

Exhibiting at Clinical Research Conferences

By Norman M. Goldfarb

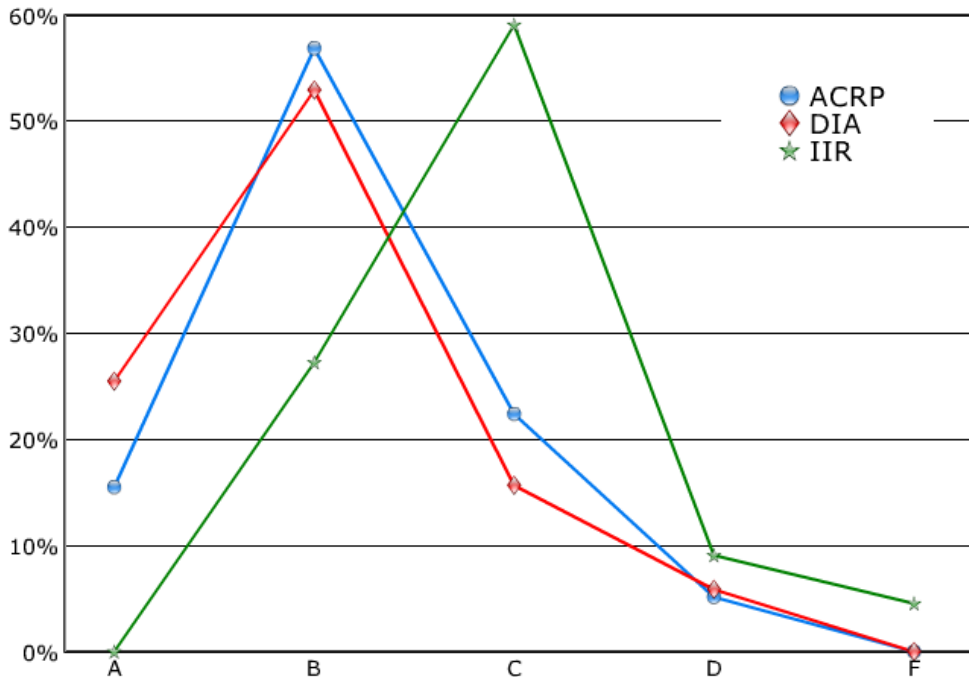
Three U.S. clinical research conferences attract the largest number of exhibitors:

- Association of Clinical Research Professionals (ACRP) Global Conference & Exhibition
- Drug Information Association (DIA) Annual Meeting
- IIR Holdings (IIR) Partnerships in Clinical Trials

Conference Profiles

At ACRP's conference in April 2010, the author surveyed 58 exhibitors to learn why they exhibit at conferences and their perspectives on these three conferences. Most survey respondents attended two or three of the conferences. On a scale of A to F (like school grades), exhibitors at ACRP rated the ACRP conference "B" (2.8), the DIA conference "B" (2.9), and the IIR conference "C" (1.9). Figure 1 shows the distribution of scores. If an "A" or "B" score indicates satisfaction, 72% of exhibitors were satisfied with the ACRP conference, 78% with the DIA conference, and 27% with the IIR conference.

Figure 1. Conference Ratings
(Scale of A to F, like school grades)



These scores reflect the fact that the survey was conducted among ACRP's unique mix of exhibitors. The scores may also reflect the fact that the 2010 IIR had already taken place, while the 2010 DIA conference had not.

Because every exhibitor is different, it is important to consider the strengths and weaknesses of the conferences in Figure 2 to determine their fit with the exhibitor's objectives and target audience:

Figure 2. Conference Characteristics
(Rating from zero to three, with three being the best)

Conference	ACRP	DIA	IIR	Comments
Attendance (estimate)	1,900	7,400	1,300	Includes exhibitor personnel
Exhibitors (estimate)	140	470	160	
Attendees/Exhibitor	14	16	8	
Meet sponsor decision-makers		***	**	
Generate sponsor leads	*	***	**	
Market to sponsors	*	***	**	ACRP: Numerous CRAs
Meet site decision-makers	***	*		ACRP: Relatively numerous investigators and site managers
Generate site leads	***	*		
Market to sites	***	*		
Recruit job candidates	***	*		ACRP: Numerous CRAs, CRCs and project managers
Education	***	**	*	ACRP: Program more focused than DIA
Generate business from other exhibitors	*	***		IIR: High ratio of salespeople
Cost	***	**	*	DIA: Expensive to stand out IIR: Expensive booth rental

