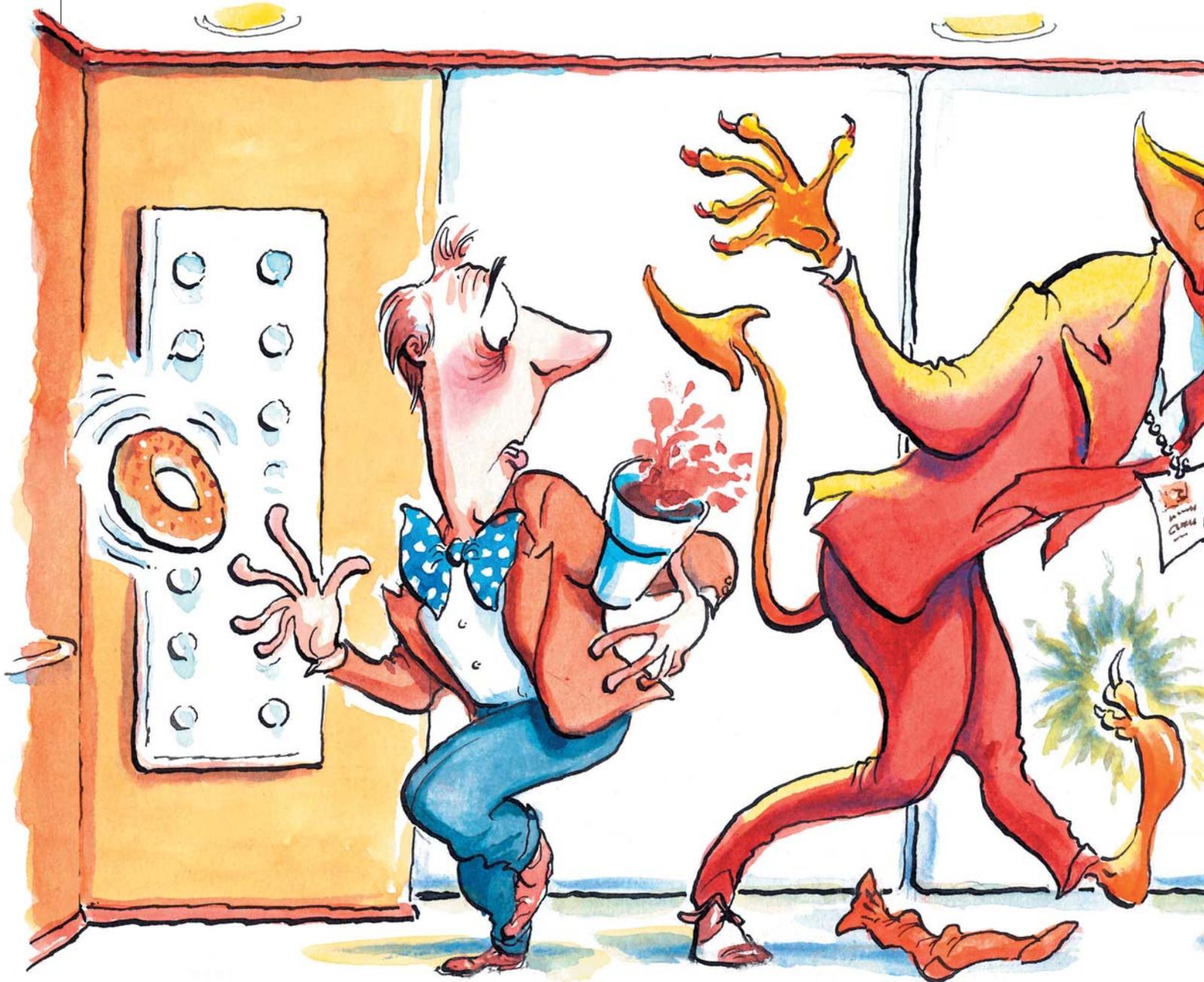


The Seven Deadly Sins of Booth Staffers

It may take a year or more to develop a heavenly trade show program and booth design that is set to skyrocket your company's bottom line, but it only takes a matter of seconds for badly behaved staffers to send it all straight to hell. *By Ben Barclay*

Ask anybody who's been in the trade show industry for a while, and he or she will be able to share some unsavory booth-staffing anecdotes about everything from mild infractions to downright devilish behavior. Reports range from staff abandoning exhibits en masse for lunch to a staffer standing barefoot in her booth because her feet hurt. And that's not even taking into consideration the cringeworthy conduct that takes place off the show floor while employees are still clad in their company-branded clothing.



