



Tips for Shipping Trade Show Booths

By Don Woodard

A few months ago, I repaired a wooden crate for one of my clients. This particular company exhibits year-round, so repairs, due to the constant use, are a part of the business. Once I patched up the crate, I sent it and its contents to the next show. It returned a few weeks later, and it was damaged yet again.

There's no question that the trade show industry has its share of headaches, and damage during shipping is usually one of them. The good news is that understanding the shipping process can help.

Choose the Standard

Hard shipping cases, with wheels, can be purchased for smaller displays, such as banner stands and 10 x 10 pop-ups. Some cases convert into counters, and their advantages are obvious. Shipping costs are small. The cases can either travel with the booth staff or be shipped, via commercial carriers like FedEx or UPS, to the hotel. Using this method of shipping is fairly easy; however, there are some points to remember.

1. When packing the case, be certain to roll the pop-up graphic panels with the images facing the *outside*. However, rolling the panels with the image facing the inside allows the panels to curl *away* from the magnetic channel bars. To protect the panels, then, roll them individually and use the plastic, protective sleeves they came in. This also makes it easier to remove the panels from the case at the show. Add foam padding where necessary.
2. If a commercial carrier is used, then all staff members should have the tracking number(s) and the name of the carrier.
3. Insure the shipments for the value of the booth; use your invoice to determine this amount. The insurance will cost a bit more; however, it doesn't compare to the cost of a lost or damaged booth. (It's always a good idea to take pictures of the assembled booth. Providing proof that damage occurred during shipping is half of the battle. See the carrier's website for information about claims; be proactive.)

Get Jiggy With It

If the booth is a bit larger, say a 20 x 20 modular display, then consider purchasing “jigged” partitions. The partitions may include foam that is die cut to the specific size and shape of the booth’s components. This minimizes shifting and damage during shipping. Clearly, this type of case will be heavier, which means that shipping costs will increase a little.

1. Use pieces of cardboard or packing material between the layers for extra protection.
2. Depending upon the number of cases, it’s still possible to ship the booth via commercial carriers. Note: Any single piece over 150 pounds usually changes the shipment’s category from Ground to Freight. This means more pre-planning (the shipment will need to be picked up by the carrier) and a “Bill of Lading.” Again, use the carrier’s website to find specific information because guidelines vary between carriers.

Moving the Big Stuff

If the exhibit is big or customized, then large, wooden crates are usually the container of choice. Generally, these will be purchased through your exhibit house/exhibit provider. This also means that the shipment definitely falls under the “freight” category. At this point, commercial carriers could still be an option, but consider using a freight company. Drayage will also be an expense. Pre-planning, assuring that the shipment reaches the show’s warehouse or the conventions center’s loading dock by the deadline, is essential. Consult your Exhibitor Manual for time frames, schedules, and late fees. Budget for these expenses: [Classic Exhibit's Drayage Calculator](#)

To save money, some companies create the crates themselves. Others rely on the experience of their booth suppliers. Either way, I’ve found the following ideas to be especially helpful.

1. Felt crate liner is an ideal packing material to help prevent damage to panels and walls for modular and custom exhibits.
2. If possible, construct compartments or custom partitions into the crate. This makes it easy to locate the various components at the show. This will aid the installer and save time (and money) when setting up the exhibit.
3. Paint the crates in an unusual manner or specific color so that the crates are easily identified. Should they get lost, either during handling, while being transported, or possibly on the show floor, it’s much easier to say, “They’re the orange crates,” to the warehouse manager.

4. If it is necessary to send a number of loose items or boxes to a show, always place them onto a pallet and shrink wrap them together. This not only helps prevent all the loose items from getting lost, but it saves a lot of money since the show charges a handling fee for each item or box. Use this technique for shipping multiple molded cases, too. Stack several of them onto a pallet and shrink wrap them, allowing the freight handling people to use a fork lift to move them.

Glass...Do Not Break

With the increased use of monitors and iPads, comes the increased risk of broken screens. Even with the best packaging practices, expensive things still break. Is the booth, itself, insured? Generally, the shipping company is only liable for a very small amount of money PER HUNDRED POUNDS of freight. When I say a small amount, I am referring to approximately \$50 per hundred pounds. Consequently, an exhibit that is worth thousands of dollars may only be insured by the shipper for a few hundred dollars. ([See "Who's Gonna Pay for the Damage," Solutions, September 2009](#))

No Substitute for Experience

I mentioned using a freight company earlier. Here's why. Shipping with a freight company who understands and has experience with the exhibition industry is very important. There are many details in getting the freight to and from a convention center, and this isn't a time for rookies. A carrier who has a good relationship with the unions at various locations will also be a plus. I highly recommend [Platinum Cargo Logistics](#).

The Marshalling Yard

Show organizers must coordinate hundreds of deliveries in a very short period of time, but they have a system to control the chaos. This system is known as the marshalling yard. Freight Drivers "check in" when they arrive and are assigned a number. When the number is called, the driver moves from the marshalling yard to the convention center, where the crates are unloaded.

1. Whenever possible, ask for the driver's cell phone number; this little piece of information will allow staff to track the shipment through this process.
2. As the freight driver waits in the marshalling yard, there is a per-hour fee. Read the fine print of the contract and include this cost within the shipping budget. At times, this waiting time fee can add up to quite a sum of money.

I once had a customer who had a show in Houston during the Houston Grand Prix automobile race. Unbelievably, the race track went around the convention center, so all the freight carriers had to wait for breaks in the practice sessions in order to gain access to the convention center. The waiting time fee was in the many hundreds of dollars, and my customer was not too happy...I don't think she was a racing fan to begin with!

By Sea or By Plane

Shipping a booth to another country adds even more expenses to the budget. It creates more details to handle and issues to conquer. How long will it take? How expensive will it be? What kind of documentation is needed for customs? Is anything on the “restricted” list? This is definitely the time to consult the Exhibitor Manual and an expert.

Remarkable

In review, the shipping of an exhibit is just another component of the trade show experience. I am often amazed how a person may need to send one small box to a convention center. During the set-up process, there are dozens of trucks being unloaded with tons of freight; lifts hanging signs from the ceilings; forklifts going every which way within the convention center; hundreds of exhibits being installed; people hanging from ladders; crates and boxes spilling into almost every aisle; and somehow, one, little box makes it to the correct booth space. Remarkable.

Don Woodard, President of Blue Goose Exhibits, has worked in the exhibiting industry for over 30 years. He has presented seminars and training programs for exhibitors across the country. He has been a contributing author for *National Business Media's* numerous trade publications as well as *Exhibitor Builder Magazine*. He co-authored *The Still More Secrets of Successful Exhibiting* and authored *The T.S.K.S Handbook* and *The Exhibit User's Handbook: Fried Goose Eggs*.