The three conferences offer very different demographics:

- At ACRP, about 14% of participants are with sponsors, 39% with clinical sites, 44% with suppliers, and 3% with government agencies.
- At DIA, about 42% of participants are with sponsors, 38% with suppliers, 12% with clinical sites, and 8% with government agencies.
- At IIR, about 20% of participants are with sponsors and 80% with suppliers, including a few clinical sites.

Within these percentages are very different mixes of attendees. For example, ACRP attendees include a relatively high concentration of site monitors, study coordinators, and site managers; DIA sponsor attendees are from very diverse functional areas; and IIR's sponsor attendees include a relatively high concentration of sponsor decision-makers and outsourcing people.

Exhibitor Objectives, Strategies and Methods

Unsurprisingly, the objective of most exhibitors is marketing and sales. Marketing and sales is a multistep process. Marketing goals typically include establishing awareness, credibility, presence and message. Sales goals typically include generating leads, qualifying them, and then working toward an eventual sale. The primary goal of most exhibitors is sales, with a focus on generating leads, preferably qualified. They are most interested in meeting decision-makers, i.e., the people who have the authority to purchase their product. The secondary goal expressed by many of these exhibitors is marketing. However, a large fraction of exhibitors consider marketing their primary objective, probably because selling is not practical option because of the composition of attendees. Some exhibitors also stated that their goals include reconnecting with current customers, finding employees, networking, conducting market research, and attending educational sessions. Some exhibitors vary their objectives and priorities by conference. For example, it is easier for staffing firms to find clients at DIA and IIR but easier to find potential employees at ACRP.

Networking is a rather general goal, but can be clarified by setting more specific objectives like, "Meet decision-makers for our product." Networking usually consists of making semi-random contact with people who might turn out to be useful contacts. Networking occurs on the exhibit floor, in session rooms, in hallways, in bars, and at parties. Conferences with numerous parties, like DIA, offer extra opportunities for networking.¹

Most exhibitors exhibit at more than one, but not many, conferences. There is probably little overlap in attendees across these three conferences in a given year. Even if someone attends all three conferences, the chance of catching that person at any one conference is far less than 100%. Exhibiting at multiple conferences also generates multiple impressions for marketing purposes.

Exhibiting at conferences is only a fraction of the typical marketing and sales budget. It must compete with other uses of funds, such as direct sales, advertising, websites and public relations. Each marketing and sales activity has a return on investment (ROI). Calculating ROI for disparate activities is challenging, especially for marketing activities with impacts that are hard to measure. However, it is well worth the effort to create an ROI model of the marketing and sales process and collect data when possible to fine-tune it.

ROI compares costs to benefits. The costs for exhibiting include direct costs for booth space and amenities (e.g., chairs), booth fixtures (e.g., stands and banners), show passes, sponsorship fees, marketing literature, give-aways, and advance mailings. Labor-related costs include personnel time and out-of-pocket travel costs. The cost of personnel time can be calculated based on salary, benefits and overhead, but the real cost (opportunity cost) is determined by what they could be doing instead of attending the conference.

Conferences are very efficient places to meet with numerous people. The best way to meet relevant decision-makers is to schedule meetings in advance. The catch, of course, is to identify the right people and obtain the meetings. Large, established organizations already have long lists of decision-makers to contact for meetings. Small, young organizations probably do not have such lists. One exhibitor comment is telling: "Eighty-percent of the work is done before the conference." Developing contacts with decision-makers is thus a long process in which conferences can play a part. For most exhibitors, unfamiliar, walk-up decision-makers are few and far between.

The ideal conference for exhibitors is one with many attendees and few exhibitors. Unfortunately, large numbers of attendees attract large numbers of exhibitors. A smaller conference thus offers a smaller audience, but a higher chance of meeting the right attendees. At smaller conferences, attendees often spend more time in a booth and may revisit an exhibitor, potentially moving the marketing and sales process along several steps

over the course of a few days. Larger conferences require more booth personnel, marketing literature and give-aways. In addition, the challenge at larger conferences is to stand out from the crowd. Bigger, fancier booths, better prizes and give-aways, and sponsorships address this issue, but all cost money. These costs affect ROI.

