



# WINNING EXHIBITOR STRATEGIES FOR THE NAACS SHOW

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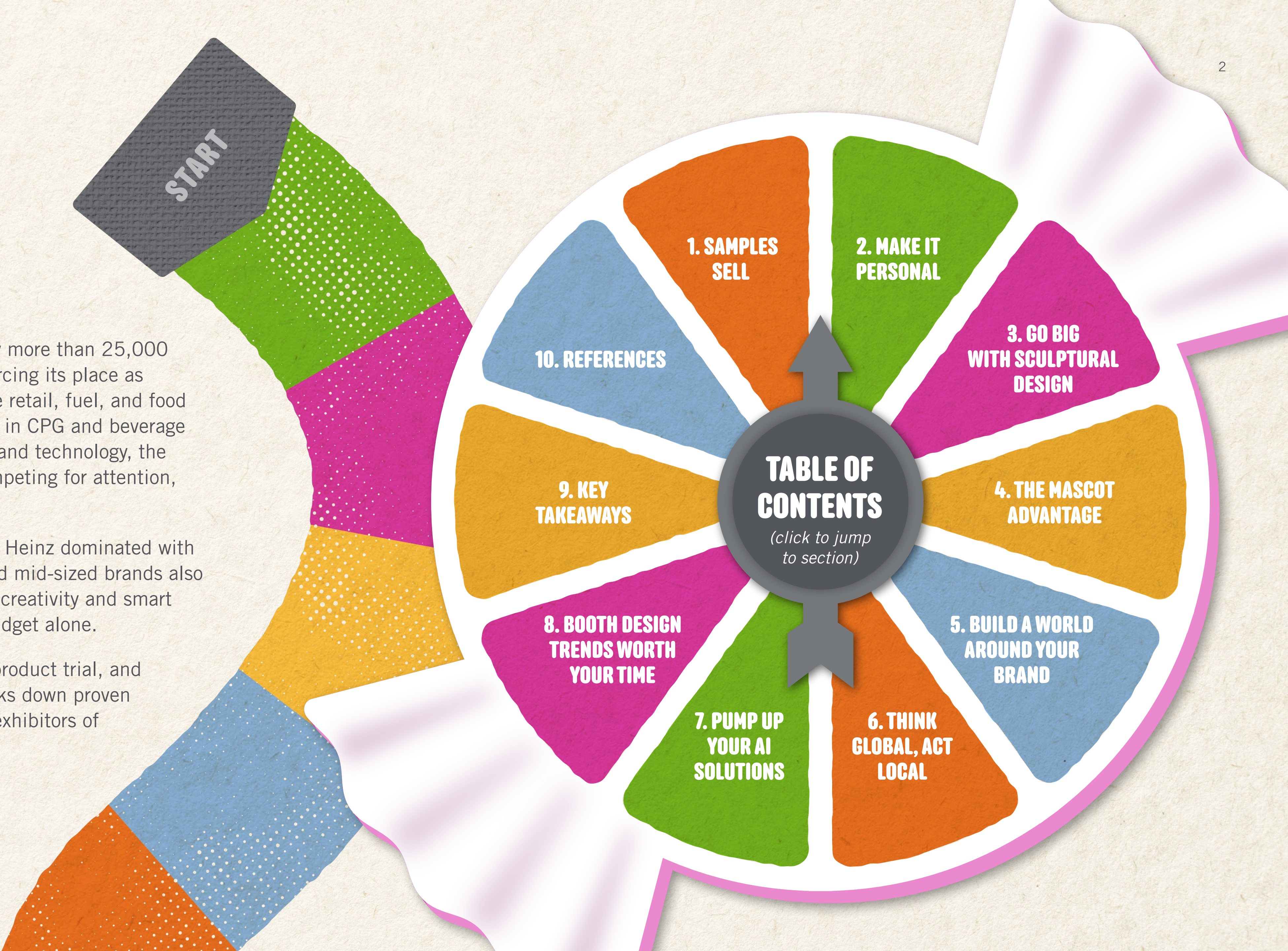


# INTRODUCTION

The 2025 NACS Show in Chicago drew more than 25,000 attendees and 1,200 exhibitors, reinforcing its place as the premier trade show for convenience retail, fuel, and food service brands. From household names in CPG and beverage to emerging players in fuel equipment and technology, the show floor was packed with brands competing for attention, engagement, and ROI.

