagine my frustration when I couldn't figure out why the figures weren't adding up.

**The Mistake:** After crunching the numbers over and over again (and getting nowhere), the accountant I was working with finally asked me what currency conversation rates the two finance teams and I were using. Being new to international exhibiting, I never thought to check. And it turned out we were all using different rates to convert euros and British pounds into U.S. dollars.

**The Ramifications:** If it turned out the \$75,000 difference wasn't in my favor, our presence at this important show would be significantly diminished.

**The Solution:** We computed the budget using the same conversion rates, and my original calculations were higher than what our accountants were showing. So I was actually under budget. I thank my lucky stars for this, as the discrepancy was just as likely to have worked against me.

**The Lesson Learned:** I continue to check budgets regularly with the necessary teams to make sure we are completely aligned and raise red flags early on if I feel there are hiccups. And I stay up-to-date on the currency conversion rates that all our teams have agreed to adopt.

— **Carrie Higbee, CTSM, senior marketing events manager, Control4 Corp., Salt Lake City**



## TIME CRUNCH

During my first year as a trade show coordinator, I was responsible for everything connected to the second largest show on our calendar. On the morning of the show's opening day, I was about to leave the hotel to check on the booth when one of our company's sales managers informed me that he and two VIPs on our team were being sent to another hotel because this one was overbooked. I had confirmed reservations for everyone, so I immediately asked to see the hotel's registration manager.

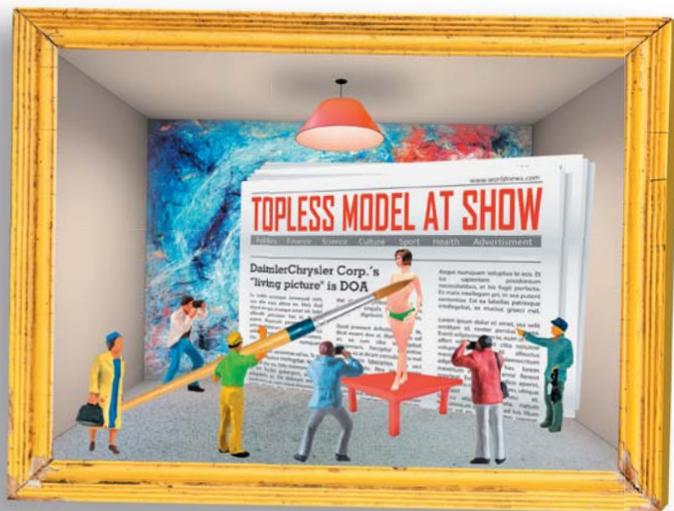
**The Mistake:** In my urgency to make things right with our reservations, I forgot that the exhibit should be my first priority. By the time I arrived on the show floor almost an hour later, my manager confronted me with the news that the booth vacuuming was still in progress and the large number of decorative plants we ordered had yet to be placed. Plus senior management and our booth staff were scheduled to arrive in just minutes.

**The Ramifications:** With the booth carpet not completely clean and the plants not in place, the impression felt by our team members when they showed up for the morning orientation would not have been a positive one, and it truly would have reflected unfavorably on me.

**The Solution:** The vacuuming crew picked up the pace after I explained the time crunch we were in. My manager and I then frantically moved the plants into the desired locations ourselves and were just finishing up when our staffers and company reps arrived.

**The Lesson Learned:** You can't be a hero to everyone, and ensuring your exhibit is ready to open on time must be your first prerogative.

— **Diane Benson, CTSM, Americas exhibits leader, GE Healthcare, Princeton, NJ**



## STOP THE PRESS!

Earlier in my career, I was the director of global event marketing at DaimlerChrysler Corp. One time, at the North American International Auto Show, we'd planned a press conference for one of our luxury Chrysler vehicles. Our idea was to associate the brand with sophisticated art, so we decided to replicate the Pageant of the Masters from the Festival of Arts of Laguna Beach, which is known for its tableaux vivants (or "living pictures") in which well-known works of art are recreated by performers who are made to look nearly identical to the originals using wigs, costumes, makeup, theatrical lighting, backdrops, etc.

**The Mistake:** We went to extreme lengths to replicate three famous pictures, one of which included a woman who wasn't fully clothed. But the performer's body was painted, and when the lighting was in place, the audience couldn't really see any of her anatomy. However, the next morning the front page of a major newspaper carried the headline "Chrysler Uses Topless Model at Auto Show."

**The Ramifications:** The headline caused quite a stir and generated a lot of negative feedback. It seemed people just read the headline and did not know the story behind it.

