

EXHIBITOR Magazine: Major Research Study on Sustainable Exhibiting

Everybody, it seems, is “going green” these days—looking for ways to lessen their impact on the environment and infuse a greater degree of ecological responsibility into their operations. But what about the trade show and exhibit industry? Are companies in that sector following suit? That was the principal question that EXHIBITOR magazine wanted to answer in an industry survey for which the publication enlisted Alterra Group's help.

A Need for Insights on an Emerging Issue

EXHIBITOR magazine was founded in 1982 and is a recognized leader in trade show and event management education—providing techniques, tactics and trends a company can use to successfully market products and services through trade shows. Written by a full-time editorial staff, EXHIBITOR has become the definitive source on every element of exhibiting. In 2007, the CEO/editor-in-chief of EXHIBITOR, Lee Knight, believed one element of exhibiting that was becoming increasingly important was the issue of “green” exhibiting. Knight had seen a gradual uptick in interest among both companies exhibiting in trade shows as well as the vendors that supply trade show display equipment, accessories and services. Yet although EXHIBITOR and other related magazines had published periodic articles on various aspects of green exhibiting, no substantive research had been done to date on the topic. And therein Knight spotted an opportunity. “With the massive amount of publicity the green movement was garnering in business and in consumers' lives, we decided it was time to quantify the economic impact of the green movement on the trade show industry,” Knight recalls.

Having determined the time was right for such an effort, Knight decided to look for outside help in the research initiative. “We have our own research capabilities in house that we use for various projects, but we realized that the green

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research was too important an initiative to have our folks work on as part of the collection of projects they juggle daily,” said Knight. “We felt that the green project required full-time attention, and that we would best be served if we found an established research partner with a lot of experience doing this type of work.”

In discussing his proposed research effort with Jim Gilmore, a founder of Strategic Horizons LLC and frequent speaker at EXHIBITOR-sponsored events, Knight learned about Alterra Group and its expertise in conducting in-depth research projects for professional services organizations. Knight contacted the firm to learn how we might help the magazine design and conduct the research EXHIBITOR was considering.

During several initial discussions between Alterra Group and EXHIBITOR's leadership team, it became clear not only that the magazine's appetite for doing the green research was strong, but also that interest in the research was great among trade show equipment and accessory suppliers. In particular, suppliers were keen to find out the extent to which exhibiting companies themselves considered green a priority and how much of their trade show budgets they were willing to dedicate to green options if available.

With little such validation of green's importance available to date, suppliers were reluctant to invest heavily in developing green alternatives. Supplier executives felt that EXHIBITOR's proposed research could go a long way

toward helping to quantify the business opportunity for green solutions and generally raise the visibility of the issue across the trade show community.

EXHIBITOR and the Alterra Group team led by Bernie Thiel ultimately agreed that a comprehensive survey of both executives at suppliers and those responsible for trade shows and events at exhibiting companies would meet the needs of suppliers and be an effective first step in what EXHIBITOR hoped to be a series of research efforts on green exhibiting.

Designing and Executing the Research

EXHIBITOR and Alterra Group kicked off the research project in August 2007 with a series of discussions in which the research team explored the key aspects of green exhibiting the research would cover. Given the vastness of the topic, and the fact that little had been published on the issue to date, this was not a simple exercise. As with any new research initiative, the temptation to “boil the ocean”—cover too many aspects of the topic to gain sufficient insights—was great. Therefore, Alterra Group recommended the effort begin with the creation of a set of hypotheses that would guide the research. These hypotheses would serve as formal guideposts to help ensure that the research activities remain focused, and would force the research team to think about the logic of the research by presenting a preliminary story about the topic the magazine believed to be true (with the veracity of the story eventually supported or refuted by the research).

Working closely with the magazine's leadership, Alterra Group helped create two sets of research hypotheses—one for the survey of exhibiting companies and one for suppliers. The former were centered on the mindset of the trade show products and services buyer: how predisposed trade show marketing managers were toward sustainability as a whole and in their jobs; what obstacles to broader adoption of green exhibit solutions existed in their organizations; the extent to which they've already adopted, as well as plan to adopt, green exhibit solutions; and their overall satisfaction with the green solutions their suppliers currently provide. The second set of hypotheses was focused on supplier executives and their perspectives on and performance in green exhibit solutions: how interested they were in green initiatives; the extent to which they have increased their green options and those options' resulting impact on the business; and obstacles they perceived to being able to offer more green options. Together, both sets of hypotheses were geared toward answering the overarch-

ing research question: What is the economic impact of the green movement on the trade show industry?

