

OSPI network: Value beyond borders



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At the recent EDPA event in Marco Island, one of the international exhibitors gave a long introductory spiel to the attendees visiting their booth and concluded with, "Oh, and we *are* an OSPI member." The weight added to that statement made it sound more like a punch line than an afterthought, and it was obviously intended to draw an understanding "Ah!" from the audience. While some attendees were appropriately impressed, others drew a blank. What exactly is OSPI? And why should it matter?



Founded in 1984, Octanorm Service Partners International (OSPI) is a network of partners (exhibit designers, producers, etc.) that unites about 170 exhibit companies in 55 countries. The common link among them is the use of an Octanorm aluminum extrusions system. The idea is that an exhibit can be designed anywhere, but then be built by a partner who may be on the other side of the globe, eliminating the cost of shipping, drayage and storage. "Designed here - built there" is their motto. While the Octanorm extrusion system is still a uniting element, the network itself enabled companies to take their customers globally, and to do so with confidence.

"Our customers are on a tradeshow schedule, going to several shows around the world, and they expect the same consistent branding at each location," said John Moyes, principal at San Francisco-based GGE and a member of the OSPI executive committee. "The interesting thing about OSPI is that even though there is a rental system in the background, the partners all have key customers that need to attend tradeshow worldwide and to truly accomplish that usually takes above and beyond the necessary architecture. As a partner in the United States, we have to cover all aspects of our clients' exhibiting here and expect the same in return."

With reputations on the line, confidence in the partner's expertise becomes crucial and that's one of the things that make the network so successful. The fact that a certain company is a member means that it has met the selection criteria, including at least five years of practical experience in the tradeshow industry and at least one year with Octanorm. It also must be able to perform necessary operations in its shop as well as use OctaCad, the proprietary architectural software designed for Octanorm. Since partners rely on each other for all aspects of exhibit management, they have to have sufficient experience and resources to coordinate onsite logistics. Another necessary element - an English-speaking staff member. After the selection process is complete, the executive committee votes to include the new partner into the network. The same committee mediates any disputes and enforces performance rules.

Apart from the obvious cost advantages, local partners are helpful when it comes to overcoming cultural differences in exhibit design and actual exhibiting. "When you are crossing

cultures, there are just that many more variables that you are dealing with," said Dennis Birsa, owner of Las Vegas-based CB Displays International and a former long-time member of the OSPI executive committee. "We work closely with local designers to adapt the design to the local market, and it also works the other way around - we redesign their concepts for their clients going to the United States, to fit the culture and budget."

Moyes also pointed out the partners' involvement with other important exhibit elements, such as hospitality and talent. "Some of the furniture pieces they use in Europe don't even look like furniture, yet it's something that can make or break the booth. It's a very fine point," he said. As with any intercultural exchange, working with a trusted partner still has its challenges, and the presence of an English speaker on staff doesn't exactly guarantee perfect understanding. It's hard to predict that person's level of language proficiency and familiarity with specific industry terms and concepts, on top of different cultural backgrounds.

"Just because something is stated in writing doesn't mean it's understood," Birsa said. "At this point, we know what our partners generally understand and what they don't. The same words can mean different things."

Other elements, such as the culture for markups and additional services, also come into play. In some countries it's appropriate to invoice for a lump sum, while in others the bill has to be broken down by line item.

To help eliminate some of these difficulties, OSPI holds annual events at which the members have an opportunity to meet in person and take their partnerships to a new level. Although new companies join every year, Moyes noted that many are "long-standing players" in the industry.

When asked about the impact of OSPI on the success of their companies, both Moyes and Birsa said it was a major factor. "It gave me a wonderful group of friends all around the world and an incredible group of companies to network with," Birsa said. "It allowed us to perform on the international level, where there are a lot of expensive learning experiences. Crossing cultures is a lot to deal with. That's one of the things OSPI makes it easy to do."

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