

Maker Faire: Tips for First-Time Exhibitors

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Last updated on 2018-08-22 03:43:45 PM UTC

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Overview



Nothing can quite prepare you for Maker Faire®, whether one of the big main events or independently-produced “mini” Faires. It’s “*fifty percent science fair, fifty percent county fair, and fifty percent Burning Man reunion.*” A unique opportunity to show off your vision, make new contacts or peddle your craft.

Exhibiting at a Maker Faire, especially the first time, brings with it stress and sensory overload...but also excitement, kinship and the exchange of ideas. Here are some pointers we’ve collected. This list is by no means exhaustive (nor official)...mostly *missed hindsights*, above and beyond what you might already be planning and what information the event organizers provide.

Each event will have its own rules and procedures; mini Faires are independently produced, *not* directly managed by Maker Media. Such rules *of course* take precedence over anything we might suggest!

Presentation

- **Keep it simple!** A *little bit* of signage is a good thing. It saves your throat vs. introducing the exhibit to *every* passer-by...and also, there are many people too shy to inquire. Use just the *bare minimum* text or diagrams to explain what’s going on. You *cannot* hold anyone’s attention in this three-ring circus!
- With interactive things, **think about affordances** — how an object’s appearance implies a purpose. *Dials* want to be *turned*, *buttons* beckon to be *pressed*, a *telephone handset* says “*speak to me.*” *Red* says *stop* and

green means *go*. Shapes and colors convey a *lot* of meaning without a single word!

- For home-made projects, provided your writing is legible, handwritten signs are great (it's a DIY event, after all). Businesses will want slick signage to radiate professionalism.
- Consider *digital* signage, if the setting permits it (indoors, with power). A secondhand flat-screen monitor and a junky old laptop or a Raspberry Pi are totally sufficient to run a basic slideshow (but see "keep it simple," above).
- Make use of URL shorteners and/or QR codes.
- If there's computers, **turn off the screen saver**. (For whatever reason, it's in the *Personalization* control panel in Windows 7.)
- WiFi access (and even cell phone reception) is nearly impossible at a full-scale Maker Faire, there's just too much interference. If your exhibit has an internet-connected element, have an offline copy as a backup. Even just a screen shot may be sufficient.



- If your project is an *enhancement* to something else, create a "before and after" demo; the benefit might not be obvious without that contrast (see "Practice," below).

- If you have a table, where will you stand...in front or behind? Both have pros and cons. Give some thought to the *format* of your interactions, the *image* you'd like to project and your *personal space* needs.

Practice

- You might *think* your idea is plain to understand...but that's only because you've been immersed in it for so long, the same way people are oblivious to their own body odor. You can *never* see your own work fresh through your own eyes. **Enlist help.**
- "**Beta test**" a quick, early prototype of your setup with neighbors or co-workers...but not close friends who've already seen what you're working on, and not with your planned booth mates. This *requires* virgin eyes. See where the gaps in your explanations lie, take all feedback and criticism into consideration, retool and reorganize, prototype and test *again* with a fresh audience.
- Practice your pitch at a smaller event. If you're heading to one of the big regional faires, try a local "mini" Maker

Faire first.



- Smaller still...visit our weekly [Show and Tell on Google+ Hangouts \(https://adafru.it/dfD\)](https://adafru.it/dfD) online, make a five minute (or shorter) “elevator pitch” with your beta exhibit. You’ll interact directly with *other makers!*

Supplies & Equipment

- If it looks like **free swag** on a table, people *will* pick one up *regardless* whether they’re interested. Samples, flyers, business cards...hand these out *individually* to folks who stop and look (even briefly) at the exhibit. You can make/print about half as many, and the “click-through” rate (cards/flyers leading to actual web site visits) will be better. Using the “hand out only” method, 500 business cards was more than enough for a *major* weekend Faire.
- **Bring spare parts, power supplies, and a minimal but effective toolkit.** Though most won’t get used, it’s better to *have-and-not-use* than to *not-have-and-panic*.
- **Power strip, USB chargers, USB cables+++**, camera battery charger.
- **Notepad and PENS**, multiple.
- The absolute greatest butt-saver in the history of mankind is *gaffer’s tape*. It’s like duct tape on steroids, but peels off without residue. It holds signs *up* and wires *down*. Expensive, but worth every penny. A sampler pack of **zip ties** is a good thing too, plus a big handful of **binder clips** and a few **A-clamps**.
- If tables are provided, **bring tablecloths**. This makes your booth look more professional and helps hide gear out of sight. Nice fitted tablecloths can be found at wedding and party suppliers.
- If audio is a major part of your exhibit, get the biggest, loudest speaker that budget and cargo space allow. What’s ear-splitting in your living room might be a whisper in a cavernous expo building, and you may be set up alongside other noisy exhibits that will drown out your audio. You can always turn the volume down on a too-big speaker (and please do, in respect to your exhibiting neighbors), but a too-small speaker will *always* be too small.
- Bring some basic food and drinks (e.g. Clif Bars, bottled water); you may need a boost and not have time for lunch. Check with the venue first...vendor or union contracts may have strict rules against outside food! Also bring breath mints.

- **If selling:** bring way more small bills and change than you'd think.
- **If buying:** bring way more small bills and change than you'd think.

Crew

- **Bring helpers...**and *at least* one more than you think you need. **Work in shifts.** This way everyone can eat, take bathroom breaks, maybe even see a little bit of the event.
- Get to know your “booth neighbors.” Most are good folks who can watch during any brief staffing gaps (*brief* being the operative word...don't be a burden).



- Consider a simple uniform (such as matching polo shirts) or a costume — it helps attendees identify your crew for questions...otherwise you blend in with other patrons (a badge isn't enough). Science, tech or biology? Lab coat. Machinist or mechanic? Coveralls. Farming or food? Overalls. Artist? Smock. It seems *so terribly* cliché, but really helps!

- Bring clothes for rain or shine, *especially* if outdoors. Two pairs of shoes, swapping off.

The Event

- These are *very* dynamic events; **expect setup chaos.** There's a good chance you'll be assigned a different spot than originally planned...it might be bigger or smaller, brighter or darker, almost certainly louder, and possibly right next to a cell phone tower or Tesla coil. **Roll with it.**
- The event staff will be super busy. Veteran makers at the show can usually help with “level one” questions (to a point...they need time to set up too!).
- When you get to your booth, familiarize yourself with the location and prepare a quick spiel of directions to nearest restrooms, H₂O, food, official info, exits, plus all emergency items.
- Don't have a meltdown if your exhibit breaks mid-faire. Make a show of repairing it...makers *love* seeing what's inside!

Sales

- If you're selling a product or craft, *how much to bring* is a dark art. Bring too much and you'll be packing it all to

take home. Too little and opportunities are missed. *Economic factors* (such as recessions) seem to be a bigger influence than competition from other vendors.

- Few people carry cash anymore. Get a Square account to handle credit card payments on your smartphone. But...as previously mentioned...even cell phone service can get overwhelmed at larger events. Accept that you might just be drumming up business for future sales online.

These tips were culled from our own experiences and the advice of others in [this thread in the Adafruit Forums \(https://adafru.it/dXs\)](https://adafru.it/dXs). Feel free to chime in with your own there!