While major players like Coca-Cola and Heinz dominated with large, high-visibility booths, smaller and mid-sized brands also stood out by being strategic. At NACS, creativity and smart experiential strategy can outperform budget alone.

If your goal is to increase leads, drive product trial, and build brand awareness, this guide breaks down proven tactics and emerging trends that help exhibitors of all sizes win at NACS and beyond.







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## SAMPLES SELL

Free samples are timeless because they work. The marketing psychology behind **product sampling** is well-documented: in-store trials can deliver up to a **475% same-day sales lift**, and **85% of consumers** are more likely to purchase a product after trying it at a live event.<sup>1, 2</sup>

At trade shows like NACS, where taste, texture, and aroma sell better than any ad, sampling is one of the most powerful ways to turn traffic into trial and trial into loyalty.

**PRO TIP:** Add exclusivity. Offer a show-only flavor, prototype, or sneak peek at an upcoming launch. Attendees love insider experiences; they'll share them too. Just ask anyone who tried the Dr. Pepper milkshake. The FOMO was real.





## 2 MAKE IT PERSONAL

Personalization continues to dominate experiential marketing because it transforms passive visitors into active participants.

At the NACS Show, brands with **personalized giveaways** or **interactive activations** drew long lines and social buzz. The reason is simple: personalization creates co-ownership. It tells your audience, "This brand sees me."

### OUR FAVORITES:

- **Heinz:** Customized ketchup bottles with attendee names.
- **Stella Artois:** Personalized engravings on their iconic chalices.

**PRO TIP:** Treat personalized giveaways as brand stories in motion, not just swag. Every attendee who leaves your booth should take a valuable piece of your brand narrative with them.





## GO BIG WITH SCULPTURAL DESIGN

Scale equals spectacle. Oversized product displays, from **giant energy drink cans** to **8-foot-tall Oreos**, don't just attract attention; they trigger curiosity and joy.

These **larger-than-life elements** act as brand magnets, pulling attendees from across the show floor and creating irresistible photo opportunities that amplify your reach through social sharing.

**PRO TIP:** Place oversized props where they can be seen from afar and ensure they connect back to your brand story. When design and meaning align, immersion turns into measurable engagement.







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## THE MASCOT ADVANTAGE

Mascots are back in a big way. Whether it's the **Keebler Elf** or an original character built for your activation, mascots humanize brands and make them instantly more approachable.

At NACS, mascots consistently drove **crowd engagement, photo ops, and organic social reach**, effectively turning attendees into micro-influencers.

**FUN FACT:** The word mascot originates from the French term for “lucky charm”—and in the world of experiential marketing, they still bring luck (and leads).





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## BUILD A WORLD AROUND YOUR BRAND

The most memorable booths at NACS didn't just display products—they built entire **immersive brand worlds**. Lean into your brand personality and put it on blast.

For house-of-brands exhibitors, adopting a **unifying theme** (like sports, sustainability, or global flavor trends) can visually and emotionally connect diverse product lines under one story.

**PRO TIP:** Choose your theme based on what resonates most with your target audience. For example, beverage brands often tie into professional sports or outdoor lifestyle themes to tap into shared passions.







## THINK GLOBAL, ACT LOCAL

The best-performing exhibits at NACS 2025 leaned into **global storytelling**. While the U.S. remains a major market, today's brands are increasingly catering to **international tastes and trends**.

