

Emergency Response Planning – White Paper

Introduction

Prior to 9/11/2003, most people concerned with trade show security focused on theft and unauthorized entry. Since 9/11, security concerns have expanded to include every operational procedure associated with trade shows. So while everyone is still worried about that laptop sitting on the unattended table, the question of what happens if the unimaginable takes place during the show still remains. When planning an event post 9/11, event managers and planners must now consider all possibilities. The process starts with the development of an emergency response plan, continues with the selection of a competent security contractor and ends with keeping the attendees and exhibitors informed.

When considering the lessons learned from 9/11, it is apparent that what we now do for security, we should always have done because we have always faced situations that involve a potential terrorist threat. In many instances, a natural disaster can produce the same, if not worse, physical destruction and loss of life as an attack from terrorists. The only way to respond to any crisis, regardless of the source, is to have an effective security plan and an emergency response plan in place that incorporates everyone associated with the event.

An emergency response plan should have elements that are both dynamic and static. If a trade show travels on an annual basis, the plan should be fluid enough to incorporate different facilities and their environment. However, the basic structure of the plan should be rigid enough so that everyone knows exactly what to do should a crisis develop. In addition to publishing and distributing the plan, the key players must practice the plan so that its execution becomes routine. We all know that a crisis tends to produce panic. Therefore, practice in executing the plan will reduce panic and allow habit to take over in the event of a crisis. At the very minimum, the plan should be executed at each new facility as soon as the group arrives so that everyone is familiar with the exit doors, evacuation routes, bottlenecks and “crisis” meeting places.

In many situations, the crisis or emergency response planning is left up to the facility. While that may seem reasonable, in practice it may not be the best thing to do. First of all, the personnel of the facility may not have developed or practiced their own plan recently. Turnover or facility changes may cause problems if a crisis develops. Secondly, exhibitors and attendees will look to event managers and planners, not the event manager at the convention center, for answers when a disaster arises. Finally, for your own safety and for the safety of those around you, you should know what to do if a situation arises that would cause you to evacuate the facility.

I. Developing a Crisis Plan

As stated above, your crisis plan should be broad enough to incorporate not only show management staff but also exhibitors and attendees. The best way to

develop such a plan is through a committee process. This will help with coordination and communication. The basics of the crisis plan should include the following:

- Develop a communication and leadership tree with backups if key personnel are missing or incapacitated
- Identify locations for a command center. Ideally there should be two centers, one at the facility and a remote location for a crises that directly effects the safety of the facility
- Identify a “safe” meeting place for all staff both at the facility and outside the facility
- Identify different levels of crisis situations and a response to each level
- Develop a communication plan with all relevant phone numbers and a backup if telephone communication is not working
- Develop a plan to disseminate information to exhibitors and attendees
- Have a policy of reviewing the facility’s crisis plan so that you know how it works and how your plan will operate in conjunction with the plan of the facility

It would be wise to publish the basics of your plan on a website so that attendees, exhibitors and their loved ones will have some idea of what to do if an emergency occurs. Additionally, it is a good idea to have signage in rooms or meeting spaces directing people where to go if there is an emergency situation. One of the best things to do is to have people go back to their hotel and distribute information through the hotel and the convention and visitors bureau.

II. Making Crisis Plans Compatible with the Facility

In ensuring that your plan is congruent with the facility, the following considerations should be made:

- How does the communication flow when a crisis develops at the facility?
- Who will be your main contact for information?
- How do the emergency alarms and announcements work?
- What does the facility staff do when there is an emergency?
- When was the last time they practiced their own plan?
- What plans for evacuation have been made for the disabled?

III. Choosing a Security Contractor

Now it is time to address how your security plan and staff will help you have a safe event. The plan starts with choosing the right company. Many times the decision of choosing a security contractor is made not with safety and security in mind but because of a number generated by a budget. This generally tends to lead to problems and in some cases embarrassment for show management. The horror stories regarding security companies and their employees are too numerous to recount. If you treat selecting a security provider the same as any other profession, your chances of a successful relationship will increase greatly.

Security companies always have great references. Unfortunately, these references maybe old or have some dubious connection with the security company. Instead, you should ask for the names and contact numbers of the last three shows that the security company provided services for at the facility. Make sure that when you speak with the references that you ask how the security provider compares to other companies. Inquire into the communication abilities of the security company. By checking more recent references, you will receive a more realistic view of the security company.

Ask the Security Company for a copy of its training handbook and insurance certificate. The training handbook will let you know if they even have a training program, and if they do, is the training consistent with your vision. The certificate of insurance will certify that insurance is in place and that the types and limits of the insurance are acceptable.

