



Stealing the Show: The Not-So-Grey Areas of Exhibiting Ethics

By Becci Ambroe

Don't steal. Don't cheat. These are lessons learned at a young age, and they seem to be fairly black and white. A young girl knows not to steal money from her mom's wallet to go to a movie. A young man knows not to cheat on a test in school. Why? Because they were taught that stealing and cheating are wrong. A person should *earn* things. Simple. Then, they grow older, and justifications for poor choices creep into their decision-making. Because she didn't receive a promotion, the young girl decides to take home a few office supplies from work. Since he already pays the government enough money, the young man decides to fudge some of the numbers on his income taxes. These are such little things, they tell themselves. What's the big deal? It's not like she's Bernie Madoff. It's not like he's Lance Armstrong. The big deal is that sometimes the clear-cut, black and white scenarios of childhood become grey, with justifications, in adulthood. In the exhibiting industry, these "grey" areas of unethical behavior often appear as Suitcasing or Outboarding; however, upon closer examination, these practices are blatant examples of stealing and cheating, and there is nothing grey or justifiable about them.

Defining Suitcasing and Outboarding

Suitcasing and Outboarding are, in fact, two of the black and white no-no's of the exhibiting industry. According to the International Association of Exhibitions and Events (IAEE), "Suitcasing is the act of soliciting business in the aisles during the exhibition or in other public spaces, including another company's booth or a hotel lobby."¹ Suitcasing, then, is the attempt of soliciting business or selling products and services *without* paying exhibitor fees. Likewise, the IAEE website defines Outboarding as "the creation of a concurrent event that is related to an existing exhibition or event but that is not sanctioned by the organizer and which seeks to benefit from the audience the organizer attracts."² Outboarding is basically stealing the show's audience. Although the need for defining these practices seems disheartening, it's important to note that most exhibitors follow the show organizers' rules. Exhibitors pay their booth and attendance fees; they pay for shipping, drayage, and I&D; they pay for their own marketing campaigns; they may even pay to be a show sponsor. In short, they *earn* the right to exhibit and to be associated with the trade show. Suitcasers and outboarders have not earned that right.

¹ IAEE Website. "Suitcasing Tool Kit." http://www.iaee.com/resources/tools/suitcasing_toolkit

² IAEE Website. "IAEE Website." <http://www.iaee.com/article?id=183>

One of the major justifications for suitcasing and outboarding is often lack of money. Start-up companies and small businesses claim that they can't compete with the corporate giants. Some budgets are so tight that businesses can't afford the admission fees to shows, much less the price of booth space, but "they have a really great product," or "they just need a few good leads," or "they just want to present a couple of pitches..." And there it is. Those huge butts. Hello, grey area! There is a valid point, there. How many companies can and do spend millions of dollars on their marketing/exhibiting campaigns? (*Think of those companies who are so huge and well-known that their booth graphics are simply the company logo; Nike, Apple, Microsoft, McDonald's, Target, and Pepsi spring to mind.*) It could be argued that the "rule benders" want to play by the rules, but they just can't, literally, afford to do so.

The other major justification for suitcasing and outboarding is pure ignorance. Lack of knowledge and experience identify those business owners who just don't see "what the big deal is." Being new to the industry, they may not realize how much time, money, and planning are necessary to create a solid presence at a trade show. All of this effort, on the part of honest exhibitors, is justified. According to Exhibit Surveys, Inc.'s 2012 Trend Report in *Exhibitor Magazine*, "On average, nearly half (45%) of attendees don't plan to participate in any other exhibitions or events, meaning companies aren't likely to interact with them (exhibitors) if they choose not to exhibit at the show."³ This number definitely demonstrates the power and value of exhibiting at a trade show. It could also explain why a company might want to "bend" the rules in order to attend.

The Cost of Exhibiting

Budgets for exhibiting at a trade show are created well in advance of the event. There are books, charts, checklists, and countless other ways to anticipate how much money will actually be spent per show. For a clearer picture of these expenses, Exhibit Surveys, Inc. looked at the "Cost-per-Visitor Reached." In 2011, their annual trend report noted that it cost the average exhibitor \$177 to give "booth exposure" to a "potential audience" attendee. It cost the exhibitor \$274 to give "meaningful engagement" to a "potential audience" attendee. ("Attendee" means a targeted, potential lead or sale.)⁴ In other words, it cost the exhibitor \$177 for an attendee to remember the booth; it cost an additional \$97 for booth staff/attendee interaction. Again, this is an average. It considers all booth sizes in all industries. The message, however, is clear. Exhibitors pay quite a bit of money to make a sale. That's the big deal. That's why many shows have policies against these practices. That's why suitcasing and outboarding are not grey areas; they are the black and white cases of stealing and cheating.

Be a Part of the Solution

This "grey" area of ethics is giving the exhibiting industry a black eye, and show organizers are very aware of the problem. They should be. Organizers also spend a great deal of time, money, and planning to promote their trade shows. As organizers, it is in their best interest to protect exhibitors' investments by having a "no tolerance" policy against the practices of suitcasing and outboarding. As a result, show websites usually list the event's specific policies. They may also note how to report violation incidents. Despite theses and other efforts, show organizers still need the support of both exhibitors and attendees. Show organizers can't be at all places at once. With that idea in mind, here are some tips to help the management:

³ Stanton, Travis and Sequeira, Ian. "Trade Show Trends." *Exhibitor Magazine*. April, 2013. <http://www.exhibitoronline.com/topics/article.asp?ID=1355>

⁴ Exhibit Surveys Website. "Trends." <http://www.exhibitsurveys.com/trends>

Be a savvy attendee.

- Don't accept "freebies" or literature/handouts from folks who aren't exhibiting. (If someone offers you something, away from a booth, ask for his or her booth number.)
- Don't attend events, especially "off site" ones, which conflict with show times. Again, be certain that the event hosts are, in fact, exhibitors at the show.
- Know the difference between auditing and suitcasing. Auditing the show means that the attendee is determining whether or not a show is worth a future exhibiting investment. Networking will occur. Blatant soliciting and/or the active seeking of business *will not* occur. There is a difference.
- Report questionable behavior or suspicious activity to show management.

Be a conscientious exhibitor.

- Be aware of the organizer's policies. Follow them.
- Don't "share" booth space, unless it's approved by the show organizers.
- If you host an event in conjunction with the show, "clear it" with the show management. At the very least, be certain that the event does not conflict with expo and seminar schedules.
- Report questionable behavior or suspicious activity/events to show management. Follow-up on it. Be certain that the show organizers are doing their part to protect your investment.
- Use post-show surveys to comment, positively or negatively, about any issues that occurred.

Exhibiting at a trade show is expensive because trade shows offer unique and valuable opportunities for businesses and customers to connect. Suitcasers and outboarders steal that connection. They don't "bend" the rules; they break them, and it is a big deal. Regardless of the justification, the result is a black and white example of unethical behavior. Don't steal. Don't cheat. It's as simple as that.

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