

COLUMN: As The Saws Turn

TITLE: The Great Drayage Rip-Off At LVCC

When I first saw Tiny (name changed to protect his...identity) he was sitting on a yellow cart in front of the entrance to the South Hall of Las Vegas Convention Center. He was a very, VERY, large man. His head was shaved. He was wearing dark sunglasses. His muscle shirt revealed tattoos from his wrist to his neck. On the front of the cart was a sign with his name on it. On the back the sign said: Teamster: Back Off.

It was a Sunday, the last day of set up before the National Association of Convenience Stores (NACS) show opened. Exhibitors were hustling around finishing their exhibits, running in and out of the hall doing last-minute errands before the business of the trade show began.

Tiny had one mission: stop every exhibitor from bringing anything in the building that they couldn't hand-carry. No luggage carts. No dollies. However, exhibitors with pop-ups in rolling plastic cases were allowed to enter. He watched people walk out of the hall with empty carts. He watched them fill those carts from their trunks and the backs of their vans. He watched them roll up to the doors. Then he would strike.

He told them they could not bring the material (most of it was the exhibitor's product, not exhibit properties) into the hall. He sent them over to the corner of the building, to wait in line, while a woman filled out a bill of lading for them. She counted pieces and estimated weight. They then waited for another driver on another cart to come pick them up and escort them into the hall to their exhibit. And while they were waiting, a Las Vegas police officer ticketed their vehicle.

I watched this while I was standing next to my clients' car, so she wouldn't get ticketed. She was waiting in line to get a cart driver to take her product packages up to her exhibit. She had to replace the ones she sent to the show, because they "disappeared" the first day of set-up. She waited an hour. When her turn came, the cart driver stopped about 30 feet from her car, got off his cart, lit a cigarette, and made a cell phone call. We waited another fifteen minutes.

You need to know that NACS is not a small show. It consumed all of both levels of the South Hall. There were many very large exhibits, and even more medium to small ones. I would bet that the vast majority of the people wanting to wheel a few product cases in the front door had already paid very large drayage charges to get their exhibits in the hall. It's not like anyone was hurting for work to do on this show. But it was a Sunday. It was the last day of set up. And it was on double time that any work got done that day.

When you consider the drayage charges on the 100's of thousands of pounds of freight moved into the hall for this event, you have to wonder how much incremental revenue they were really giving up by letting a few exhibitors wheel some product in the front door. What was that revenue worth compared to the image that this set of circumstances burned into the minds of exhibitors?

Let's consider this from three different perspectives: that of show management (the National Association of Convenience Stores – NACS); the teamsters union, and the city of Las Vegas, or more specifically, the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Bureau.

My question for NACS is pretty simple: Is this how you want your paying customers – exhibitors – to be treated? Some of these exhibitors have paid big money for booth space to be in this show to be treated this way. As a show sponsor, the exhibitor is your direct customer. Sure, they are also customers of the show contractor, the union and the city, but by virtue of their signed contract

with you for booth space, they are your primary customer. They wouldn't be a customer of these other groups if they weren't your customer first. It is your responsibility, through your agreements with these other suppliers, to make sure your customer – the exhibitor – is treated fairly.

To the teamsters union, I ask this: After your recent strike that affected the dismantle of the MAGIC show, can you afford to be seen in this fashion by the people in this industry – exhibitors – that pay your wages? Is this behavior good for your reputation and credibility? Actions like this do not go very far in building support for your causes in our industry. Exhibitors will remember this experience – especially when your next contract is due and you are looking for public support for your causes.

Finally, to the LVCVB: Is this how visitors (exhibitors) should experience doing business in your city? You have taken some very large shows from cities like Chicago in the last few years. In 25 years of working in Chicago, I have never seen anything like this. I would think you could just as easily lose these big shows to cities like Orlando or New Orleans if behavior like this becomes the norm.

The bottom line here is that it is the exhibitor that is getting taken advantage of – again. One way to address this is for exhibitors to band together and go to show management and push for change: change in their contract with show management, change in show management's contract with the show contractor, change in the operating agreements with the local unions and the city-owned facilities, or change in venue – move the show to a more exhibitor-friendly environment.

It is not always easy to get exhibitors to band together – they are used to competing against each other in the marketplace, not joining forces. But this

may be the only way to bring about change. Another option might have been to band together and do an end run around Tiny and storm the front doors.

See you on the show floor.

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