

Reverse Trade Show Tips

Plan Early

Start planning early - even a year out!
(All chapters gave this as a very important tip)

What is the best time of the year for the event?
(no conflicts with other purchasing events)

- Establish a time annually, so vendors will be looking for it and can plan on it. Stay away from first of the year, when new budgets are released for companies -- they need to have some time to see what funds are available. Vendors sometimes have money to be spent at end of the year.

Budget

Develop a preliminary Budget based upon estimated number of agencies and vendors. Make sure all individuals involved are aware of the amount allocated for all expenses.

- Any expenses – facility, parking if applicable, labor for set-up etc.
- Allow for food.
- Advertising – Newspaper, flyers, etc.
- Printing Programs- please note: you may consider vendor ads for an additional fee.
- Name tags and signs

Once you have most of your costs, create a spreadsheet with formulas to determine costs and what you must charge your vendors to make a profit. It can be called your anticipated income statement. This can help you 'play' with the numbers and determine breakeven point and profit.

Pricing

Be sure your prices are affordable, particularly for small businesses; this is generally your primary target audience. Give a discount for a second person to attend from any one supplier.

A registration fee for the vendors can be used if you keep it nominal. For example, \$10 for pre-registration and \$15 at the door. This can help offset the cost of the venue. It also can help Vendors to follow through and show up. (Skin in the game)

Set the cost you will be charging vendors:

- One fee for early registration – Set an end date for early registration.
- Another fee for late registration.
- Another fee for multiple people attending for one vendor.
- If you are allowing credit card payment for registration allow for any charges that may apply.
- Another fee for registering the day of the show, if applicable.

Committee Structure

Set up a Committee for: Registration, Directory, Food Set Up, Agency Liaison, and Vendor Recruitment.

Develop a Timeline for the Committee:

- Includes benchmarks and activities for 4-6 Months, 3 Months, 2 Months, 1 Month, 2 Weeks, 1 Week, the Day Before and Post RVTS. It includes a checklist for materials needed at the event.

Flow chart of subcommittees & volunteers for each committee

The problem-solving methods acquired at the Leadership Symposium work well in this arena. Take a problem; break it into categories and then promote volunteerism based on these breakouts. No one gets overwhelmed. This is really important, lead by a committee not just one position within the board.

Communication of RTS Committee

Communication with a core team of organizers is key. It is difficult to have an event if everyone is swamped, and you cannot expect too much time out of the office. A suggested cycle is:

- a. About 5 to 6 months prior to the event start planning the event.
- b. 1st mtg: rally the troops and pick a theme and approximate date that does not conflict with agencies. Determine venue/location possibilities then contact the different locations, and get pricing and date availability. Assign sub-committee leaders (ie. Venue coordinator, volunteer coordinator, speaker and presentations coordinator, donations coordinator)
- c. 2nd mtg - try to secure venue/location. Identify presentations and possible speakers. Obtain funding commitment from the chapter.
- d. Meet at least monthly, and as the event approaches weekly to coordinate.
 - i. Schedule an on-site trip to test technology, power availability, room layout etc.
- e. Avoid long lines the day of the event by having online registration and payment; and have more registration desks than you think you may need. There will always be walk-ins.

The team responsible for managing the reverse trade show needs to communicate weekly with each other even if there is no activity. Communication is crucial to the success of the show and everyone needs to be on the same page.

Location

Location, Location, Location!

Select great/easily assessable location with ample parking or even free parking.

Encourage chapter members to offer locations from their agency that can be obtained without cost in order to save on expenses.

Rotate locations if it is a recurring event. If your chapter covers a large area, rotate to various cities. You can reach more businesses that may not be willing or able to travel access.

Venue

Make sure the facility can:

- Negotiate room rental if there is any
- Manage the estimated number of people that will attend.
- Request lower room rates for participants/attendees.
- Set up the conference room based upon the agreed upon layout the night before the show.
- Make sure parking is not an issue.
- Provide security when and if necessary.
- Test equipment/Wi-Fi before the event
- Negotiate set up time to decorate as well as table set ups.