If at all possible, try to be a secret shopper and visit the site prior to your event so that you can see how the security contractor actually operates and the type of people that they employ. If this is an option, speak with the staff instead of the supervisors, as this will give you better insight into the company. Inquire about the turnover at the Security Company.

Remember that the rates for security services vary from city to city. So if last year's numbers solely determine the budget for security, you may be forced to choose the low bidder. Again, this will normally be a mistake if you desire a high level of service from your security provider. Because the security staff will essentially play the role of a public relations kiosk and security provider, you may desire higher caliber employees, which generally cost more.

Once you have chosen your security contractor, establish a security plan for your event with the contractor as soon as possible. This will allow the security company to provide the best available staff. Check with the contractor and see how the facility really works and how the operation of the facility and of your event can best work together. Are there any recurring operational problems at the facility? Do escalators get jammed with large numbers of people in them? This will help with determining staffing levels. Give the contractor last YEAR'S security schedule and have them develop a plan that takes into account this facility's unique environment.

You should also make sure that as part of the security contractor's policies and procedures that they use basic forms like Incident Reports, Hall Sign-In Logs and, Daily Activity Reports. Ask for a copy of the completed reports on a daily basis.

You should also seek the advice of the security contractor on your emergency response plan and how it can best be utilized at the facility. Ask the security

contractor what changes should be made to the plan and if they have any suggestions.

Make sure that there is adequate security coverage during move-in and move-out as these are prime times for theft. Another time when theft is high is after the show has closed. Find out how access to the facility is controlled at night, how persons who enter the hall are tracked, and how the trash from the hall is removed from the facility. The security contractor should sift through the trash as it is removed from the hall.

Require that all staff of the security service have radio communication and that the supervisor be able to communicate with your staff.

You should also ask the security contractor, or develop for yourself, an exhibitor tip sheet that contains at least the following:

1. Show management, the facility, the decorator and the security contractor provide a measure of protection such as providing perimeter security. But ultimately exhibitors and their staff are responsible for their own valuables.
2. Do not identify the product or manufacturer on the outside of freight cartons. Mark cartons numerically to indicate the total being shipped (3 of 9). Include company's name and booth number on and in cartons. Furnish the freight forwarder with an accurate and complete bill of lading.
3. Escort the merchandise and/or goods to your booth if at all possible. *The greatest risk of loss occurs during set up and tear down.* Be especially alert during these times. *The second greatest risk of loss occurs prior to show opening and after show closing.* Try to be the first person in the Hall and the last to leave once the show begins.
4. Treat especially valuable goods such as prototypes as irreplaceable. If they truly are one-of-a-kind, you may wish to arrange for your own security by speaking to the on-site representative, removing the item daily if convenient or securing the item within your exhibit. Under no circumstances should the goods ever be left unattended. VCR's, televisions, computers and other electronic equipment are particularly vulnerable to theft.
5. At the close of business each day, cover all display tables. This establishes a barrier to curiosity seekers and other would-be thieves from selecting items to steal at a later time. Store excess supplies and merchandise with the material-handling contractor or in a secure container. Never store excess merchandise or supplies under tables or displays. That's the first place a thief will look. Place your trashcan in the aisle so the cleaning crew will not need to enter your booth.

6. During tear down, stay with your exhibit until your empty cartons are delivered and your goods are packed, sealed and properly labeled.
7. Obtain proper insurance coverage for your goods, including transit to and from the show site
8. Report any suspicious behavior immediately to show management and security personnel.

Have daily meetings with your security contractor during the event to discuss issues and formalize plans for upcoming events.

Reassure exhibitors and attendees by making them aware of your emergency response plan and by distributing its basic contents to everyone associated with the event. At the very least, make sure that they know of locations that they should report to in case of an emergency. These locations should be both at facility and off site.

Identify the locations around the facility that are dangerous or that the persons attending your event should avoid. Advise the attendees and exhibitors that they should not wear badges from the event outside of the facility, as the badge is a clear indication that the person is an outsider and possibly a target.

IV. Summary

In light of the perilous ramifications of 9/11, security has taken a more important role in the safe and effective operation of a trade show. Therefore, event producers must plan for all contingencies. This includes developing a dynamic plan of action that takes into account the various interests of the facility, attendees, exhibitors and the vendors. Choosing a competent and professional Security Company will require additional effort on the part of show management, but that effort will be pay dividends on a daily basis especially if an emergency arises. Informed exhibitors and attendees will benefit from the efforts and planning of show management by feeling assured of their own safety at an event.

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