Some exhibitors focus on collecting unqualified leads with appealing give-aways and prizes or "treasure hunts." If ROI is determined by the number of business cards collected and badges scanned, these approaches work well. However, booths clogged with visitors are unappealing to real prospects, who may decide to come back later and never do so. If an exhibitor wants both lots of unqualified leads and walk-in real prospects, it is important to have a booth of adequate size and enough personnel to handle the crowds and identify the real prospects for special treatment. However, if the primary objective is marketing, a crowded booth sends a positive message.

While relevant decision-makers are the Holy Grail, other types of attendees may be useful. "Gatekeepers" hold the keys to the decision-makers' door. Gatekeepers are often in the outsourcing (née purchasing) department, but could be anyone with the decision-maker's ear. "End users" are the people who would actually use the exhibitor's product. They may influence the buying decision and can provide useful feedback on product features. Every attendee may not have influence, but most of them know people who have more influence than they do. They will often identify the decision-makers and perhaps provide an introduction.

Collecting leads is only useful to the extent that the exhibitor later uses them. More than one exhibitor has returned to the office with no time or energy left to make use of the leads in a timely manner. A post-conference strategy and plan is thus required. This strategy probably involves special attention to qualified leads, so it is essential to identify the qualified leads at the conference and record details for follow-up.

The impact of marketing programs on revenue is notoriously difficult to measure, but exhibitors should be able to detect at least a rough correlation over time. Market research can measure knowledge about the exhibitor in its target audience. The author once commissioned such a market research study, which provided very useful good and bad news. Members of the board of directors were surveyed as a positive control and yielded somewhat bad news.

Effective marketing messages must be especially clear, distinct and succinct on exhibit floors. An effective and inexpensive approach to capturing attention is to design a booth that visibly communicates the exhibitor's primary message in the three seconds it takes an attendee to walk by, e.g.: "Acme Printing: CRFs While-U-Wait."

Conferences are also excellent places to conduct market research. Exhibitor personnel can quickly evolve their story over numerous conversations with attendees. Which messages in which words create interest? Brief surveys can be conducted. Attendee questions are very revealing.

Exhibitors can collect competitive intelligence. Booth visitors may be a competitor's customer or potential customer. Exhibitors can also visit their competitors' booths. Deception is unethical. However, it is ethical to ask questions without deception. It takes only two seconds to find the attendee's organization on his or her badge, but many booth personnel just plunge into their presentation. On exhibit floors, the maxim "let the buyer and seller beware" applies.

Some exhibitors stated that not exhibiting at a major conference sends a negative message about the health of the exhibitor, especially if the exhibitor has a tradition of exhibiting at that conference. This effect may or may not be significant, but the recent economic troubles have caused some exhibitors to reassess this consideration.

Exhibitors that market their products to other exhibitors benefit from the presence of a large number of exhibitors. Conferences are also a good place to discuss partnerships with other exhibitors. However, the composition of booth personnel varies by show; it is tough to sell to salespeople.

Exhibitors prefer conferences in which:

- The exhibit floor is near the session rooms.
- The conference motivates attendees to visit the exhibit floor, e.g., with food and beverages.
- The exhibit floor is open when attendees are likely to visit and not longer than necessary.
- Breaks between sessions are long enough for attendees to visit the exhibit floor.
- Exhibitor personnel can attend sessions and networking events without extra charge.
- Speaking opportunities are available.
- Everything runs smoothly.

Conclusion

Because conferences are an efficient way to present a physical presence and meet people face to face, they are a valuable marketing and sales tool. The three U.S. conferences discussed above are the largest, but not necessarily the best for a given exhibitor. Every conference has its strengths and weaknesses. Organizations planning to exhibit at one or more conferences should clearly define their objectives, strategies, plans and methods for measuring ROI. They should select conferences that best meet their objectives and then assess actual results. With enough experimentation, the best conferences for a given exhibitor will emerge.

Reference

1. "How to Meet People at Conferences," Norman M. Goldfarb, *Journal of Clinical Research Best Practices*, September 2006.

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