In an industry built on the foundation of face-to-face interaction, every employee misstep — barefoot or otherwise — can tarnish a brand's halo and drag its bottom line straight to Lucifer's lair. But take heart. We asked four staff-training experts to identify seven deadly staffer sins and provide saintly solutions to help put even the most irreverent staffer back on the path of righteousness.

SIN Wagging Tongues

1 Indiscreet staffers can steer their companies' exhibiting programs directly into the

proverbial iceberg. Imagine stepping into a hotel elevator on your way to the exhibit hall. Seemingly oblivious to your presence, a couple of staffers decked out in company polos continue their conversation in which they roundly badmouth their boss, their company, and the show. When the elevator arrives in the lobby, they continue their detrimental dialogue as they pass more people heading to the event, leaving in their wake a fleet of innocent eavesdroppers who will surely give that company's exhibit a wide berth when they hit the show floor.

You may think this example is unlikely, but not so according to Rick Grubbs, staff trainer for Live Marketing Inc. "I have heard the most amazingly negative comments, inside information, and flat-out dirt while riding elevators, standing in coffee lines, and eating breakfast," Grubbs says.

The impact of loose-lipped staffers cannot be overstated. They are branding their companies with off-message tidbits that can torpedo months of preparation. "A trade show is more than just one booth in a sea of exhibitors," Grubbs says. "Rather, it's a complete ecosystem." That environment spans hundreds of miles, starting at the airport where a staffer may share a row with a potential lead or industry influencer headed to the same venue. And the closer one gets to the show floor, the more likely it is that a staffer's unsavory comments can stymie your company's mission.

Saintly Solution: There's no way to unring a bell, and there's no way for strangers to unhear vile, crude, and embarrassing commentary. Grubbs suggests using pre-show staff trainings back at the home office to make sure that anyone attending a show understands that mum's the word from the time they leave home until they are sleeping in their own beds again.

Staffers should assume that every person they encounter on their trip is a possible lead, a direct competitor, or an industry VIP that has the potential to trigger unwanted and unwarranted waves. "My rule of thumb," Grubbs says, "is that unless you know the birthday of every person on the elevator, keep your lips sealed."

SIN Circling the Wagons

2 Face-to-face marketing is kind of hard when staffers have their backs turned to booth visitors. Susan Brauer, head of Minneapolis-based Brauer Consulting



Group, knows this from experience. She once walked through an exhibit at GlobalShop looking for details on rental audiovisual equipment for a client and noticed all the staff huddled in conversation at the information desk. While the majority of attendees would have simply left, she crashed the soiree and notified them she was interested in obtaining more information. A lone staffer reluctantly tore himself from the conversation long enough to scan her badge and provide some perfunctory answers. Brauer had had enough.

"I just walked a few booths down the aisle and found another company that offered similar services. The staff took the time to engage me in a good conversation about my needs and offered troves of information with specific solutions," Brauer says. "Which one do you think got my business?" And since her client was looking for a long-term relationship with an AV provider, that business ended up being worth hundreds of thousands of dollars annually.

Saintly Solution: Inevitably, trade shows are a bit of a reunion in that they provide company employees, many of whom are from branches scattered across the country (or the world), a chance to reconnect and cross-pollinate ideas and strategies. But this shouldn't happen during show hours when there's fresh fruit to pick. "Exhibit managers can help their staff avoid this sin by having an early pre-show meeting to allow staff to catch up," Brauer says. "But then ensure staffers know their roles during show hours and that there's never a role that involves huddling up."

Obviously, there are times when staffers can and will chat, says Matt Hill, president of staff-training firm The Hill Group. "When it's slow, I don't mind staffers talking to each

other — as long as it's not in closed circles," he says. "But those conversations must end immediately when there is an attendee to talk to. My rule is to always greet visitors within 15 seconds of their arrival at the booth."

SIN **Celling Out**

3 You'd think that cellphones have been around long enough that we've all learned the proper etiquette. However, just about every meeting, wedding, and funeral reveals how badly people behave when their mobile devices are at hand. From sneak peeks at notifications to ringtones fit for a college dance club blaring at the most inopportune times, smartphone faux pas are ubiquitous, and the trade show floor is no exception.

