The real cost of exhibiting

7 hidden costs that can quietly double your budget — and how to avoid them



Why *budget surprises* happen

Imagine this: you've invested months into booth design, your space is booked, and your team is onsite, ready to make an impression. Then the invoices start rolling in.

Drayage. Rigging. Late order surcharges. A Wi-Fi bill larger than your plane tickets. Suddenly the budget you carefully planned is already under pressure — and finance is asking questions.

You're not alone. Exhibitors everywhere underestimate the true cost of trade shows. It's not because they lack experience; it's because the system is complex, fragmented, and full of fine print.

"I've seen \$100,000 booths turn into \$150,000 projects just because of hidden costs. With the right partner, they don't have to."

Craig Hoffend, CEO Gielissen USA



This blueprint is designed for **exhibitors managing 20×20+ booths**. It lays out the 7 hidden costs that catch most teams off guard, with real-world examples and practical ways to stay in control.



The 7 hidden costs of exhibiting



1. **Drayage** (material handling)

"We paid more to move our crates across the hall than to ship them across the country."

What is it

The mandatory fee for unloading your freight, moving it to your booth, and storing empty crates until teardown.

Typical range

\$188-\$260 per CWT (100 lbs). For a 20×20 booth (8,000-10,000 lbs), that's \$15k-\$25k+. In premium cities like NY or Chicago, rates can run \$300-\$400 per CWT.

A Risk

Multiple shipments, oversized crates, or late arrivals trigger surcharges that can inflate your bill by thousands.

Smart move

Consolidate freight into fewer, lighter crates. Ship to the advance warehouse to avoid last-minute fees.





These booths made a big impact on the floor. Can you guess their total weights?

Who Royal IHC **Where** OTC 2022 in Houston

Big impact, light load — smart use of aluminum keeps drayage costs down.

Enable effective di



Who GE Healthcare **Where** HIMMS 2024 in Las Vegas

Factor in the weight of LED walls — they look great, but add to your drayage.

Who Rheinmetall **Where** DSEI 2023 in London

Showcasing heavy equipment? Plan drayage like a project of its own.





2. *Union* labor

"We thought our team could handle setup. The venue had other plans."

What is it

At many venues, only union crews can perform tasks like laying carpet, installing lighting, or connecting AV.

Typical range

\$120–\$250 per hour, often with 4-hour minimums. Overtime and weekend rates are higher.

A Risk

Assigning work to your own staff can lead to delays, fines, or even work stoppages.

Smart move

Pre-schedule union labor with the general contractor. Plan installation during straight-time hours to keep costs down.



Ask *Ed*

"Think of your booth like a project, not a purchase. Planning and teamwork are what make the difference."



3. Rigging

"We didn't budget \$2,000 just for an engineer's signature."

1 What is it

Many venues require engineerstamped rigging drawings for overhead signs, trusses, or heavy structures. Las Vegas and other major cities are strict about this.

Typical range

\$1,000–\$2,500 per stamped drawing.

A Risk

Submitting plans late triggers rush fees or delays in sign hanging. Without stamped approval, your rigging may not be installed at all.

■ Smart move

Ask early if stamped plans are required. Provide rigging drawings well in advance to avoid rush fees.



A large overhead **banner** helps your booth stand out long before visitors reach it.





Ask **Jeff**

"High-stakes industries, like defense and aerospace, demand zero surprises on the show floor."





4. *Utilities* (power, Wi-Fi, water)

"Our AV wall was a showstopper. The power bill? A shock."

What is it

Every outlet, internet connection, or water line is billed as a service. Dedicated Wi-Fi lines or high-voltage connections can be surprisingly costly.

Typical range

- Power outlets: \$1,000-\$3,000
- Dedicated Wi-Fi: \$3,500-\$5,000
- Water line: \$500-\$1,000

A Risk

Ordering on-site or missing deadlines can add 20–30% to your bill.

■ Smart move

Audit power needs during design. Book utilities before deadlines.



We advise on the best placement of power, Wi-Fi and water, so every connection supports your booth strategy.



5. *Catering*& food rules

"We paid \$2,500 just to serve our own coffee."

What is it

Venues often have exclusive food & beverage contracts. Bringing in your own snacks, coffee, or catering usually requires a buyout fee.

Typical range

\$2,000–\$5,000 for a buy-out, plus service staff costs. Even a keg of beer can cost \$1,000 through the venue (vs. \$50 at a store).

A Risk

Serving unapproved food or drinks can result in fines or confiscation on the show floor.

Smart move

Budget for catering early. If offering branded coffee or drinks is part of your strategy, negotiate buy-out terms with the venue in advance.



For travel and hospitality brands, guest comfort is non-negotiable — but catering always comes with venue rules.



Ask Jeanne



6. Cleaning

"We wanted to vacuum ourselves. The venue said no."

What is it

Daily booth cleaning is typically required and must be performed by the official contractor.

Typical range

\$500-\$1,500+ depending on booth size and show duration.

A Risk

Skipping cleaning can leave your booth looking unprofessional, but handling it yourself is often prohibited.

Smart move

Schedule cleaning services for every show day. Plan higher budgets if your booth has carpets, lounges, or heavy traffic.



Is carpet always necessary, or can your booth stand out without it? A bold choice — and cleaner for the planet.



7. Show services deadlines

"We missed the deadline for electrical orders. The late fee was 30%."

What is it

Every show sets deadlines for ordering services like rigging, electrical, and furniture.

Typical range

Late fees add 20–30% to published rates.

A Risk

Missing a single deadline can push thousands in unexpected costs onto your final invoice.

Smart move

Track all show deadlines in a master calendar. Assign a dedicated team member to submit orders well before cutoff dates.



Behind the smile is a full checklist of deadlines already taken care of.







How to stay in control



Design light, build strong.

Save thousands on drayage with modular, lightweight systems.



Plan early.

Finalize graphics 60+ days before deadlines.



Pre-order services.

Electricity, Wi-Fi and furniture are 20-30% cheaper in advance.



Stage locally.

Avoid coast-to-coast shipping with our local storage hubs in Las Vegas and Atlanta.



Track deadlines.

A missed order cutoff can add thousands to your bill.



Partner smart.

A trusted builder handles the details so you can focus on results.



Your next step

Budget clarity is the first step to trade show success. With a clear picture of hidden costs, you can prepare confidently and protect your investment.

At Gielissen, we don't just design and build — we guide you through the entire exhibiting process, making sure there are no surprises when the invoices arrive.

"Want a clear budget estimate for your next booth? Let's build your plan together."





Why Gielissen?

In the U.S. we may be a new name, but in Europe we're one of the largest exhibit builders. With local teams in Las Vegas and Atlanta, we combine global experience with on-the-ground support — so your booth looks great, runs smoothly, and stays on budget.





Watch our brand movie at gielissen.com or scan the code



420+ employees



average NPS-score









1,500 projects/year



85+ years of experience





Active in 72 countries





13 offices





Ask *Maylo*

"Woof! I don't know much about drayage, but I do know how to make people smile."





building unforgettable stories