**The Solution:** What was done could not be undone, but in hindsight, we should have selected the art more carefully.

**The Lesson Learned:** Always remember that if there can be any misinterpretation or distortion of what your company is doing at an event, that misconception is almost always bound to cause consternation. Try to imagine all the ways your audience or the media can perceive your idea or theme, and if you have any doubts, it's probably best to go back to the drawing board.

— Donald Schmid, CTSM, global congress lead, Pfizer Inc., Lake Forest, IL



## PROMOTION COMMOTION

As the former event manager for Schneider Electric SA, I was managing an exhibit at the annual Cisco Networkers show. To incentivize attendees to take a digital "tour" of our offerings, we planned a promotion to give away USB thumb drives (this was back when they were still relatively new). The tour was managed from our registration desk, and we set up 10 tour stations, thinking that would be more than enough to handle the crowds.

**The Mistake:** We greatly underestimated the popularity of both the tour and our giveaway. Within two hours of the show opening we had a long line of attendees waiting at the registration desk, and before long the queue was winding into the aisle and causing congestion.

**The Ramifications:** Attendees were growing frustrated at the long wait time, and eventually show management said we had to do something about the 70-plus people clogging the aisle. So not only were we making an unfavorable impression on attendees, but also we were getting on show management's bad side.

**The Solution:** First, I went through the line and apologized for the delay to maintain a level of customer service. I then worked with show services to get some rope stanchions and had the line of attendees wrap around our booth.

**The Lesson Learned:** Do not underestimate the value of your promotions or giveaways, nor attendees' willingness to join crowds and lines without necessarily knowing what they're queuing up for. And enlist show services' help for quick solutions to last-minute dilemmas.

— Jason Askew, product marketing manager, onsite solutions, Cvent Inc., Tysons Corner, VA



## THE WAITING GAME

I knew my company's booth would be one of the bigger ones at an important show in New York, so I spoke to the show producer about setting up earlier in the day. I was given the go-ahead (over the phone, mind you), so I scheduled my labor accordingly. When my team and I arrived on site, we were informed that we wouldn't be allowed to set up until after lunch. Well, lunchtime came and went, but again we were told to wait because our exhibit would block access to the only working freight elevator. So my show team, labor crew, and I had to bide our time until the other exhibits arrived.

**The Mistake:** I tried to get the show producer to confirm the early setup arrangement in writing prior to the show, but to no avail. Now I was over the proverbial barrel with little recourse because I had no document stating we could set up our booth at a particular time.

**The Ramifications:** While my teams were cooling their heels, my labor costs kept inching higher and higher. And I should mention this was Super Bowl Sunday, meaning I had some pretty angry guys on my labor crew who just wanted to get home to watch the game.

**The Solution:** All I could do was rally the troops when we were given the OK to proceed with the build. We got the booth set up in time, but my budget suffered as a result. Fortunately, I had a small contingency in the budget that offset a portion of the additional labor costs.

**The Lesson Learned:** Now I make sure my requests and approvals are in writing, especially for things that are a bit outside the norm, and I confirm any approvals from show management before I arrive on site.

— **Lisa Lawley, CTSM, senior event program manager, Cisco Systems Inc., San Jose, CA**



## FIRE DEXTINGUISHER

Shortly after I arrived at Globe Manufacturing Co. LLC, I was tasked with helping set up our booth at a larger show. When we started installing the lights at the top of a 10-foot-tall tower, we discovered that one of the poles to which we were to attach a light fixture was round, but the brackets for the lights were all square. The clock was ticking, so we channeled MacGyver and improvised a solution for our square peg/round hole dilemma.

**The Mistake:** Before long, however, we began to smell something burning. Now, I should mention that Globe manufactures gear for firefighters, and I was told that it wasn't unusual to smell smoke at our industry's trade shows. But eventually a staffer looked up and saw that our improvised fixture attachment had drooped far enough to touch the now smoldering graphic panel beneath it.

**The Ramifications:** Thankfully we had remained in the exhibit, or our booth could have burned to the ground. But now we had a very damaged, highly visible graphic panel.

**The Solution:** The torched graphic was for our fire boots, all of which feature removable inserts. A member of our team had the idea to raid our inventory of boots and glue enough inserts to the panel to cover the burned hole. The patch job gave the graphic panel an added dimension and served as an artful solution to our two-alarm quandary.

**The Lesson Learned:** As exhibitors, we have to expect the unexpected and recognize that necessity is indeed the mother of invention. And when your exhibit throws you a curveball, consider input from everyone on your team.

— **Stephanie McQuade, CTSM, marketing services manager, Globe Manufacturing Co. LLC, Pittsfield, NH**