A brand that references global culture like **soccer, K-pop, or F1**, positions itself as current, connected, and borderless. In a show as diverse as NACS, global relevance = local resonance.

**FUN FACT:** Soccer (football) is the world's most-watched sport, with an estimated 5 billion fans compared to about 150 million for American football. Global brands are paying attention.



# 7 PUMP UP YOUR AI SOLUTIONS

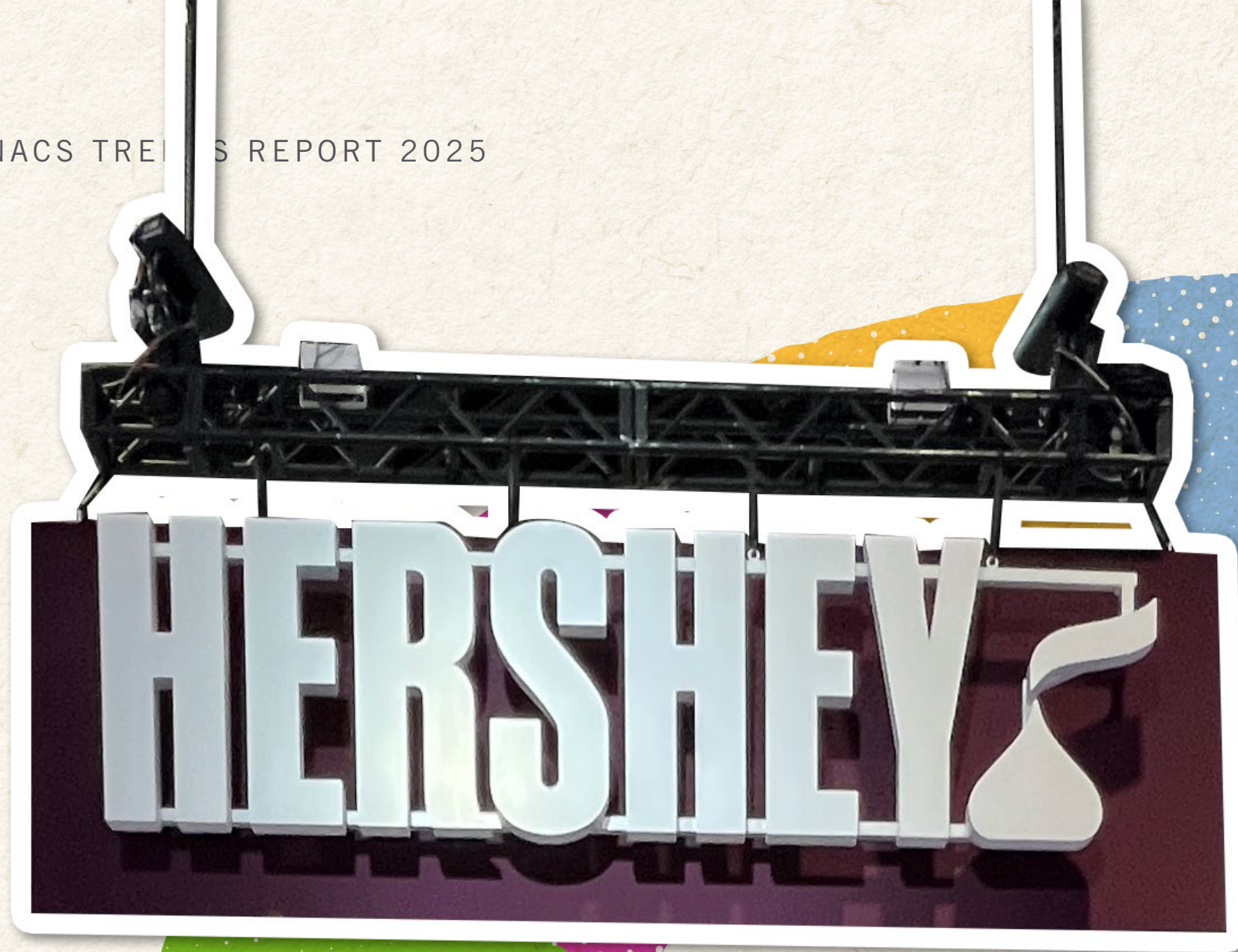
NACS Show attendees crave AI solutions that simplify operations, enhance fuel equipment performance, and strengthen loyalty programs. With so many AI-driven offerings competing for attention, the brands that stood out focused on clear, practical benefits rather than technical buzzwords.

