

## Best Practices in Industry Event Staffing

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### Event Staff Management: The Missing Element

The temporary staffers at your show who interface with your attendees and exhibitors are for a short time the face of your organization. Yet hiring temporary staff for a trade show or large industry event often gets delayed to the last minute in the press of more urgent tasks. Somehow, it seems less important than setting up the schedule of events, dealing with exhibitors, getting the programs printed, lining up hotels and planning the transportation logistics. Somewhere near the tail end of the process, someone picks up the phone and talks to a temp agency or the Convention and Visitors Bureau (CVB).

If that is your modus operandi, then you may also be familiar with the following

- Angry, backed-up lines of attendees who stood in the wrong line for an hour before being told to go stand in another long line
- The cold and flu season that left you short-staffed with no trained replacements
- Staffers who showed up without reporting instructions (or with the wrong instructions) and you had to sort them out and make sure they were placed productively.
- Staffers who were mismatched to the position and you had to replace them.
- Unfilled orders because the order was received at the last minute, resulting in unassigned and untrained staffers reporting in every day who had to be trained from scratch.
- Staffers who were told only to “dress professionally,” resulting in staff that could not be told apart from attendees or exhibitors.

I could go on, but I think my point is obvious; staffing is a function that should be managed well in advance of the event. It is certainly something that should be handled by people who understand the mechanics and details of event staffing.

The missing element is *management* of the temporary staff. It is widely accepted in business that to bring out the best performance, employees must be trained for their jobs, supervised to assure performance to well-established standards, incentivized to perform well, and rewarded when they do. But when dealing with *temporary* staff, people tend to overlook these basic, proven tenets of management.

If temporary staffers are not managed well, their performance will be random. There will always be the person that performs above and beyond because it's his or her nature. The rest will perform only as well as they have been trained and managed. As for emergencies



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and unforeseen contingencies — good management anticipates and provides for these. If there is no management in place, there is no good way of dealing with the ensuing disruption of your event.

“So,” you might say, “I can see that I shouldn’t use some random temp agency for my show. But surely the Convention and Visitors Bureau must know what they’re doing.”

Well, yes and no. CVBs provide staff, and the staff does have “supervisors.” Usually, the supervisor coordinates lunches and breaks, and that is the sum and substance of their contribution. CVBs do not train, incentivize, reward, or plan for contingencies. In fact, event staffing is such a problematic and difficult task that many CVBs are abandoning this service.

### **The Ideal Event Staffer**

The ideal event staffer is made, not born. You can’t take the average temporary worker, throw him onto the convention center floor, and expect him to instantly become an acceptable representative of your organization. I have developed a template for the ideal staffer, and every individual who sets a foot on the show floor through my company must exhibit these qualities:

- Dedicated to customer service
- Smiles at people: warm and friendly.
- Alert to opportunities to help.
- Genuinely interested. Calls people by name. Generous with praise.
- Believes that the success of the event reflects upon them personally.
- Well-groomed and professionally attired.
- Experienced. Tries to troubleshoot issues before they become problems, but stays calm under fire.
- Committed and dependable.
- Works well without supervision, yet accepts the authority of the manager.
- Exhibits good judgment.
- Learns quickly.
- Likes the hustle and bustle of the event floor.
- Understands that he or she represents the sponsoring organization, and takes responsibility for any attendee’s problem.

Needless to say, molding every staffer into this inviting and friendly image requires deliberate selection to start with, and specialized training to follow.

Deliberate selection begins with the above template and a screening tool to identify the people who fit the template. I provide these tools to my staffing partners in every market, and train them in the screening and orientation process. The local staffing companies are the ones most familiar with their own market and labor pool. I bring them up to speed on the specialized needs of event staffing and train them in recruiting these critical people.

Once staffers are selected, they are trained on-site prior to the event. They are trained in general principles of event staffing (“Treat every attendee like visiting royalty”), they are trained for their specific role, and they are trained in the specifics of your show.