Once the research team agreed on the hypotheses, Alterra Group developed two survey questionnaires: one based on the exhibiting company hypotheses and one derived from the supplier hypotheses. These questionnaires would serve as the core research tools that would uncover the data necessary to prove or disprove the hypotheses. The EXHIBITOR team administered both survey questionnaires via the Web, with participants randomly selected from the magazine's subscriber and advertiser bases. After several weeks in the field, the survey generated responses from nearly 500 exhibitors and more than 100 suppliers.

After data collection was closed, EXHIBITOR and Alterra Group spent several weeks analyzing the data and mapping the findings back to the hypotheses. In doing so, the research team could determine whether its proposed storyline “held water” and, ultimately, the impact that green was having—and could have—on the trade show industry. The overall findings of the research were this: There is considerable interest in green exhibiting across both exhibitors and suppliers, and that interest has translated into some small, measured steps toward adopting green exhibit solutions. Furthermore, interest in green exhibit solutions is likely to increase in the coming year, as is the percentage of trade show budgets that exhibitors will earmark for such products and services. For their part, a large percentage of suppliers expect to substantially increase the number and variety of green alternatives they offer—in some cases, nearly doubling the percentage of their product line that green solutions encompass. All told, the survey found that a major untapped market for green solutions does exist, but a number of obstacles that currently impede broader adoption of green solutions across the industry must be overcome for that market to become a reality.

Armed with the results of the analysis, Alterra Group produced a series of documents designed to bring the research findings to market. The first of these was an executive summary of the results—“An Inconvenient Booth: The Economic Impact of the Green Movement on the Trade Show Industry”—which EXHIBITOR designed and published as a supplement to its November 2007 issue (and which received significant advertising support from many exhibit solutions suppliers). The summary was followed by an in-depth research report that explored the survey findings in detail from many different angles; a news release announcing the results of the research, which was disseminated by

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EXHIBITOR to relevant media outlets; and a PowerPoint presentation on the research findings to be used in conference speeches. EXHIBITOR also used electronic versions of the full report and the executive summary as the foundational content for an online portal focused on the green movement in the trade show industry—providing a kick-start for ongoing dialogue on this important topic.

Developing the Voice of Authority

When the research report was released in the autumn of 2007, the market's reaction was swift and positive, according to the EXHIBITOR team. Within hours of the announcement of the results, approximately one dozen environmentally focused organizations had issued alerts to their constituents highlighting the findings and providing links to the report on EXHIBITOR's website. This provided the magazine with broad exposure among an entirely new audience. A presentation on the findings at the Exhibit Designers and Producers Association was filled at "double capacity," said John Pavek, EXHIBITOR's vice president of publications. The interest in the session was so intense, "You could have made it a general session and filled the room," Pavek noted. And strategic partners that supported the research "loved it," according to Knight. "One of the strategic partners said to me, 'We're very proud to be associated with this research because in 15 years, I want to look back and say we were part of the leading edge of this paradigm shift in our industry,'" Knight said.

The EXHIBITOR leadership team themselves also are pleased with the end result—and found the process used to get there rewarding. Pavek noted he found the approach Alterra Group took to research design quite valuable. "Creating hypotheses, and using those hypotheses to drive the development of the survey questionnaire, was a great way to construct the research," he said. "I learned a lot from that that I can apply to other surveys we do." Randy Acker, EXHIBITOR'S chief operating officer, thought the project capitalized on the strengths of both organizations. "The research and analysis capabilities Alterra Group brought to the table were hugely beneficial to our ability to pull this off," Acker noted. "Combining those skills with our own ability to present information in a way that is easily understood, we were able to complete a massive undertaking in a tight time frame, while still doing our day jobs, and end up with an awesome product."

In all, the EXHIBITOR leadership team said the research effort has been a major success. It was the first true objective research project on the topic of green exhibiting and as such has reinforced EXHIBITOR's image as a thought leader and voice of authority on key issues affecting the trade show community. As Lee Knight put it, "The combination of the depth of the research, and how the report read and looked, really enhanced our image in the eyes of the industry. In some small way, it's made us caretakers of the industry." ▲



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