Show how your solution integrates smoothly with existing systems, reduces friction for operators, and improves the customer experience at every touchpoint.

**PRO TIP:** Use a before-and-after storytelling format to demonstrate the impact of your AI solution. Comparison narratives showing how a client reduced labor hours, gained operational visibility, or outperformed competitors help attendees instantly understand value and differentiate your technology from the sea of “AI-powered” lookalikes.







## BOOTH DESIGN TRENDS WORTH YOUR TIME

**COLOR IS KING:** The NACS Show thrives on vibrancy. Lean into bold, saturated hues that reflect your brand personality.

**VOLUMETRIC SIGNAGE:** Traditional banners are fading fast. Custom illuminated signage adds depth and visibility that stands out on the show floor.

**PRODUCT AS DÉCOR:** Showcase your products as design elements. Build focal points using your own SKUs—it's smart, efficient, and instantly reinforces your brand.



## KEY TAKEAWAYS

**SAMPLING DRIVES ROI:** Live product trials turn foot traffic into measurable sales opportunities.

**PERSONALIZATION CREATES LOYALTY:** Attendees engage deeper when they co-create something with your brand.

**SCALE ATTRACTS ATTENTION:** Oversized displays and immersive environments boost booth visibility.

**MASCOTS BUILD BRAND LOVE:** They make your booth fun, memorable, and shareable.

**PUMP UP YOUR AI SOLUTIONS:** Use real-world storytelling to transform your positioning.

**DESIGN TELLS A STORY:** Use theme, color, and product integration to connect emotionally and visually.

**GLOBAL IS THE NEW LOCAL:** Broaden your narrative to align with global cultural trends.

## FROM STRATEGY TO SUCCESS

Winning at the NACS Show isn't just about booth size; it's about strategy, storytelling, and smart ROI alignment. Whether you're launching a new product or scaling an established brand, your exhibit should be more than a display; it should be a revenue-driving experience.

Start by defining your business objectives and building your creative approach around them. Measure success not just by impressions, but by engagement quality, lead conversion, and long-term brand recall.

**Because at NACS, the brands that win aren't always the biggest—they're the ones with the smartest strategies.**

**READY TO  
EXHIBIT SMARTER?**



## CONTRIBUTORS



### ALLI HUGHES

#### *Marketing Manager*

Alli joined Derse in 2015 and has more than 10 years of experience in strategizing, executing, and measuring marketing solutions across digital and experiential landscapes for Derse. Her deep understanding of trade shows and events paired with marketing tactics has led to successful outcomes and insightful content across Derse's marketing efforts. Her experience extends to new business development and market research for retail and CPG brands.



### DONOVAN HOGAN

#### *Content Strategist*

Donovan joined Derse in 2024 and has more than a decade of experience in content marketing. His diverse expertise is applied by creating dynamic insights and strategies for our internal and external audiences. His pedigree includes such clients as Frito-Lay, PepsiCo, Qdoba, and Post Cereal.



### TESS BRZYCKI

#### *Marketing Graphic Designer*

Tess joined Derse in 2022 and brings 10 years of experience in graphic design to the team. She specializes in creating compelling visual solutions that elevate Derse's brand across digital, print, and experiential channels. Her strong understanding of design principles, paired with a keen eye for detail, supports impactful storytelling throughout Derse's marketing initiatives.

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