Make sure there is ample room to move around for the vendors or for the agencies

During the initial planning stages the number of potential attendees needs to be estimated and capped. Based upon the number of attendees that will be in the room at a given juncture be cognizant of noise levels. If you have a large volume of participants consider multiple rooms within the same corridor/area for ease of movement and to ensure parties can converse without having to raise their voices. If additional rooms are not an option, consider splitting the vendor attendees into time frames (i.e. morning & afternoon.)

If you are unfamiliar with a potential location, plan to visit the location, if possible while another activity is being held. Ask the facility for references and make the necessary contacts to confirm suitability.

Make sure you leave the venue and its staff with a good impression – you might want to use them again next year. Clean up after the event unless you negotiated the clean-up in the initial rental.

Venue to Sponsor Event

Try to get a venue to sponsor the event. With lots of members having access to government space, many times members/officers can get space at a deep discount or comp - This will help tremendously with any expenses as it relates to renting a facility, etc. - if at all possible, negotiate with the center to get comp items such as pipe/drape, etc.

Theme

Create marketing materials and flyers with a “Theme” to help promote the event and give it a professional look. Be sure to include a description/definition of how a RTS works for those “newbies”.

Have a theme which makes decorating and the show itself more fun which everyone including the Vendors enjoys.

Volunteers

Have enough volunteers so that none is overwhelmed

Give volunteers training in advance of the show

Have numerous meetings and communications with volunteers.

Create job descriptions and task checklist for all volunteers to ensure everything gets done.

Delegate members to head committees for major items such as Venue/Food, Communications/Marketing, Volunteers

Signage

Make sure that you create signage pointing the way to your RTS especially if using your venue for the first time.

Ensure visible signage

Floor Layout

Floor layout:

- Allow plenty of space between each agency. Noise is a major factor.
- Set up an easy flow for vendors to visit with agencies.
- Group similar agency departments together. i.e. Police, EMS, Purchasing, etc.

Have a floor plan so that all of your buyers know where to set up their displays/exhibits.

Make sure the venue has electricity for the booths.

Provide Wi-Fi if possible.

Have a seating area for the vendors with some water and coffee available.

Have chairs for the visitors. It makes things much more relaxing.

Noise Control

It gets loud! Make sure the room is equipped to handle the volume of attendees. It gets crowded! Make sure you have methods to deal with crowd control (staggered start times, morning AND afternoon sessions may be an effective solution). Do not sell more admissions than the appropriate occupancy, a bad experience and overcrowding will reduce the likelihood of repeat attendees.

Have nice music playing softly in the background.

Food and Beverage

Breakfast

- Provide continental breakfast
- Breakfast buffet open during the morning session works well versus having a lunch and keeps costs down. Most vendors seem to want to make the most of their time with the RTS and then leave when the RTS is done.

Lunch

- Have the agency people set with vendors during lunch (networking lunch).
- Have a nice catered lunch!

- Themed lunch catered for the Members only but do have a Continental breakfast available for the Vendors and Members.
- If offering lunch, be flexible. Keep show open so vendors can continue to visit with your organizations. Ask your agency representatives to try and have someone at the table and relieve each other for lunch.
- Getting your facility at no cost allowed us to serve hot catered lunch, not a box lunch.

Offer snacks during RTS

Food is not required (though snacks are always appreciated). Beverages (e.g., coffee, water) are a must.

Provide a meal (breakfast or lunch) so the vendors feel they are getting their monies worth.

Schedule

Put together a schedule and:

- Allow enough time for agencies to set up. Suggest – agencies arrive at least one hour before the show begins.
- Allow enough time for vendors to register and meet the agencies they came to visit. Suggest – trade show is held from 9:00 am to 12:30 pm.
- Allow enough time for lunch. So vendors can talk to agencies if necessary. Suggest, 12:30 pm – 1:30 pm.

The schedule of the event should not be too long and have various other activities going on to give the vendors a break from doing the same thing all day. For example, 3 hrs RTS, 1-1/2 hours for program, lunch and back to RTS for 1-1/2 hrs.

Keep the time schedule compact (4 hours max)

Educational Program

Provide some type of educational offering; it makes the event an easier “sell” to the powers that may be making the decision to let a member participate.

Plan “breakout sessions” during the Trade Show which are educational and at no extra charge.

Deadline/Cancellation

Make sure to establish/publish deadline dates to register. Both on the supplier and attendee sides.

