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Why Attend Tradeshows? A Comparison of Exhibitor and Attendee's Preferences

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Recommended Citation
Han, H., & Verma, R. (2014). Why attend tradeshows? A comparison of exhibitor and attendee's preferences. *Cornell Hospitality Quarterly, 55*, 239-251. doi:10.1177/1938965514537550 Retrieved [insert date], from Cornell University, School of Hospitality Administration site: http://scholarship.sha.cornell.edu/articles/599/

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Keywords
tradeshows, tradeshow criteria, meetings incentives conventions and exhibitions (MICE) industry, best–worst analysis, sustainability, social media

Disciplines
Hospitality Administration and Management | Tourism and Travel

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Cornell Hospitality Quarterly
2014, Vol. 55(3) 239–251
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DOI: 10.1177/1938965514537550
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Why Attend Tradeshows? A Comparison of Exhibitor and Attendee's Preferences

Hyunjeong "Spring" Han[1] and Rohit Verma[2]

Abstract

Tradeshows and conventions continue to thrive in the twenty-first century, both for information exchanges and direct selling, but numerous forces have meant changes in show operation and in participants' selection criteria for attendance. A study of more than 2,500 tradeshow exhibitors and attendees document a clear bifurcation in the reasons for attendance in these two groups. Exhibitors are primarily focused on business and contact development, whereas participants seek a unique experience and are motivated heavily by educational goals. Successful tradeshows will need to satisfy both of these complementary sets of goals. The effects of social media and mobile technology on tradeshows are noticeable but still in flux, as many shows increasingly use virtual methods for information exchange and contact development. Environmental sustainability has become important to both exhibitors and attendees, and budgetary constraints continue to be an issue. Not only are there differences in relative preferences of exhibitors and attendees, but subgroups within each category also show different tradeshow criteria, based on age, frequency of tradeshow visits, career stage, and their technology readiness.

Keywords

tradeshows; tradeshow criteria; meetings, incentives, conventions, and exhibitions (MICE) industry; best–worst analysis; sustainability; social media

Contrary to expectations regarding virtual meetings and the vast communications power of the internet, tradeshows and conventions continue to thrive, both for information exchange and direct selling. Tradeshows, along with other large group sessions, are part of the meetings, incentives, conventions, and exhibitions (MICE) sector and constitute a major global economic activity. The basic form of tradeshows is little changed with the passage of time, but as we document in this article, tradeshows also have been affected by such trends as social media and mobile technology, environmental sustainability and corporate social responsibility, and budgetary constraints.

The economic impact of tradeshows (and the MICE sector) cannot be understated. It is generally reported that tradeshow travelers have greater spending power than typical business travelers and they typically spend a longer time at a destination. Furthermore, because tradeshows are planned and organized well in advance, they provide an opportunity for all stakeholders for smoothing out the seasonality of demand, revenue, and cash flows. Tradeshows are especially important for manufacturers, suppliers, and service providers because they can directly connect with a large number of current and potential customers at one location in a relatively short time. Associations often organize tradeshows in connection with their conferences or conventions, which makes successful execution of a tradeshow of extreme importance.

While tradeshows generally retain their traditional format, they have also taken advantage of the advances in information technology to open additional channels for marketing and communicating with tradeshow participants. As we discuss later in this article, many technologies, such as touch-screen displays, computer simulations, and software solutions for scheduling meetings, are increasingly

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being woven into tradeshows' structure. One consideration for all these technologies is, "Which ones do meeting participants actually find useful, especially given the expense of implementation? We seek to assist tradeshow organizers in prioritizing and selecting the technology options that best meet the needs of exhibitors and attendees.

The uneven economic recovery from the 2008 economic and credit crisis has left tradeshow organizers with the additional consideration of costs. At the same time, groups and associations are in the forefront of addressing the environmental impact of such economic activities as tradeshows. It seems as though the internet helps organizers include environmentally sustainable options within the design and execution of tradeshows.

Given the importance of tradeshows, and considering the emerging trends, the objective of this research is to identify and quantify the similarities and differences in the preferences of exhibitors and attendees of tradeshows organized by professional associations.

Specifically, this study was designed to address the following research issues:

- benchmarking current patterns associated with different components of tradeshows and identification of relative importance of tradeshow selection criteria between exhibitors and attendees and
- exploration of similarities and differences in tradeshow selection due to other explanatory variables (such as age, frequency of tradeshow visitation, career stage, and technology readiness).

We first offer a summary of studies on tradeshows. Our study includes both qualitative and quantitative phases, and our key findings provide several managerial implications and offer avenues for future research.

