

The Trade Show Booth Buyer's Guide

Everything a first-time or growing exhibitor needs to know before talking to a single booth builder.

Inside this guide:

- How much a trade show booth actually costs in 2026
- The 4 booth types - and which one fits your show
- 10 questions to ask every booth builder before you sign
- Realistic timelines: when to book to avoid rush fees
- Red flags that signal a builder will miss your deadline
- Budget worksheet to scope your show

1. What a booth actually costs

Booth pricing is the #1 question we get. The honest answer: it depends on size, materials, shipping, drayage, A/V, and how much custom design you need. Here are realistic 2026 ranges based on briefs in our network.

By booth size (all-in, US shows)

- 10x10 portable / pop-up: \$3,000 - \$10,000
- 10x10 modular custom: \$8,000 - \$18,000
- 10x20 modular: \$15,000 - \$32,000
- 10x20 fully custom: \$25,000 - \$55,000
- 20x20 custom build: \$45,000 - \$120,000
- 20x30+ island: \$80,000 - \$300,000+

What's usually NOT in the quote

- Drayage (material handling at the venue) - often 10-15% of build cost
- Electrical, rigging, and labor ordered through the show
- Shipping to and from the venue
- Storage between shows
- On-site supervisor or installer travel

2. The 4 booth types

Portable / pop-up

Lightweight, ships in cases, sets up in under an hour. Best for first shows, regional events, and tight budgets. Limited customization.

Modular

Reusable aluminum frame system with swappable graphics. Scales from 10x10 to 20x20. Best ROI for exhibitors doing 3+ shows per year.

Rental

Rent the structure, only pay for graphics and customization. Best for one-off shows or testing a new market without capex.

Custom build

Designed and built from scratch for your brand. Highest impact, highest cost, longest lead time (12-16 weeks). Best for flagship shows where presence matters.

3. 10 questions to ask every builder

- 1. Have you built for this specific show or venue before?
- 2. What's included in your quote - and what's billed separately?
- 3. Who handles drayage, electrical, and rigging orders?
- 4. What's your design revision policy? How many rounds are included?
- 5. Can I see a portfolio of booths in my budget range, not just your hero projects?
- 6. Who is my point of contact from kickoff through teardown?
- 7. What happens if a graphic, panel, or A/V piece arrives damaged on-site?
- 8. Do you store the booth between shows, and what does that cost?
- 9. What's your payment schedule and refund policy?
- 10. Can you provide 2 references from exhibitors of my size and industry?

4. Timelines that actually work

Most exhibitors underestimate how long a booth takes. Here's the reverse-countdown we recommend for a typical 10x20 modular or custom build.

- 16 weeks out Brief booth builders. Get 2-3 quotes.
- 14 weeks out Sign with builder. First design concept.
- 12 weeks out Design lock. Order long-lead A/V if needed.
- 8 weeks out Final graphics approved. Production starts.
- 4 weeks out Pre-show review. Confirm logistics with show.
- 2 weeks out Freight ships. Book installer travel.
- Show week Setup, supervise, exhibit, teardown.

Rush fees kick in at...

- Custom builds under 10 weeks out: +15-30%
- Modular under 6 weeks out: +10-20%
- Portable under 3 weeks out: +5-15% plus expedited freight

5. Red flags

- Quote is dramatically lower than 2 other bids - usually missing line items.
- Builder won't share references or only shares marquee projects 5x your budget.
- No clear point of contact or named project manager.
- Vague timeline ('we'll figure it out') or no production schedule.
- Pushes for full payment up front.
- No experience with your show or venue's specific rules.
- Slow to respond during the sales process - it gets worse after you sign.

6. Quick budget worksheet

Use this to scope your show before talking to builders.

Booth structure (size + type): \$_____

Graphics & branding: \$_____

A/V (screens, lighting, sound): \$_____

Furniture & accessories: \$_____

Shipping (round trip): \$_____

Drayage (10-15% of build): \$_____

Electrical, rigging, labor (show services): \$_____

Installer travel & supervision: \$_____

Storage between shows: \$_____

Contingency (10%): \$_____

TOTAL: \$_____

Skip the 20-vendor email chain.

Tell us your show, budget, and timeline. We match you with up to 3 vetted booth builders that fit - usually within one business day. Free, no commitment.

exhibitbridge.com/get-matched