Make sure to have a clear/published cancellation policy.

What is A Reverse Trade Show?

Educate public agencies and members on what a reverse trade show is and the benefits of participating. Many are unsure, so they are not responsive to requests to participate.

Very important: Educate attendees up-front about the definition of a reverse trade show vs. traditional trade show, this can be confusing. The occasional vendor will show up with a suitcase full of promotional materials.

The first year requires a lot of one-to-one contact (phone, email) to educate both agencies and vendors what a reverse trade show is and how it benefits both entities.

Who to Advertise to

Advertising is the most important thing you can do. Work with the local business organizations. (Partial list below) They can get the word out to their membership through e-mail, Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook and their websites. You may even want to get some of them to help sponsor the event. Even if that sponsorship is nothing more than their logo be placed on your advertising flyers.

- a. Chambers of Commerce
- b. Small Business Organizations
- c. Minority Owned Organizations
- d. Women Owned Organizations
- e. Disadvantage Business Organizations

Get the word out. The more email databases you have access to, the better off you are. Use your vendor email list, your chapter conference attendee list, list from other departments in your agency. They can send flyers to their clients which includes small, women and minority owned businesses.

Obtain vendor emails from participating agencies to build a master marketing database and notify vendors early about the event. Marketing is key to a successful event.

Get buy-in from your oversight and contracting agencies.

Invite your Engineering Departments to be there with information about Capital Improvement Projects and to help get the word out.

Enlist help from all agencies registered to directly send invites to vendors they deal with. Vendors seem to respond more quickly to an email from a current customer verses an email that appears to be "generic" from an unknown email address.

1. This email includes reminders about location, directions, what items to bring to the trade show such as business cards and other details

Also remind entities it's FREE (many thought they had to pay to participate) there's no special presentation required - just talk to vendors and get them registered with your entity

Where to Advertise

Advertise-Advertise-Advertise

Advertise early and often

Advertise in a newspaper, journal, website, etc.

Post a list of all of the agencies and vendors on your website.

Advertising for both vendors and entities (Chapter Websites, State procurement site, etc.) Push out the flyers often, in as many venues as possible (paper, DJC, MWESB Associations, Procurement Websites, etc.) Be aggressive getting sponsors -- make it worth their while and keep them year after year. Partner and work with local business organizations such as Chamber

of Commerce, etc to promote your event. In exchange of the chamber marketing your event, offer them a comp sponsor table or web advertisement.

Advertise through the participating Agencies Vendor/Bid lists. Most Agencies have Economic Development Departments, invite them to participate and help get the word out.

Approach the local paper and or radio station about advertising. (News Articles/Stories or if you have the budget adds)

Be sure to research free outlets for advertising like local newspaper and television station community calendars, these will often advertise free of charge for non-profits.

You can have posters that can be displayed in the Chamber and local businesses windows.

Provide flyers at this event for future events

Marketing

Create a "Save the Date" flyer.

Have a unique flyer with all the pertinent info. (look at what other chapters have used)

Communication with agencies and suppliers is critical. This includes email reminders such as "Time is Running Out" or "Last Chance".

Use the phone to contact agencies when no response by email

Committee chair needs to call the agency and personally request them to attend the RTS. E-mails, memos etc. are not good enough. Must explain to agency people how attending the RTS helps the chapter members obtain monies for scholarships and other such requests.

Tailor the marketing materials to address the agency base, there are specific points that may attract a representative from a municipality vs. another from a county or school district. Don't limit this to the agencies; there are some vendors who aren't familiar with the reverse trade show format.

Market the event as an opportunity for those who want to learn how to do business with government and for those that have current contracts with government agencies that this is a great way to promote their awarded contracts. Coordinate the date and time of your RTS with other chapters in the area to make sure that similar events do not occur within the same geographic area within a short window of time which might limit the success of your RTS and confuses the vendors.

Share success stories as part of your marketing materials from both a vendor and agency perspective.

Have and Follow a Marketing Plan

Incentives for sponsors so they want to sponsor rather than just attend (special signage at tables during lunch, early entry, etc.)