Each show is different. A given medical convention may be held every year at the same convention center, but the bookstore may be located in Room 1B instead of 6A, and the press room may be on the second floor instead of the first this year. Every year, the program is different, and there may have been changes to the layout of the convention center. Every member of the show staff is walked through the convention center and briefed on show specifics.

The end result of this process is a team that is pumped and enthusiastic about being there, knows what's going on and treats every visitor with warmth and a helpful attitude.

### **Incentivizing Temporary Staff**

Perhaps the reason people don't work harder at incentivizing temps is because they think it can't be done. After all – here today and gone tomorrow, right?

Nothing could be further from the truth.

Temporary workers respond to incentives every bit as much as full time employees. But there must be clear expectations as to what constitutes acceptable, unacceptable and exceptional performance. Once the expectations are understood and the reward system is clear, many temporary staffers will eagerly rise to the occasion (especially as they have been selected for their professionalism from the start).

Recognizing excellence and rewarding it also helps to attract the same good people year after year. So even though the staff for each show is temporary, many of the same great people work the same show every time it comes to their town. This helps to create a remarkable degree of consistency from year to year.

Of course, rewarding exceptional performance means that performance must be observed and noted. Managers must be on the spot at all times, for reasons that go far beyond incentivization.

### **Managing Temporary Staff**

Even well trained staffers require management. They need to know that their timely (or late) arrival has been noted. They need to know that if they are performing above and beyond the call of duty that it will be acknowledged. And, no matter how good the selection process, there are sometimes last-minute tweaks required to make things go more smoothly.

For example, once a show is underway, it may become obvious that additional staff is required to help with crowd control. The manager will see the situation and move staff around as required — or call in trained standby staff. Our approach is to always train 10% more people than the order specifies. (The client doesn't pay for the additional workers unless it is necessary to put one of these standby staffers to work at the show). We also bring in standby staff when people get sick, don't show up, or just don't work out.

Managers must be on the floor at all times, observing, solving issues before they become problems, making sure that everything is running well. There is no such thing as hands-off management when working with temporary event staff.

### **Achieving Consistent Quality**

Many organizations hold multiple shows during the year at multiple locations around the country. This can impact the quality and consistency of the show, because it is obviously not possible to have the same temporary staffers at each show. It is impossible for most organizations' event managers to spend the time required to recruit, train and manage temporary staffers in multiple venues; they simply don't have the time or resources.

The ideal event staffer is a certain kind of person; the trick is to find these people in every venue. Our answer is to partner with local staffing agencies to achieve a consistent recruiting process. They know their city and their labor pool; we provide the tools, training and expertise that enable them to find the right people. Once the workers are selected, we train them and our managers work with them.

This approach has resulted in both high quality performance and highly consistent performance from one venue to the next, and from one event to the next.

## **Saving Time and Money**

“Wait a minute,” you may say. “If there’s a layer of management happening that I didn’t have before, doesn’t that cost more money?”

Of course, if you hire someone to recruit, train and manage temporary staffers, there will be additional charges. But there are savings to be realized as well.

First, good managers will continually be evaluating whether or not the event is staffed at an appropriate level. If things slack off, he may cut staff to save you money. On the other hand, if things are busier than anticipated, she may call in the standbys to keep bottlenecks from forming and help with crowd control.

Good managers will also replace people who aren’t working out and solve issues on the floor before they can escalate into full-blown problems. This may not save you hard cash, but it does guarantee that your money is well spent.

Probably most valuable of all, event staff management saves you time. The entire staffing function is taken off your plate and handled. You don’t have to recruit, train, or supervise the staff. You don’t have to solve personnel problems on the event floor. You don’t have to train replacement or incremental staff, if needed. Your time is now reserved for the myriad other tasks involved in planning and implementing an industry event.

It can all probably be boiled down into one statement: good event staff management equals peace of mind. And that’s worth something.