



Material Handling (“Drayage”): The good, bad, and ugly

Not to be confused with shipping, exhibit drayage can sometimes cost as much (or more) than exhibit shipping. Should loss or damages occur, drayage carries far less recourse for damage claims than the shipping, even though drayage moves across a fraction of the distance.

What is drayage?

Drayage is the exclusive labor service that can only be provided by the General Contractor (GC) managing your show. The GC is hired exclusively by your trade association, and the drayage labor is hired exclusively by the GC.

Drayage begins once your shipping carrier delivers your freight. The process includes:

- Unloading your freight from your carrier at the receiving dock
- Moving your freight to your booth space
- Removing & storing your empty containers during the show
- Returning your containers after the show
- Moving your packed containers back to the docks for outbound shipping

THE GOOD

With thousands of **tons** of exhibitor freight at stake in a very condensed schedule, the highly coordinated process is streamlined exclusively through labor teams specifically allotted for this volume of movement. For this reason, exclusivity greatly enhances efficiency.

Everyone should witness the organized chaos that is the move-in and hurry-and-move-out process at least once. You’ll quickly gain at least some increase in appreciation for the 95% successful procedure.

THE BAD

Even with its necessity, drayage is the most notorious category in the exhibit budget. Why?

- Rates are non-negotiable.
- Rates are unpredictable, with fluctuating prices across the same shows, the locations, and GCs.
- Rates have been rising at a disproportionate rate when compared to other labor rates (see sidebar).
- The rules are increasingly restrictive, costly, and filled with vast areas of non-liability from the GC... which brings us to...

THE UGLY

- 1) Has your booth ever been mysteriously damaged overnight during installation or dismantle days?
- 2) Has your freight ever gone missing somewhere between the dock and your booth space?
- 3) Has your invoice ever seen a mysterious “special handling” surcharge even though your freight consists only of standard crates?
- 4) Has someone else’s typo caused their 5,000 lb exhibit to land on your drayage bill?

***An exhibitor at a food show once complained to me about their missing boxes of snacks... her actual product...
...She sat through the snack show trying to sell a snack by merely talking about it... Needless to say, it didn’t go so well.***

Shockingly, there is very little recourse for the exhibitor unlucky enough to experience #1. Take five minutes to read the typical “Material Handling Terms & Conditions” in the exhibitor manual, and you’ll see that merely by being at the show, you’ve signed away your rights to reclaim anything for damages. Even if it’s undeniable that the GC is at fault, damages are awarded with cents on the dollar for each pound of that property... not for the actual value of the item. (Where does that leave you if a forklift punches through your fabric graphic?)

The only recourse for issue #2 is if they find your freight. Otherwise, it’s simply gone... even if it shows up as “checked in” at the marshaling yard. An exhibitor at a food show once complained to me about their missing boxes of snacks... her actual product. The freight had “checked in”, she was billed for the drayage, but the boxes never made it to the booth despite relentless searching. She sat through the snack show trying to sell a snack by merely talking about it... Needless to say, it didn’t go so well.

So how can you reduce both your drayage costs and risks?

- Use lightweight materials in your booth design, and consolidate all packages/crates/skids into as few freight “units” as possible.
- Know your freight inventory before it leaves home, and preferably take photos of all pieces.
- Take photos of freight as it arrives in your booth space, and note any container damages or missing pieces. Immediately notify the GC of any issues.
- During set up and tear down, try to position large crates around the perimeter of your space to ideally block forklifts from cutting through your booth corners and potentially causing damage.
- Positioning caution tape around your booth perimeter is another way to signal forklifts to “keep out”.
- Check your GC invoices immediately as the show opens, if not sooner... Drayage will already be billed, and sometimes your credit card already charged. Sadly, the errors happen fast, but the resolution happens slowly.

Finally, be kind to your GC onsite Exhibitor Service desk reps. They’re never the root of drayage woes, but often get the heat. Most reps really want to help make it right, and many have the power to do so. In the midst of bad trade show attitudes, you’ll be pleasantly surprised how far a kind approach will help you resolve the situation at hand.

SIDEBAR:

Take note of exhibitor push-back already happening against show associations regarding the imbalanced inflation of drayage costs compared to other show costs.

Typically, the GC negotiates discounts for your trade association in order to gain their overall show decoration business. Material handling is a common area for the GC to recapture those discounted dollars... thus throwing the burden on the exhibitor.

*An 8-year study of 8 major conventions revealed that drayage rates increased 257%, compared to labor rate increases of 21%. (Drayage is exclusive to the GC, while standard labor is not.)

**Exhibit and Event Marketers Association (E2MA), 2013 Red Diamond Congress report.*