Communication to Vendors

Communication to vendors is key. Have a plan for spreading the word, and begin about 60 days in advance of the event. It is ok for vendors to receive multiple invitations from the agencies. You can ask each agency to contact their vendors rather than gather a single list. Spreading the effort to each agency reduces the burden for the vendor communication task. Consider vendor budget cycles if they will be required to pay for entry - for example, advertise in December for a Feb. event so they can include the cost in their Jan. 1 budget.

Communication- Email is a great way to communicate, however, take it a step further, for example, speak at municipal cooperative meetings and distribute handouts. Many small agencies that do not have an individual(s) dedicated to full-time purchasing have been more receptive and engaging about participating when the communication is face to face.

Sponsors

Seek sponsors and place their logos on the Chapter website for a predetermined length of time. (Platinum sponsors, as an example, have their logos on your site for 6 months.) Offer sponsors perks like a ten minute time slot during your luncheon so they can tell the group about their products or company.

Actively solicit sponsorships – this is what will make your chapter money; include different dollar amount levels

Offer sponsorship opportunities for vendors to advertise at the event vs. just attend. This may include contracting with a local print shop to sponsor the member directory or provide printed trade show bags in exchange for admission and advertising.

Consider allowing vendors to place an ad in the program for an additional fee.

Provide banners for the sponsors that they can take back to their offices (include their sponsor level, the year and your chapter logo.) *Staples* does these fast and for very little money.

Include a “Sponsor Row” marketing plan and allow a set number of vendors to participate as a “sponsor registration” allowing them to set up a table within the RTS event and any other extras that would be just for the sponsors. Allow for other sponsor programs to provide bags, USB drives, etc.

Provide an opportunity for vendors to sponsor your conference with door prizes or a monetary amount that will go towards the conference cost. Make up mini-posters to display at the RTS which recognize vendors for donated prizes or donations.

Agency Participation

Public Agency Participation - Incentivize as many public agencies (state, county, school districts, IUs and municipalities) as possible to participate. The greater the number of agencies the more of an interest from the vendor base.

Chapter Member Participation: The more procurement professionals from your government entities that are involved, the more attractive it is to vendors.

One of the biggest reasons an event is successful is because you had great participation from a wide variety of public agencies. Getting them to commit to participating is a key factor, so the committee needs to have a strong plan for having that happen.

Develop as many government participants as you can - the more there is, the more incentive for Contractors to come.

Participation: Encourage agencies from nearby chapters to participate in your RTS if they are not holding an RTS of their own (this will offer additional value to the vendors who attend)

Vendor participation is based on Agency Participation. So concentrate your efforts on getting a variety of agencies to participate. Vendors must see the value of paying to come talk to the agencies.

End User Agency Participation - Have end user agencies participate in the show. Set up groups of tables/booths within the venue based upon end user agency background, i.e. Facilities & Operations, Information Systems, Human Services, Law Enforcement, Purchasing etc.. Vendors find the opportunity to speak directly with end user very enticing.

Up front agency support. The more agencies that you have at the tables the more attractive it is to vendors. And if you know who is coming up front you can put this information in your advertising.

Expansion of Public Agency Base - Obtain participation from additional/new public agencies each year. Set a goal on the net new number of additional public agencies you want to participate. Vendors will participate in future years if they see the opportunity to make net new additional contacts.

Agency Tables

Get as many volunteers from the State and Local Municipalities as possible to sit behind the tables as exhibitors. If possible do not charge them. This can be used as an incentive for them to volunteer.

Hold a training session for the individuals manning the tables

Register vendors to do business with your entity at your booth. Take a laptop and register them via your website as they stop by to chat.

Encourage chapter members to have a knowledgeable decision maker in attendance. Vendors enjoy seeing and conversing with people who will actually use or recommend the use of their product or service

Make sure your organizations show up and stay throughout the event. Vendors pay to see them, some fly in, they're not happy to see empty tables. Some vendors can't always attend all day and might come in for the last couple hours. It's not fair to them if organizations leave early.

Remind agency reps to not pack up and leave early.

Agency people at tables must stay at table until RTS is over. Do not leave early. Use reward, such

as gift card giveaway must be present for them to win.

Make sure all agencies that commit follow through on their commitments both before and during.

