

The real cost of exhibiting in the U.S.

A practical guide
for European
marketing teams



7 hidden costs you
won't find in Europe —
and how to avoid them



Gielissen

Interiors | Exhibitions | Events

Why *budget surprises* happen

You know how trade shows work. You've delivered strong booths in Europe. You understand budgets, logistics and deadlines. *Then you enter the U.S., and it feels different from day one.*

Invoices come from multiple parties. Basic services cost more than expected. Things you normally handle yourself are suddenly "not allowed". And hidden fees appear long after you planned your budget.

"You didn't become less experienced overnight. You just entered a different system."

Jeroen van Beeck, CCO at Gielissen



This guide helps European teams prepare for that reality. In clear language. With practical tips. And with examples from real projects.

If you're planning a show the U.S., this guide will help you:

- ✓ Understand cost drivers you don't see in Europe
- ✓ Avoid expensive last-minute surprises
- ✓ Ask the right questions early
- ✓ Protect your budget — and your peace of mind



Same industry. *Different rules.*

European shows are often straightforward: you rent space, hire a builder, and most services flow through that builder.

In the United States, it works very differently:

-  The general services contractor (GSC) controls many services on the floor
-  Labor is regulated by unions, so your team can do far less on-site
-  Every single item, from power to cleaning, comes with its own form, deadline and price
-  Drayage is mandatory and charged by weight: a cost you won't see in Europe
-  Rules change per city and venue, so every show has a different cost profile

It's not better or worse. Just different. And you need to know how the system behaves.



Gielissen has local exhibition experts in:

-  Atlanta
-  Las Vegas
-  Chicago
-  Amsterdam
-  Eindhoven
-  Hanover
-  Munich
-  Stuttgart
-  Barcelona *
-  Dubai

** Local production partner*



The **7**
hidden
costs *of*
exhibiting
in the U.S.



1. *Drayage* (material handling)

“We paid more to move our crates across the hall than to ship them across the ocean.”

i *What is it*

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

📦 *Typical range*

\$4–\$6 per kg. For a 6×6 meter booth (3,600–4,500 kg), that’s \$15k–\$25k+. In premium cities like NY or Chicago, rates can run \$6,5–\$9 per kg.

⚠️ *Risk for Europeans*

This fee doesn’t exist at home, so teams don’t budget for it, and often design too heavy. In the U.S., weight drives cost.

👍 *Smart move*

Design light: U.S. booths use lightweight frames. Reduce crates. Ask your partner to calculate weight early.



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.



Who GE HealthCare

Where HLTH 2024 in Las Vegas

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

Who Marriott

Where GBTA 2023 in Atlanta

This grand gesture may look heavy, but might be lighter than you think.



2. *Union* labor

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

i *What is it*

In many U.S. venues, only union crews may install flooring, build structures, handle electrical work or connect AV.

🔧 *Typical range*

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

⚠️ *Risk for Europeans*

Teams assume they can help on-site, like in Europe. But most hands-on work is restricted. Assigning work to your own staff can lead to delays, fines, or even work stoppages.

👍 *Smart move*

Book labor early. Avoid overtime hours. Ask your partner what your team may (and may not) do.



Ask *Joe*

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

 Joe Forrest is part of our team in Atlanta.



3. *Rigging*

“We didn’t budget \$2,000 just for an engineer’s signature.”

i *What is it*

Many U.S. venues require engineer-stamped 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.

⚠️ *Risk for Europeans*

In Europe, rigging approvals are simpler, so teams often don’t expect engineering fees or long review times. Late drawings create rush fees, delays, or prevent your sign from being hung.

👍 *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 *Jeanne*

“For me, it’s all about making the client feel taken care of. If they can focus on their audience instead of logistics, we’ve done our job.”

 Jeanne Powers is part of our team in Atlanta.



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

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

i **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

⚠️ **Risk for Europeans**

Utilities are cheaper in Europe, so teams often underestimate U.S. rates. Late orders quickly 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.”

i *What is it*

Most U.S. venues have exclusive food & beverage contracts. Bringing in your own snacks, coffee, or catering usually requires a buy-out fee.

