

Trade Show Executive

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"Let's start with the data and really know our attendees and give them what they want. That trend has to get stronger. At the end of day, people are limited by time. We need to serve them up what they want, when they want it."

Jo-Anne Kelleway
Founder & CEO
The Info Salons Group

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Trade Show Security Efforts Broaden in Face of Varied Threats

BY SANDI CAIN, News Editor

Chicago – Since our two-part report on trade show and venue security last year, racial protests, political protests, lone-wolf attacks and other threats to prominent locations have dominated the news.

It's one thing to know that your particular industry may face a protest. It's another to not know what hot button issue could erupt into a major disruption for your show at any given time. But just as 9/11 changed the thinking about making security a focus of trade shows and venues, the random nature of some of today's violence is making a different kind of impact on public places across the globe.

Last year, venues focused on 'hardening the target.' Show managers were learning to cope with an ever-delicate balance between good security measures and perceived inconvenience to attendees. With those methods increasingly in place, security professionals, show organizers and potential attendees now focus more toward a general preparedness that involves everyone touched by the trade show industry.

"Security at shows has always been a concern," said Tom Corcoran, CEO of Corcoran Exhibitions, which has staged more than 700 expos nationwide. "But the level of concern has escalated in the past few years."

Corcoran said the important thing is to have a good line of communication with the facility and together consider the show's subject as well as regional and national issues at hand to devise the best security plan for any given show. "I've found all facilities willing to do whatever is needed to make show attendees feel secure," he said.

Industry professionals like Stephanie Selesnick, President of International Trade Information Inc., said that while big shows have generally increased security, smaller shows often are not yet on board. "If you have 5,000 people in one building, you're a soft target," she said. "How you train your staff to react is important."

Selesnick said that everyone who comes to an event should see a visible security presence that might include random stops, bag checks and even metal detectors. "The

perception of safety is important," she said.

The Charlotte Convention Center in North Carolina is one venue that already has already ramped up visible security efforts and now is focused on other internal processes that might deter violence, according to Laura White, director of communications for the Charlotte Regional Visitors Authority, which operates the convention center. She said they are in the midst of a security audit of the center and are looking at ways to go the extra mile by beefing up security at loading docks as well as providing better credentials for vendors that are regularly on site, among other efforts. "We're looking at all best practices," she said. "Some are less visible efforts but are important in the big picture."

Bill Callaghan, Vice President and Director of Security Specialists at United Services, Co. (USC) in Chicago said organizers need to think about security long before move-in for an event. (USC also is the parent company of Trade Show Executive Media Group.) "Monitor social media and other events or potential threats in the city at the same time (as your event)," he said. "Look at the whole picture (for) anything that would disrupt your particular event or show," he said.

In addition, some venues are conducting active shooter/active attacker training among staff members while others are conducting drills with all personnel who might be impacted during such an incident. Cobo Center in Detroit, which recently beefed up its CCTV security network, also staged an Active Shooter Training last fall that included local safety and security companies, Cobo Center staff, Detroit PD and SWAT teams and county sheriff officers. Detroit FD responded to the 'incident'.

"I was both reassured that our response is the best it can be and frightened that we may ever go through this scenario after this training," said Claude Molinari, general manager of Cobo Center.

With global growth expected for trade shows in 2017, it's incumbent upon the industry to demonstrate an ability to carry on with the show, no matter where it is

held. In the U.S., CES alone this year drew 175,000 attendees to its annual event in Las Vegas—the biggest trade show in the U.S. International attendees accounted for 55,000 people from more than 50 countries outside the U.S. The show also featured 3,800 exhibitors.

"Every tech company on the planet participates in our show," said Gary Shapiro, CEO of the Consumer Technology Association that produces the show. "Many of them come through the international buyer program of the Department of Commerce—which calls attention to their presence," he said. Therefore, CES is always on top of security needs and trends.

Karen Chupka, senior vice president of CES and Corporate Business Strategy, Consumer Technology Association, said the group tries to educate its community in advance of the show so that people can plan time for clearing security. "We now also use more armed guards at our smaller events to help response time should a threat occur," Chupka said. In addition, the group is careful to brief security teams on the ground about their exact role.

"It's important to explain the role that you want them to play and how to escalate issues that may not be immediate threats," Chupka said.

Javits Center in New York is one venue that has a procedure for security alerts that clearly outlines responsibilities should a breach occur. Others are taking a look at how best to conduct a threat assessment for any given event and how to work with local law enforcement. Still, recent events like the knife attacks at Ohio State University are hard to define when the victims are random and the attacker doesn't survive the attacks.

Callaghan said savvy organizers also will make certain that vendors, presenters or speakers aren't likely to engender a contingent of protestors. "And ask show managers if any personnel have domestic issues that might encourage an ex-spouse or family member to show up," he said. If so, staff should create a watch list.