

This article was first published in **Defence Management Journal 2009: Issue 46** in Autumn 2009

Exciting Prospects

By **Jack Downton**

8 - 11 September will be dates firmly in the diary for many in the defence industry. *Defence Systems and Equipment international* will be taking place in London's ExCel centre, and whilst for many this provides an excellent opportunity to develop both business and contacts, for some it is a missed opportunity.

Visitors come to DSEi from the UK and around the world to experience the latest defence capabilities of more than 1,300 companies from 40 countries. A world-class platform for exhibitors to promote their latest goods and services, the event allows visitors to network with individuals, businesses, and even government representatives. The exhibition also provides face to face opportunities for those in the industry to discuss developments, conduct business and network for future growth.

Yet both exhibitors and visitors often face a number of problems. Lack of preparation and unclear objectives leave many ill prepared for the opportunities that arise and this hinders their access to the right people. Many exhibitors also fail to ensure that their stand team is prepared and adequately briefed.

It is worth bearing in mind that this is, arguably, the world's largest defence and security exhibition. There will be large exhibitors and small exhibitors, serving the whole supply chain with business-to-business transactions, as well as business-to-Government. While the big international primes will see international delegations, small companies must gear their expectations realistically and focus on meeting less-senior visitors and other businesses where their components or services will fit.

Planning

Going to this exhibition should be part of a clear marketing plan, with clear objectives. There is no point going along and just hoping to meet clients or make sales. You would be unlikely to go to a meeting without any preparation because if you didn't know what you wanted to get from it, you would be unlikely to succeed. So it is with exhibitions: a little preparation can pay big dividends. You would probably be surprised by the number of people we train who just seem to ignore any meaningful preparation: those who have a clear idea of who they want to meet and what they want to achieve are far more likely to come away with contacts and business leads.

It might help to do a bit of homework on the people that will be there. Think about what you will say when you introduce yourself. Remember to have to hand business cards, a pen, and a breath mint!

Small exhibitors

With over a thousand exhibitors and several thousands of visitors, it is easy for small exhibitors to feel lost. Smaller exhibitors need to know their position in the supply chain and should aim to meet those in the next link up as the most viable way to achieving realistic growth.

Exhibitors should also make a list of all those they want to meet and create opportunities to see them. Although unlikely to meet any of the big delegations, small exhibitors should nonetheless be prepared. If you have something that catches the eye of a passer-by, be ready.

Manning the stands

Those manning the stands need to be ready and know their objectives. They need to know the key points of their products/services and be able to present the benefits succinctly in a way that engenders further conversation. You'd be surprised how many fail at this first hurdle.

Exhibitors should give thought to the way they present themselves on their stand. Although it can feel a long day (and the event runs for four days), those manning the stands must avoid looking bored. If they are engrossed with their own laptops, they cannot be alert to passing traffic, and will miss opportunities. Exhibitors should also take sufficient people to the show so team members can have breaks and look alert. It is a false economy to take too few.

Exhibitors also need to ask opinions from visitors and not push with a hard sell. They must value a visitor's point of view and try and use open questions to encourage full answers and closed questions to confirm understanding. They need to explore clients' needs and issues. This has much more impact than simply stating what services you offer. By asking questions, the prospect feels listened to, rather than sold to. You learn, they learn and they take away with them the feeling that you are interested in them. Remember - people buy people.

Lastly, beware of technology. Computer presentations, for example, can be a barrier to connecting with your prospect.

Meeting guests

According to John Tolhurst, Chairman of the Defence and Security Board at Clarion Events, the owners of DSEi: "If a company wishes to see an overseas visitor, there are various ways to go about it. UKTI DSO (Defence and Security Organisation) delivers over 50 official delegations to the exhibition. If a company has a particular export campaign, they should look at the DSEi website(<http://www.dsei.co.uk/>) to see which countries have been invited. They can bid online to see delegates or directly to DSO".

Clarion Events invite senior UK visitors and DSEi guests and make companies aware who will attend through the DSEi website; companies can then submit requests for those guests to visit their stand. The process is fully explained in the on-line Exhibitor Handbook on the DSEi website. Companies can also send their own invitations to guests and then apply for entry passes for them on-line.

Networking opportunities

DSEi provides a great opportunity to network: on your stand (if you are an exhibitor), on other exhibitor's stands, in the restaurants and in the workshops and seminars. Exhibitors should get off their own stands to meet other people (another reason why not bringing enough people to man the booth is a false economy). However, many in defence often go in for a hard sell and push their services too aggressively. Instead, successful networkers who have the express aim of making quality contacts get the other person

talking. Focusing on asking questions and being really interested in the other person can lead to great contacts.

This works because you:

1. learn a lot about the other person;
2. don't have to do the talking which, if unsolicited, can be really boring for everyone except the person speaking;
3. the person doing the talking is having a good time and associates that with their conversation.

At any time in a conversation, business cards can be exchanged. If sooner in the dialogue, the card can be used as a talking point. If later, it shows a real interest in the person. Offer your card if they ask for it, and also when you ask for theirs. If they don't have a card, take out two of yours, write their details on the back of one of yours and hand them the other. If they do have one, keep hold of it. Don't immediately put it in your pocket, as keeping it shows interest and will also help you remember their name. In addition, if the other person is from an Asian country, it is impolite for you to put their card away and not hold it in your hand. You should also remember to exchange cards with both hands.

Follow-Up

After all that networking, it is really important to follow-up. If you don't, all your efforts could be wasted. You might want to develop a system for recording your contacts and follow up within 48 hours. Do consider writing a short, handwritten card or letter rather than an email. It has greater impact and looks more personal. Also, share your contacts within your organisation. If you share your contacts with the people you work with, they will do the same for you.

Remember, in networking, your aim is to leave the other person feeling really good about you and positive about doing business with you if the opportunity arises.

Seek advice

Exhibitors should make use of the relevant trade associations like the Defence Manufacturers' Association or the British Naval Equipment Association which can be of enormous help in providing advice. Close contact with the Defence and Security Organisation, which is part of UK Trade and Investment, is essential for overseas business.

Exhibitions and conferences are not just opportunities to close deals, but a chance to establish relationships. Therefore, the aim is to leave prospects feeling really good about meeting you and positive about doing business with you in the future.

***Jack Downton is the Managing Director of The Influence Business Ltd
(www.TheInfluenceBusiness.com/). He is a former colonel in the Royal Marines.
Contact: Jack.Downton@TheInfluenceBusiness.com***