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Stepping Up to Multi-level Exhibits

By Valerie A.M. Demetres



Photo courtesy of ECOS, Inc.

For an exhibit manager, trying to get everything into one exhibit can sometimes be a nightmare. Where do clients go for a product demonstration? Is there any place for attendees to sit and talk with booth staff? What about storage of the multitude of boxes and items that seem to accumulate in the booth? Even a break area for staff would come in handy if the space were available.

Now imagine that the company wouldn't have to contract for more booth space, and could still add these things to the booth. Simply, many companies have opted lately to use a second deck on an exhibit rather than expand out onto the floor. Why?

"I think the advantages fall into show presence, space maximization and cost effectiveness," says Mick Parrott, president of ICON Inc. in Fort Wayne, Ind. The visual impact on the show floor is obvious, Parrott says. In addition, a second deck offers the option of custom enhancing for a dramatic effect.

Intel Inc. needed just that effect and achieved it with a custom exhibit by Chicago-based George P. Johnson Co. The booth, used at Telecom '96 in Geneva, featured a theater on the first level. The second level housed an open seating area, the projection equipment for the theater, a hands-on demonstrations area and conference rooms.

Jeff Bartle, design manager at George P. Johnson, worked on the Intel project. "There was a need to tell a marketing message," he says. "We developed a theater on the first level with queue lines that led you into the theater. Because of the high volume through it, we had the theater on the first level."

Of course, there are factors that must be considered when deciding on a two-story exhibit. Bartle suggests looking into the budget aspects, pointing out that drayage, shipping and storage costs will all increase with a larger booth.

"Not only is there a design element and cost factor, there is installation and set-up time that is involved," Bartle says. "With something that large, storage is also an issue. There's a lot of architecture there."

But there is an option for those interested in a sec-



ond deck, but not the added shipping and storage costs, Parrott says. "I think that another factor under cost is that second decks are becoming pretty common in the rental market. By renting, you're not paying the storage costs for it."

Of course, having a second deck doesn't mean that the booth needs to be tremendous. Bartle says even a 20-by-20 booth can have a 10-by-10 deck installed. Even with a deck that small, the benefits are obvious, he adds. "There is a certain profile that a client can have by having a deck. It separates you from the floor. You can look down on everything else."

Parrott, who says he also believes a bit of prestige is involved, has just introduced a new second-deck system, Expodeck. With lighter-weight components, Parrott believes his system will make second-deck decisions easier. "As a rule, we calculate that you can move up with 60 percent in cost going up rather than 100 percent going out. In other words, 40 percent less to go up than to go out in space," he says.

For Phillips Consumer Electronics' MAGNAVOX line, ICON created a 7,000-square-foot, multi-level exhibit boasting huge graphics, neon accents and computer stations throughout the first level. The exhibit debuted in January at the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas.

But remember, multi-level booths are nothing new. They've been used for years. What is new is their growing popularity in the United States. International tradeshow have long been known for favoring multi-level exhibits. Therefore, international companies tend to use them a little more frequently. Also, space



Photo courtesy of MESS/SHI AG and Thomson Radio

limitations in the United States tend to crimp the multi-level style of some exhibitors. Illinois-based Exhibitgroup/Giltspur recently designed GTE's multi-level exhibit with a major presence at the recent Americas Telecom '96 in Rio de Janeiro. The company utilized a second story with conference and meeting rooms.

Many companies in the medical and aerospace defense industries have been using second decks for years. These industries lend themselves to larger shows and larger budgets to accommodate the costs, Parrott says.

"You do need to get structural approval and certifica-



tions, which is added time and cost to factor in," Parrott says. And of course, set-up time is greatly increased in many multi-level exhibits. "In some systems, the electrical may take longer also to thread through various levels."

ICON's Expodeck boasts a quick set-up time and no need for heavy machinery. Parrott says the deck can be installed by just two men and electrical wires can be run after set up.

But even then, more considerations need to be factored into the equation. One of the most important, and often-overlooked, Parrott says, is compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

"This is a big subject that concerns many exhibits," he says. "Even many single-story exhibits don't conform to ADA issues. They can be addressed from the means of getting people with limited abilities up to second decks, or by using videos of what's going on on the second deck. This is an area that will be continually addressed in the future."

Unfortunately, many exhibit managers do not consider these issues, and even those that do can only do

so much. "Technically speaking, no exhibit is totally ADA compliant," he says, adding that most exhibits do not have Braille translations, sound enhancements for hearing-impaired, etc. "Exhibitors need to be cognizant of those with disabilities."

But the bottom line still has to be marketing, as always. A single-story exhibit can be as much or more successful than a two-story exhibit, simply because of marketing efforts.

"Creatively, I would use the deck structure only if it met specific marketing strategies set by the client," Bartle says. "It certainly does give the client a nice profile."

But a nice profile doesn't mean a thing if attendees and staff don't know how to use it to its fullest potential. Adding a second deck won't make people flock any faster, unless additional work is done to educate attendees on the company and its product.

Bottom line—a second deck can be a great asset, if used properly. "It makes a statement, but if they can't get people to go up there, it's not a good use of space," Bartle adds. □