Walk any exhibit hall and you'll see just how commonplace this sin really is. Or worse yet, step outside your own booth and turn around. Chances are you'll see staffers swiping Tinder profiles, snapping with friends back home, or checking up on their fantasy football teams. And the situation only gets worse with Millennials.

Visitors probably don't care about the latest cat video your staffer posted to Twitter, and they definitely don't want to twiddle their thumbs as reps scroll their Facebook feeds. "Answering a quick call, responding to a text, and checking emails are distractions when 100 percent of a staffer's attention needs to be on visitors and those who are potential visitors," says Barry Siskind, president of International Training and Management Co.

Saintly Solution: It's not that smartphones have absolutely no place on the show floor, according to Siskind. "If used properly, electronics are a wonderful way to immediately access important information asked for by a visitor," he says. In other words, if a quick check of the company's website

is necessary to secure some needed information to keep the engagement moving forward, then by all means check away. "However, it's imperative that each booth staffer understands that's where it stops," Siskind says.

For the most part, our experts agree that cellphones should be out of sight and out of mind during the show. For frequent violators who just cannot help themselves, consider giving them a trial separation by having them stash their gadgets in the storage closet until their break time. If cellphones absolutely must be in staffers' pockets, then they should be set to silent. And no, that does not mean vibrate, because every tiny buzz is enough to make reps break out into a cold sweat if they can't check it right away.

SIN **Working Undertime**

4 At the Print show in Chicago, a pair of staffers for a well-known printing company felt like their jobs were done about an hour before the close of the show, so they plopped down on some stools at the welcome desk and engaged in slouched conversation. An attendee in the publishing business briskly walked up and asked for a manager by name. With no hint of wrongdoing, one rep informed the visitor that he didn't know where the manager was and resumed his conversation. It was obvious that both staffers had mentally checked out and were unwilling to be of any use. So the attendee simply pivoted, left the booth, and likely took his business to a nearby competitor.

While the lounging staffers' sin was egregious and unprofessional at the worst possible location, it's far from unusual. Last year, one of the most talked-about exhibits at the International Consumer Electronics Show shut down several hours early, and the staff completely abandoned

the booth. And at the same show this year, staffers in several booths routinely told attendees "Sorry, the booth is closed" 15 minutes or more before the end of show-floor hours each day. "Checking out early isn't just rude; it could also be costing you business," Siskind says. "It's not uncommon for key decision-makers looking to close some deals to walk the show when it's ending to avoid the hassles of waiting. But if you're not there or have mentally clocked out, you're not likely to snag that lead or get that sale."

Saintly Solution: "If you consider the total cost of exhibiting and the finite amount of show-floor time, your company is likely investing thousands of dollars per hour that your booth is open," Hill says. "Leaving early just throws that money away." Conveying your per-hour investment to staffers helps them understand the financial impact of their behavior.

Managers also need to make sure staffers understand that their job is to be on point from the minute they step into the booth until they are relieved of duty — and not a moment before. Siskind suggests keeping energy high by reminding staffers to take breaks throughout the day. "If you wait until your staffers are frazzled before forcing them to relax, they're more likely to fade before the day is done," he says. "But encouraging them to take occasional breaks will help ensure that your staff has the energy to keep selling through the final bell."

SIN Pounding the Pulpit

5 Every exhibit manager yearns for staffers that fiercely stand behind a company's mission and products. "They're the sort of reps that know every nuance and spec about the product, how it's positioned against the competition, and how to fieldstrip it blindfolded in less than

90 seconds," Grubbs says. "They believe in their hearts that if people just took the time to learn about the product, it would do no less than save civilization as we know it." That sounds like a dream team, right?

Unfortunately, these evangelists often fail to notice when a visitor's eyes glaze over in the first 20 seconds of an impassioned and unrelenting 10-minute spiel. Too often, staffers fail to ask attendees any questions, leaving them passive and uninvolved. "Most booth staffers are truly dedicated to their fundamental job, which is to provide attendees with as much information as possible," Grubbs says. "Problems arise when that is their sole focus, and they only communicate in 'full-time transmit mode,' assuming the attendee is already well along the path to understanding and just about ready to buy." This situation is common when your booth is heavily staffed



with product engineers and specialists who have a lot of personal investment in the product they're talking about.

