Sidebar for The Art of Recon

**Head: Secret Service**

Competitive-intelligence gathering is an incredibly valuable tactic to add to your exhibiting arsenal, and carrying out recon requires little more than some time and strategic analysis. To help you prepare your own print or electronic competitive-intelligence questionnaire, exhibit-marketing experts E. Jane Lorimer, managing director of Lorimer Consulting Group, and Bob Francisco, former president of Admore Exhibits, offered up this lengthy list of criteria. To download an editable document and customize the list to suit your shows, competitive needs, and deliverables, click here.

**Pre Show**

To answer these queries, speak with show management, review each event’s list of exhibitors, scour competitors’ websites and social-media posts, and probe blogs and posts from industry influencers.

* Which key competitors are exhibiting, how big are their spaces, and where are they located?
* What are competitors doing in terms of pre-show marketing campaigns, at-show presentations, social-media strategies, off-site events, speaking engagements, etc.?
* Are there any new companies with competing products at the show?
* Are existing competitors debuting any new products at the show?
* Is there any pre-show hype about a particular booth, big drawing, product launch, etc.?

**At Show**

During the show, answer these questions by visiting exhibitors’ booths and examining the conference to note sponsorships, speaking engagements, and off-floor activities. Depending on your goals, your efforts could focus on one or two key competitors, a handful of rivals, or exhibitors who compete for attendee mindshare but are not necessarily within your market.

Exhibit and Graphics

* Where are competitors’ booths located — at the front of the hall, on main aisles, buried at the back, near a natural lure such as the concession area, etc.?
* What is the age and condition of each exhibit?
* What size exhibit space is being used and roughly how much does it cost? (According to the Experiential Designers & Producers Association’s 2017 Economic Survey, custom exhibit costs average between $137 and $161.17 per square foot.)
* Does the exhibit design complement the company and its message?
* What’s your first impression of each booth? Can you tell what company it belongs to and what it’s selling?
* What is each booth saying about the brand? Is it lively, trusted, conventional, cutting edge, etc.?
* What is each exhibit’s theme, and is it appropriate?
* What are one or two words that best describe each exhibit design?
* What is the overall layout of each booth — open, closed, peninsula, inline, etc.?
* Is the booth empty or crowded with attendees?
* Where are attendees clustered in the space, and what are they doing?
* Where are graphics located — overhead, on exhibit walls, on stationary kiosks?
* What images, text, and messages are offered?
* What percentages of the graphics are relayed via electronic versus print mediums?
* What main elements does each exhibit design contain, such as storage, a double deck, hospitality area, theater, seating, reception desk, conference rooms, etc.?
* What can you remember about the exhibit and its messages one hour after you leave the booth?
* Overall, what are the company’s main strengths and weaknesses when it comes to the exhibit and its messages?

Products

* Which products are highlighted?
* Are there new products or new product bundles?
* How are the products displayed and presented?
* What are the main product messages, and what mediums are being used to relay them?
* Are there any direct or indirect comparisons to your products or those of your competitors?
* Are any special pricing options available?
* Are there any surprises or recent changes with regard to product differentiators or positioning?

Presentations

* What type of product demos, if any, are offered, and what format do they take?
* Are there any live presentations aside from product demos?
* What kind of multimedia presentations, if any, are offered? Do the presentations clarify or augment a message, or are they gratuitous?
* Are presentations offered continually, on a timed schedule, or at attendees’ requests?
* Are one-on-one presentations offered? If so, who is presenting them, what type of presentation medium is used, and how often are they given?
* What messages are included in the presentations, and do they mention your company or products?
* Who is offering the presentations — hired talent, executives, product specialists, engineers?
* How long is each presentation, and is the audience engaged throughout?
* Are the presentations interactive?
* How large a role does technology play?
* Are attendees seated or standing for the presentations?
* Where are presentations offered in relationship to products and the rest of the exhibit?
* Are the presentations well attended?

Staffers

* What are the demographics of the staff in terms of executives, crowd gathers, salespeople, engineers, etc.?
* Do staffers greet attendees, or do attendees approach a central reception desk of some sort?
* What kind of opening questions do staffers use?
* How long does each initial staffer/attendee conversation last, and what happens as a result?
* How are staffers collecting leads, and what qualifying process is involved?
* What kind of promises, if any, do staffers make to departing attendees?

Promotions/Literature

* What kinds of giveaways are being used, and are they appropriate?
* How are giveaways being distributed, and to whom?
* Are there any traffic-building activities such as games, drawings, or entertainment?
* Are staffers distributing literature? If so, is the literature well done, and what messages does it relay?
* Are staffers distributing any electronic information via Quick Response (QR) code scans, email, USBs, etc.? If so, which format do attendees seem to prefer?

Attendee Experience

* From which direction do most attendees approach the exhibit, and where do they enter it?
* What do attendees look at when they approach the space? What draws them in?
* Which part of the exhibit do they migrate to first?
* Are attendees eager or reluctant to provide their contact information to staffers?
* What is the overall mood of attendees? Are they excited, subdued, serious, inquisitive, puzzled?
* How much time do they spend engaged with a staffer or a presentation/demo?
* Do they explore at their leisure, or are they immediately intercepted by staff?
* Do most attendees appear have prescheduled meetings?
* What kinds of questions are attendees asking?
* Are any of your customers in competitors’ booths? If so, what are they looking at and talking about?
* How long do they spend in the exhibit?
* What do they take with them when they leave the space?
* Where to do they go next?

Media

* Which companies have placed ads in the show daily?
* Do competitors have press kits in the press room, and if so, what information is provided?
* Are competitors holding press conferences? If so, are they in the booth, in the convention center, and/or off site?
* Are there any other VIP or guerilla-marketing techniques targeting the press?
* How are reporters greeted in the booth? Do they meet with staffers or executives, and do they take anything away with them?
* Did competitors score any newsworthy awards, perhaps for new products, exhibit design, white papers, etc.?

Ancillary Activities

* Which companies are hosting hospitality events, and are they well attended?
* Are companies recruiting at the show? If so, for what positions?
* Are competing executives speaking at the show? If so, are their sessions well attended?
* What types of sponsorships are competitors using, how many people are they reaching, and how much do they cost?

**Post Show**

Intelligence gathering isn’t a once-and-done activity. It should continue after the show as well. Visit competitors’ websites and talk with your customers, prospects, suppliers, and show management to answer these post-show questions.

* What kind of follow-up do leads receive?
* What type of post-show follow-up appears on the company website?
* Have competitors signed up for the same booth-space location and/or size next year?
* Did competitors secure any post-show media coverage?
* Is there any kind of ongoing buzz on competitors’ social-media sites?
* Are influencers still talking about your rivals’ products, exhibits, or tactics?