📦 *Typical range*

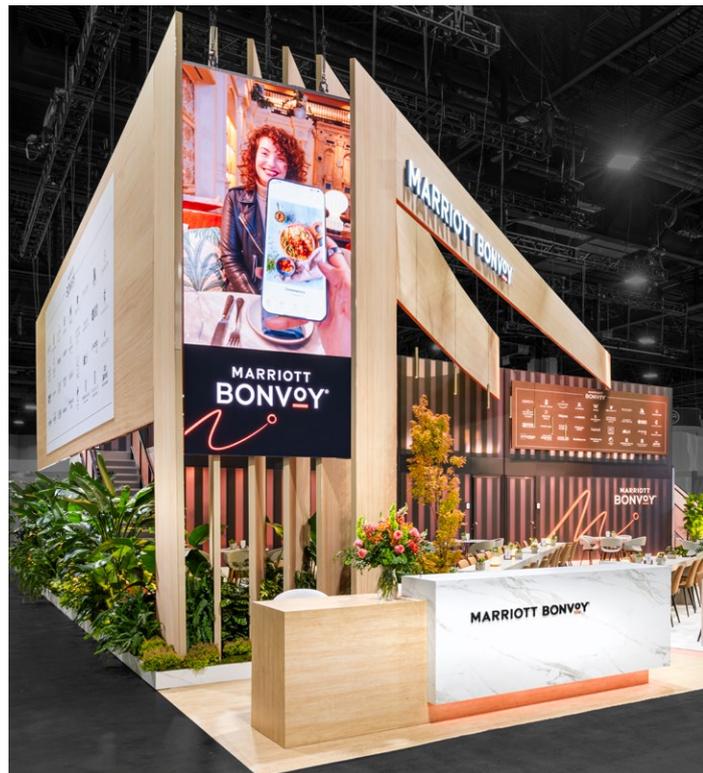
\$2,000–\$5,000 for a buy-out, plus service staff costs. Even a keg of beer can cost \$1,000 through the venue (vs. \$50 at a store).

⚠️ *Risk for Europeans*

Many European teams design around an espresso bar or cocktails, only to discover later that it's tightly regulated and extremely expensive.

👍 *Smart move*

If drinks or snacks are part of your strategy, include venue-controlled catering in your budget and arrange any waivers well in advance.



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



Ask *Dagmar*

“As a coffee lover, I enjoy the contrast. Coffee in Europe is small and strong, in the U.S. it's big and brewed. Both bring their own kind of comfort.”

 Dagmar Bloeming is part of our team in Eindhoven.



6. *Cleaning*

“We wanted to vacuum ourselves. The venue said no.”

i *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.

⚠️ *Risk for Europeans*

Cleaning is often included or self-managed in Europe. In the U.S., it's controlled, mandatory, and billed separately. Skipping it quickly makes your booth look unprofessional.

👍 *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%.”

i *What is it*

Every U.S. show sets strict deadlines for ordering services like rigging, electrical, and furniture. After the cutoff, prices jump immediately.

📅 *Typical range*

Late fees add 20–30% to published rates.

⚠️ *Risk*

In Europe, missing a deadline rarely changes the price. In the U.S., it does. One missed form can add thousands to your bill, and each service has its own deadline, form and vendor.

👍 *Smart move*

Create one master deadline list for all services, and assign clear ownership for submitting forms well before cutoff dates.



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



Ask *Susanne*

"Budget surprises can be avoided if you involve your builder early. The earlier we talk, the smoother the process."

 Susanne Alt is part of our team in Stuttgart and Munich.

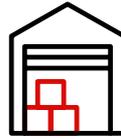


How to stay in control



Design with U.S. rules in mind.

Save thousands on drayage with modular, lightweight systems.



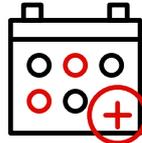
Use local hubs.

Reduce trans-Atlantic shipping with our local hubs in Las Vegas and Atlanta.



Plan early.

Finalize graphics 60+ days before deadlines. Late changes are costly.



Track deadlines.

A missed order cutoff can add thousands to your bill.



Pre-order everything.

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



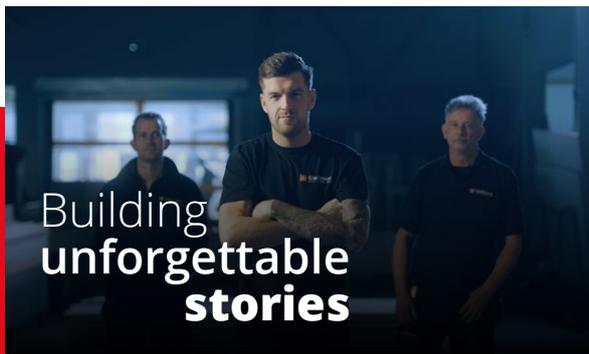
Partner smart.

A cross-Atlantic builder handles the details so you can focus on results.



Why *Gielissen*?

Exhibiting in the U.S. is far easier when your partner works on both sides of the ocean. We develop your booth close to home in the Netherlands or Germany, and our teams in Las Vegas and Atlanta translate it smoothly to U.S. rules, costs and timelines.



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



420+
employees



9.0 average
NPS-score



85+ years
of experience



1,500
projects/year



Active in **72**
countries



13
offices



Your *next step*

A clear view of U.S. costs means fewer surprises and better decisions.

"Need a U.S. cost estimate? Let's build your plan together."

Gielissen connects your European workflow with U.S. execution.

- ✓ One partner
- ✓ One budget
- ✓ No guesswork

Contact our local teams

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Ask *Maylo*

“Woof! I don’t know much about drayage, but I do know how to make people smile.”

 Maylo is part of our team in Stuttgart and Munich.



building
unforgettable
stories



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