Saintly Solution: "First, you have to find out who you are talking to," Grubbs says. "Is the visitor a quality prospect, or are you about to waste 10 minutes with a tire-kicker?" And the quickest way to determine that is through inquiry. Hill agrees, and stresses personalizing each conversation. "Don't just talk about what you think is interesting, or you might bore the visitor," Hill says. "Customize each conversation by asking questions that focus on what he or she cares about."

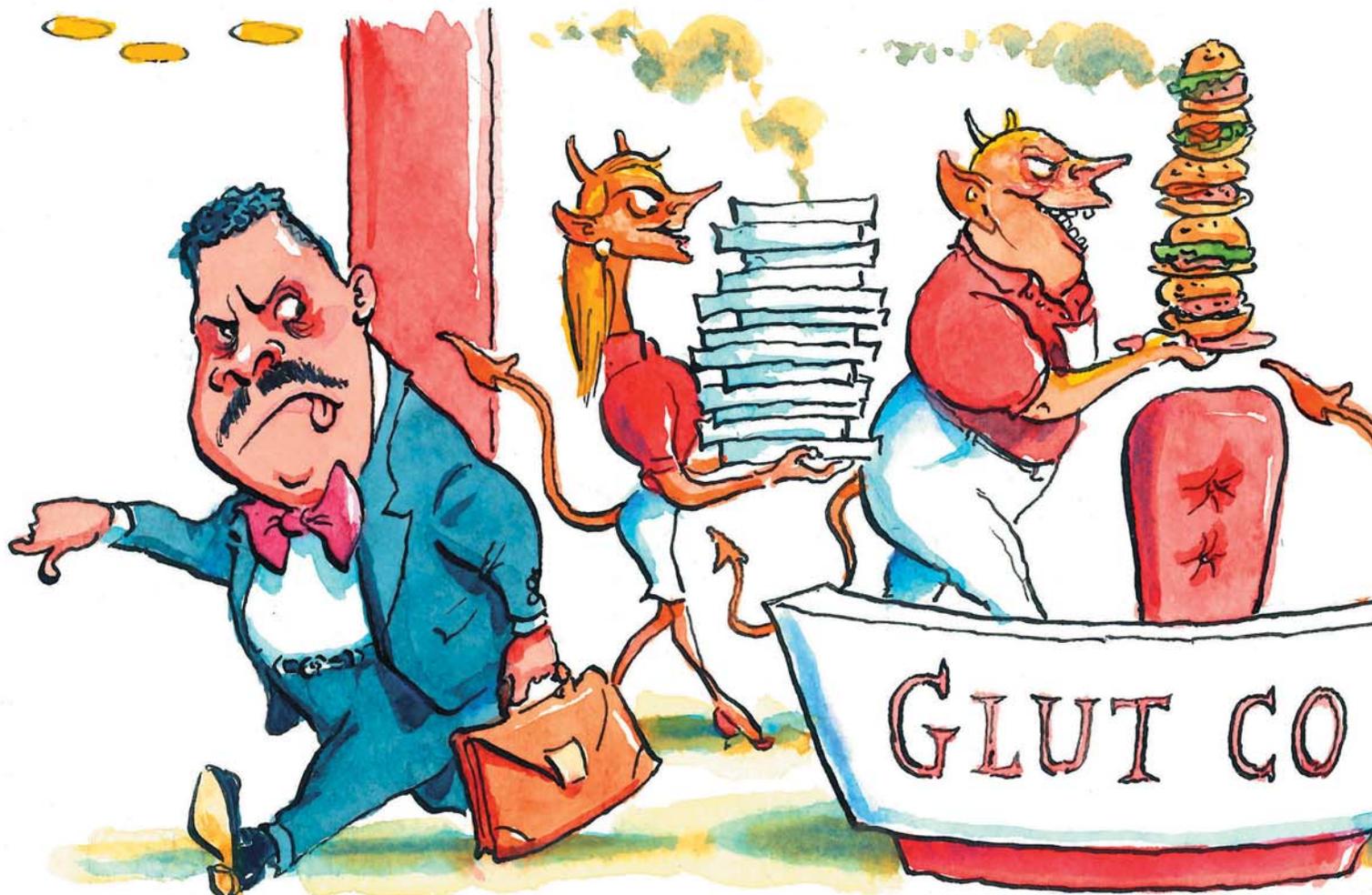
Eventually your staffers will need to deliver a call to action to keep the engagement moving forward, but your team only gets to that point after finding out what motivates the buyer. "Always remember that if you are asking the questions, you are driving the conversation," Grubbs says.