Limit time that a vendor can remain at a booth unless there is no one waiting or you move that vendor to the side so others can be greeted by your colleagues.

Make sure the buyers bring plenty of business cards with them to handout.

Registration

Have a system that allows vendors to pay for their registration via credit card both before and at the day of the RTS.

If possible have online fill in registration for both the vendors and the agencies.

Create a registration form to send out as well as advertise and link it in your website.

Take credit cards!!!

Handouts

Handouts: Offer a handout with the floor plan so vendors can easily navigate and know what agencies are present and where they are located in the room. Provide a USB drive with any other handouts for the show, which may include a NIGP chapter member directory list, flyers, video of how to do business with government and other training guides, etc. Market that with their registration they will receive this USB drive at the event.

Provide information packets with each agency's name, their mission or what they do (commodities), and the contact information of those in attendance. This allows the vendors to speak to the representatives without having to worry about business cards and other information.

Include a Buyers Directory Booklet that has all your local Gov't buyer contact information. Sell ad space or include in sponsorship levels

Have a brochure or flyer created. They're easy to circulate and give all the points of interest so nothing is left out. Use them as easy invites.

Create a quality Program for Vendors and agencies to keep:

- List all agencies, contacts and either email address or phone numbers.
- List all vendors.

Print extra programs

Giveaways

Provide giveaways for vendors and agencies

Have door prizes for vendors. Some like it some don't. Give them away during the lunch period.

Suggestions include, used bicycles, tricycles, and designed blankets donated from other departments, for example from your Correctional Facilities that have repaired or made the items.

Incentivize agency participation with scholarship opportunities or drawings at the event. Specify “you must be present to win”.

Incentives for Participation such as “Free Conference Registration” for Participating Agencies

Raffle items are really popular and add to the luncheon

On-Site Registration

Know how to register walk in vendors and vendors showing up for their co-workers who couldn't make it.

Have a separate table for walk-ins or those who want to pay for registration that day. Make sure you are set up to accept new registrations at the door (credit card “Swipe” is really beneficial).

Have plenty of people ready to handle registration to eliminate wait time and offer onsite registration with payment by credit card

Have multiple registration tables with your treasurer or other money taker out front:

- For example, one for “Registered-Paid”, “Registered-Not Paid” and “Not Registered”.

Have registration tables managed by committee members that know the system and how it works. (including chapter treasurer)

Attendee Record Keeping

Need accurate list of attendees, both agency & vendor, at registration table.

Keep good records of vendors and agencies registered so the information can easily be used again each year.

Keep an accurate record of vendor registrations (amount paid and attendee names) and print name tags in advance to give vendors when they arrive at the RTS.

Have a vendor make name tags early and have them at the RTS registration table to make new ones or make corrections as necessary. If vendor is willing to do this we give them 1-2 registration in lieu of name tags.

Appreciation to Vendors

Make the vendors, especially the sponsors, feel appreciated and welcome. Let them know how important they are to your organization at the ribbon cutting. We give sponsors a spreadsheet with the contact info for all chapter members that participated.

Make sure the vendors feel that it was a benefit for them to be there. Have relevant contacts for

them to speak with.

Thank-you letters to the sponsors

Make sure to send Thank You letters to vendors who participate

- Keep track of who won vendor door prizes and mention the member and entity in their letter

Evaluations and Surveys

Have vendors fill out evaluation form before leaving and use it to improve next RTS.

Do an Action Report (survey of attendees) after the RTS to see what went well (and remember to do it again the next time) as well as what needed improvement (and what the improvements are) so that you can correct them for the next one.

After the RTS, send out an electronic survey to your attendees for feedback on items such as time of day, day of week, location, cost vs value, so you can improve for future events.

Offer a drawing for a free entrance to next year's event for participating in the survey. Provide Exit Surveys to gauge the success of the event and likelihood of repeat attendance.

Words of Wisdom

Remember you will never be able to please everyone, so put your plan together and stick to it.

Be flexible, when necessary and stand your ground when necessary.

Do not let the small stuff get to you.

Promote, promote, promote. Don't despair; they always wait until the last minute.

*The information provided came from feedback form more than 18 chapters. Duplicate tips may have been combined into one or more points. Suggested timelines listed are for specific chapter events and may need to be altered for your own needs.