



## **CUSTOMER SERVICE AND THE EXHIBIT TRANSPORTATION INDUSTRY**

**by Dale Hunt, President**

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Quality customer service is vital to the success of the exhibit transportation industry. Targeted move-in schedule mandates the need for reliable and time-definite deliveries. General contractor move-out procedures and time lines require drivers to follow detailed dispatch instructions with precision. Challenging economic times require carriers to balance fair market value with fiscal responsibility—all in an effort to give exhibitors the highest return on their marketing investment. These are a few of the critical needs that carriers must fulfill. The unique requirements of each shipment and customer must supersede the carriers' inclination to promote the general features of their respective products.

### **UNDERSTANDING CLIENT NEEDS**

Good customer service begins when a carrier understands the exhibitor's needs. Who is attending the event for the exhibiting company? Is the booth staff new or experienced? How familiar is the exhibitor with show site procedures and paperwork? Does the shipment have unusual handling requirements? Excellent customer service is evident when the carrier customizes its communication and dispatch procedures to a particular shipment for a specific customer. Consider the following case.

The Human Health Division of Merck & Co was exhibiting at the Annual Meeting of the American Urological Association. Merck arranged with the Kansas Cosmosphere and Space Center to include as part of the exhibit a space suit along with other space artifacts and replicas. As the chosen transportation provider to carry this single crate (no larger than the size of a large office desk), Cargo Solutions Inc. was asked to present options that would ensure the safe and timely transport of the artifacts to and from the show site. The options included three separate modes of transport, each reflecting different degrees of handling.

1. Less-than-truckload (offering cost efficiency with frequent handling)
2. Air freight (offering time specific service with moderate handling)
3. Dedicated air-ride vehicle service (offering time specific service with no handling between origin and destination).

The need for minimal handling and time-definite delivery was clearly the paramount concern for both the exhibiting company and the owners of the artifacts. Merck & Co chose the dedicated air-ride trailer service which met the requirements for all parties.

In this case, the client based its decision on three options each of which addressed separate needs or combinations. It remains the responsibility of the exhibiting company to evaluate the benefits of each option, decide which option suits their requirements and communicate in a timely manner with the transportation company.

### **CUSTOMER IDENTITY**

Carriers will earn the respect of exhibitors if they establish an identity for each exhibitor and its shipment details. Recently, an exhibitor told me that there is nothing worse than calling a freight company to dispatch a shipment only to be asked to give the shipping address after a lengthy history of conducting business with that carrier. Pulling important information from an exhibitor's profile, such as an address, can be implemented with simple organizational tools and procedures. The comfort level that an exhibitor has with any service provider is enhanced when personalized service is rendered from initial contact through receipt of payment by the vendor for the service performed. The exhibit manager can also be assured of quality customer service by asking the carrier to create an identity for each shipment. This is achieved only if the carrier creates a time line for each shipment. A time line consists of specific dates and times assigned throughout the life of a shipment to ensure that the exhibit material is moving according to the targeted delivery date and time. Yes, freight that arrives five minutes after a designated targeted move-in can result in added late/overtime charges assessed to the exhibiting company.

### **ROV & ROI**

Quality customer service in the exhibit transportation industry must also reflect an understanding of the return-on-value (ROV) and the resulting return-on-investment (ROI) afforded the exhibitor. When choosing an exhibit transportation company, marketing managers along with their respective turnkey service providers have every right to evaluate the impact that the transportation vendor has on the ROV equation. This is comprised of the effect that carrier performance has on new product introduction, sales lead generation/increased revenue opportunities and key account visibility and the corresponding bottom-line ROI as a function of cost. Does your carrier's performance provide you with peace of mind and a significant ROV? A successful event is contingent on the timely and efficient handling of the exhibit material between show sites. Exhibit and event managers must put their trust in a transportation company that understands the impact that carrier performance has on the exhibitor's bottom line. After all, there is no ROI to measure if the exhibit material is not picked up or delivered according to schedule. An empty booth space means "closed for business" in the eyes of the trade show attendee.

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## **A CRITICAL LOOK AT THE TRANSPORTATION DOLLAR**

Carriers often hear from the shipping community that good service means "on time delivery at the lowest possible cost." This might be true for the shoppers of service who are relentless in their pursuit of a deal. This is not to suggest that price should be ignored when choosing a carrier which is best positioned to handle exhibits to and from trade shows and marketing events. Today, more than ever, exhibiting companies, display manufacturers, event managers and other turnkey service companies need to be budget savvy. However, in order to ensure that expectations are fulfilled, managers must evaluate carriers based on their response to the following critical questions:

1. Does the carrier understand the true cost associated with not meeting a targeted delivery or pick-up?
2. Does the carrier specialize in exhibit transportation?
3. Is the carrier staff familiar with selected facility requirements throughout the country (for example, the Ronald Reagan building in Washington DC and trailer height restrictions at various hotel venues throughout the country)?
4. Does the carrier have a working knowledge of the trade show and event industry? Is the carrier well networked with exhibit industry service providers outside the transportation arena (I&D companies, general service contractors)?
5. How many times is the shipment handled while in transit? What mode of cargo transportation best suits this particular shipment when factoring in price, transit time and handling sensitivity?

The answers to these questions directly impact not only the price of exhibit shipments but also the time lines of delivery and booth installation.

## **LOOKING AHEAD**

Future success stories in the exhibit transportation industry will be defined by the effort put forth by shippers and carriers to formulate and implement policies that respect exhibitor needs, fulfill shipment requirements and further the understanding of the relationship between carrier performance and ROV/ROI. The formation of The Exposition Operations Society (EOS) has the potential to be one such success story. The EOS addresses a myriad of exposition industry operational issues including shipping and drayage. The EOS Winter Forum 2001 afforded an opportunity for Exhibitor Appointed Contractor Association (EACA) members to discuss a proposed document entitled "Carrier Standards of Performance." The statement of purpose, as outlined in the May 7, 2001 of Trade Show Week's Guide to Exhibit Transportation, states that "these carrier standards of performance are established to create uniform pickup, delivery and handling of exhibit and trade show-related materials to and from trade shows and events throughout the U.S." The document also states the intention to "raise the level of service excellence and harmony in relationships between exhibitors, carrier service providers, general service contractors and show management, as it regards the disposition of trade show freight."

We should be encouraged that formal steps have been taken to continually improve the reputation and service standards of the exhibit transportation industry. Paramount in this effort is to remember that the exhibitor must be allowed to define the needs and expectations of what constitute excellent transportation service. Central to that definition is the right of the exhibitor to freely choose, without interference, its service provider of choice. It is then incumbent upon the selected carrier to meet the expectations of the exhibitor from the first phone call through billing for services rendered.

Marketing and exhibiting professionals will converge on Anaheim for TS2 2001, in mid August. Many folks will be looking to see if panel discussions during one of last year's TS2 sessions entitled "The Great Freight Debate" resulted in action. Have the hours of material handlers been increased on particular shows to accommodate more carriers? Have marshaling yards been expanded or modified to facilitate more trailers? Have jockeys been implemented to streamline the unloading and loading of trailers at show site? In looking ahead, there is plenty of room to improve the quality of customer service, particularly as all exhibit service providers strive to work collaboratively to serve the time sensitive needs of the exhibiting community.

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