SIN Chewing the Fat

6 There may be nothing as off-putting as trying to talk to a staffer who has half an egg-salad sandwich wedged in his or her mouth. But it is more than just the potentially unsavory sight of masticating messengers that's the problem. Brauer recounted a recent experience where all five staffers took their lunch break together at the meeting table of their company's 20-foot in-line during the busiest show-floor hours. And it wasn't just a quick bite — it included a smorgasbord of sandwiches, chips, and drinks littering the table. "While it's a mystery to me why a company ever lets its staff eat in the booth at all, this was beyond the pale," she says. "They may as well have put up a 'Do Not Disturb' sign while they munched away, laughing and chatting and letting their possible target audience just pass by in the aisle."

Hill feels the same way and prefers staffers treat the booth as an extension of their homes — just not their dining rooms. "When guests come into your home, you typically offer them food and beverage if you happen to be having some," he says. "Can you imagine eating in front of your guests without offering them what you're having? If you want to drink anything other than water or eat anything at all, you have to have enough to offer every visitor in your exhibit."

Saintly Solution: Obviously, staffers must eat and drink. A booth full of reps wilting like three-week-old lettuce is of no use to anyone. You might think having a prearranged, rotating schedule of lunch breaks is the ideal solution to this problem, but Hill has a better one. "It works best to send people to eat when it's slow," Hill says. "You should make in-the-moment decisions about letting staffers leave



for lunch because you never can be quite certain when the booth will be busy. Tell your staff ahead of time that lunch breaks will be within a range of times in case the booth is full of clients and prospects."

However, leaving the exhibit for nourishment may not always be possible, especially in smaller booths that only have one or two staffers. In that case, it's best to lay out a few ground rules. One, stress the need for low-odor fare, i.e., you probably don't want your booth or your staff's breath reeking of onions. Two, try to keep it out of sight. "If there's not a storage closet reps can step into and eat a snack, there's always the aisle," Grubbs says. And three, clean up. "Your booth is the face of your brand," Grubbs continues. "How it looks is always communicating something to potential customers, and stained coffee cups cluttering the demo area

or empty pizza boxes stacked next to the conference room door is akin to smiling at your prospect with a smear of mayo on your lip."

SIN Shooting Blanks

7 You've heard that there are no dumb questions, but Brauer disagrees. Her least favorite query is when a staffer asks "Can I answer any questions for you?" The majority of the time, an attendee is going to supply the knee-jerk "No. I'm just looking" and then make a beeline for the exit as quickly as possible. That's not necessarily because the visitor is disinterested. Rather, it's likely the attendee simply doesn't have any questions prepared, and since the staffer is essentially demanding an answer, the visitor falls back on the default response.

Unfortunately for your lead count, your staffer may have just allowed potential profit to exit the booth, as

a better line of inquiry would have yielded improved results. "Asking a lazy question like 'Do you have any questions?' is a crutch that staffers use when they don't know how to start a conversation," Brauer says.

Saintly Solution: Providing staffers with a few innocuous icebreakers will have attendees feeling less like a surprised kitten that is eyeing escape routes and more like one waiting for a belly rub. "Exhibit managers need to arm their staff with some good open-ended conversation starters," Brauer suggests. "Then give them time to role-play so staffers can find one or two that feel the most natural and comfortable for them." Brauer proposes the following options.

- ▶ The soft opening: "Tell me, what's the best thing you've seen so far on the show floor?"
- ▶ The let's-get-to-know-each-other: "I see you work for company XYZ. What do you do there?"
- ▶ The getting-after-it: "Have you ever used any of our products?" If the response is yes, follow up with "Tell me about your experience." If no, "Tell me about what your firm does."

In the final icebreaker, notice that either way respondents answer the initial question, staffers shouldn't directly launch into sales-pitch mode. According to Brauer, asking an open-ended question or two helps reps discern if an attendee is a qualified prospect and then choose which direction to steer the conversation.

So, there you have them: the seven most common staffer sins known to our experts. You probably even recognize a few of these malefactors lurking inside your own exhibits. However, no sinner is beyond redemption. If you follow the saintly solutions put forth by our sages, you'll soon find choirs of angels — or at least the executives in the C suite — singing your praises. **E**

