

An I&D Primer: How to Select and Supervise an I&D Crew

Want to cut costs AND reduce your trade show “hassle factor”? Tune up your knowledge and use of professional labor by following the tips below. We all utilize Installation and Dismantle (I&D) crews whether we exhibit in a local hotel or a large convention center. Knowing how to select and manage these professionals can save you time and money.

KNOWING THE BASICS

In most facilities across the United States, setting up inline exhibits for your company is permitted if you use no power tools or ladders and can finish within a prescribed time. If you don't have the time or staff to do this or if your exhibit is large or complicated, you need to hire labor in the form of carpenters, decorators, stagehands, teamsters, or allied trades. Selecting the right supplier, knowing how to communicate with them, and supervising them effectively are necessary skills for mental survival.

SELECTING YOUR TEAM

Your I&D team can come from the General Service Contractor (GSC) or an independent I&D company (Exhibitor Appointed Contractor or EAC). Your selection should be based on their experience, depth of service, geographic coverage, and the people working for them. They should be familiar with your exhibit property (portable, system, or custom) and the city and facility in which you're exhibiting. Where the GSC offers convenience, EACs offer accountability. You don't have to file EAC forms or perform background checks if the GSC is your labor provider and they're already on the show floor. But you usually get better quality labor and accountability from EACs. The EACs want your future business and work to ensure satisfaction but the GSCs seem to treat shows independently with seemingly no concern for the future.

The TSEA Membership Directory & Industry Buyer's Guide is an excellent resource for finding an I&D crew. You also can use the directory to contact TSEA members for referrals. Ask your I&D suppliers for references. Verify their performance and ask what they do above and beyond their I&D service.

BREAKOUT BOX

Ask plenty of questions before hiring I&D labor

- Do they already have clients at this show or event?
- Will they have too many clients at this show to provide you satisfactory service?
- Can they set up and dismantle on the days you need them?
- What are their rates for this show? Is a four-hour minimum required?
- Will you be charged straight time, overtime, doubletime? When do they apply?
- Will they have a job box on the floor (tools, velcro, cleaning materials, etc)?
- What are the prices for these supplies? (Know before you need them)
- Do they provide daily time slips? Itemize supplies used daily?
- How quickly do they invoice after events? (Does this fit your needs?)

PLANNING YOUR EXHIBIT

You need to know how many people and how long it will take to set up and dismantle your exhibit. The exhibit manufacturer (for portables, panels, and systems) or builder (for custom displays) can tell you this if you don't know. A good I&D company can estimate from the drawings, plans, or photographs. Be sure your crew is the right size – one man for a 10x10 popup, two if there are heavy components, three or more if you have larger property to assemble. Remember a larger crew can finish faster and possibly save you overtime costs. But if your crew is too large, you'll have people standing around doing nothing – a real budget buster!

Be sure everything is planned and organized before you leave the office. Make sure you copy your I&D team on everything in case you are unavoidably delayed (e.g. with airport security). You should instruct them on what to do in case you don't arrive on time and they should have every piece of information needed to proceed. Be sure you have the cell phone number for the city manager handy so you can stay in touch.

SUPERVISING YOUR CREW

Be on time and ready to provide professional direction. The nicer you are and the more you know your property, the better attitude your crew will have and the quicker you will be done.

If you get one of the rare “bad apples”, it's your job to speak with the city manager, union steward, or labor desk to remedy the situation. Staff that disappear for long periods of time, incompetent performers, and staff that won't take direction are not productive members of your team. As long as you're not being unreasonable, the supervisor or steward will move this person to another job or off the floor. If you must speak to someone about their employee, do it outside your exhibit and not in front of the crew.

At break times, offer to buy beverages if your crew is working hard for you. They may refuse, but the fact that you offer will be greatly appreciated. Keeping your crew happy will pay off in the long run. And they know where to get the best food at the lowest cost. A crew that likes and respects you will perform miracles just when you need them!

If you're impressed with your crew, ask to have them back for dismantling. Good workers are in demand, so ask early for the best ones. Using staff that know you and your exhibit saves time for everyone.

Dismantling and packing your exhibit is actually preparing for your next event. Mark crate contents, inventory parts, identify damage, and document anything

missing or needed for your next event. Good I&D crews understand this and know plenty of tricks to streamline your next event installation.

BREAKOUT BOX

What to expect from a good crew or I&D team:

- A full job box on the floor including hardware, velcro, electrical supplies, etc.
 - A crew member checking in with you each morning of the show
 - Empty labels and help with the bill of lading
 - Offers to pick up needed items when making a run to their shop or hardware store
 - Local resources for signs, materials, specialty rentals, etc.
 - Connections with the GSC, electricians, riggers, and dockworkers
 - The best local restaurants, sights, pubs, and shortcuts there and back
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SAVING TIME AND MONEY

Straight Time, Overtime, Doubletime – know what you're being charged, when it applies, and why. Four-hour minimums are common but you should only have to pay them if you are the only client using a particular crew or person on a particular day. Work with your I&D team to minimize these costs.

When you schedule a crew, know when your freight will be on the floor, when your electric will be installed, and when you can be there. You should arrive early to check everything (electric, phone, Internet, carpet, freight) and prepare for your first three steps before the labor arrives. Don't waste that first half hour trying to figure out where to start. (Example of three steps: Electrical layout, carpet and pad install, and first step of exhibit layout and construction.)

You can save a lot by shipping everything you'll need. Tape, velcro, hardware, shrink wrap, extra light bulbs, outlet strips, and extension cords. These are high-expense items on the show floor. You can count on a good I&D crew to bail you out if you forget something, but the more you count on them, the more it will cost you. And sending them to search for supplies takes them away from your worksite.

Remember – the time you save installing and dismantling your exhibit is budget savings. Streamline everything you can and keep your crew focused on your task. Poor planning leads to higher labor costs so double check everything and plan ahead to avoid or remedy potential problems.

SUMMARY

Select your I&D team based on the company's reputation, their experience with your type of exhibit, and a trusted sales or account manager.

Research your selection before making a commitment. Check with your TSEA peers to ask for references and referrals.

Become the client everyone wants. Plan everything to a “T” and don’t show up without that plan. Have your drawings, photographs, and check all of your orders and services. Act like the model trade show professional.

Be ready when your labor arrives. Don’t schedule them until you’re positive your freight will be on the floor. Don’t waste money by making your crew wait for your crates to arrive! Take care of the bad apples right away. Go through the correct channels to rectify the situation. And don’t make accusations you can’t back up with facts.

Cost savings come from good planning, but they also come from knowing the labor rules, ST/OT/DT policies, and minimum work hours of the jurisdiction you’re visiting. Take along your own supplies and extras. Assume nothing and know everything. If something seems confusing, just ask your I&D team – they should be able to answer every question fully and honestly – if not, you shouldn’t be working with them.

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