Literature Review

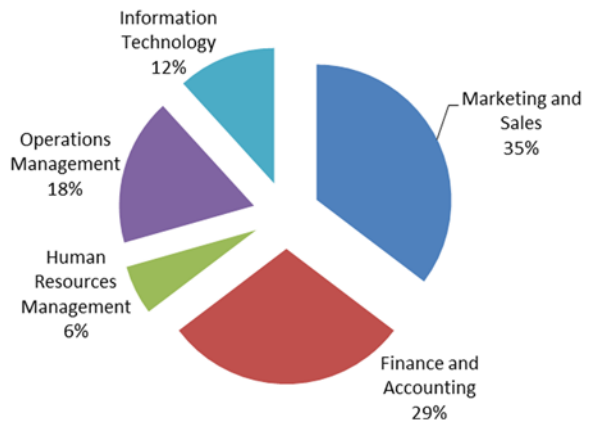
The meeting, incentives, convention, and exhibition industry is a distinct economic sector that largely comprises small to medium-size organizations. It is not as formally integrated as many other industry sectors, but we note that it achieves a high degree of functional integration through extensive, ongoing exchanges among industry organizations and via regular forums that enable a collective approach to reviewing and acting on industry-related issues. The result is a high degree of continuity and consistency in what is a complex and diverse area of business activity.

Tradeshow and MICE Research Trends

The conference market is defined primarily from the supply side, and there is a significant gap in the literature concerning the needs and wants of individual event attendees.

Exhibit 1:

Relative Breakdown of Major Disciplinary Themes in Papers Reviewed.



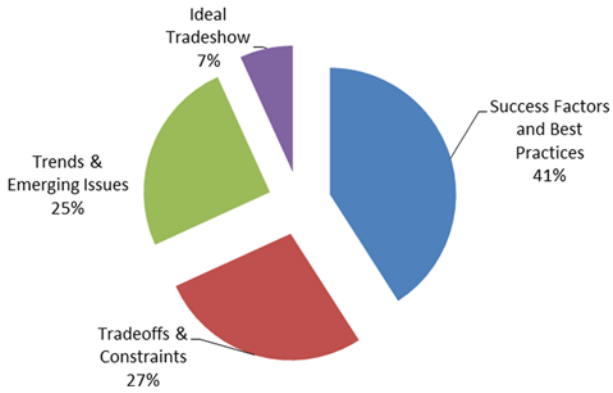
According to Robinson and Callan (2005), "in spite of the importance of customer satisfaction, there is a dearth of detailed research into customer needs" in the events industry. A growing body of research has been developing based on initial work carried out by Oppermann and Chon (1995), which examined the delegate attendance decision process (Mair and Thompson 2009; Zhang, Leung, and Qu 2007) and motivations for delegates to attend conferences (Jago and Deery 2005; Rittichainuwat, Beck, and Lalopa 2001; Severt et al. 2007). Among the motivators and considerations identified are personal and professional development, networking opportunities, cost of conference, location of conference, and time and convenience of conference (Mair and Thompson 2009). Even so, little research has examined the characteristics of tradeshow delegates, particularly their motivations for attending tradeshows.

We see two major threads in the research from the last two decades. In one thread, many papers focused on sales and promotions of tradeshows and on service quality. The other thread has examined a variety of prescriptive strategies and concepts rather than descriptive themes. Some of the major topics include the role of technology, social media, meeting scheduling, sustainability, and social responsibility related to the management of tradeshows. Exhibits 1 and 2 show the relative breakdown of different topics collectively discussed in approximately 250 core papers that we reviewed. Let us examine the themes found in these papers.

Tradeshows and conventions constitute a multibillion-dollar business in the United States. They account for about 10 percent of the marketing communications budget of U.S. firms and more than 20 percent of the budget for many European firms. During the 1990s, many researchers were interested in the evaluation of tradeshows, and so developed measures of their effectiveness. The 1990s were a time of

Exhibit 2:

Relative Breakdown of Major Topics Discussed in Papers Reviewed.



growth for tradeshows. The Tradeshow Bureau (1994) reported that the number of tradeshows in the United States and Canada grew from 3,289 to 4,316 between 1989 and 1994, the number of attendees from 60 million to 85 million, and the number of exhibitors from 1.0 million to 1.3 million. The industry also boomed in other nations during this period. A study on the convention and exhibition industry in Thailand (Chen and LaLopa 2000) documents the importance of this industry to the Thai lodging market. Ryan (2002) report that 43 percent of hotels in New Zealand rely on convention business for at least 20 percent of their total occupancy.

Information presented in various papers suggests that marketers use tradeshows as one approach for meeting their marketing communications objectives. Exhibitors' objectives for participating in a tradeshow include generating high-quality leads, promoting corporate image, and maintaining contact with current and prospective customers.

Papers that provide specific guidance for improving the performance of tradeshows and conventions have noted that organizers provide services for exhibitors before and after the event, as well as during the show. The organizers often promote a tradeshow by trying to attract qualified attendees whom exhibitors want to meet (e.g., hosted buyer program) (Smith, Hama, and Smith 2003; Tanner, Chonko, and Ponzurick 2001).

Chacko and Fenich (2000) and other researchers have explored destination selection criteria and identified the following elements as those that most commonly attract convention attendees to certain destinations: accessibility, availability of facilities, quality of service, affordability, destination image, attractions and entertainment, and safety and security (Chacko and Fenich 2000; Comas and Moscardo 2005; Crouch and Ritchie 1998; Oppermann and Chon 1997).

With the changes in information and communications technology, a new thread of scholarly debate has revolved around the issue of the extent to which technology advances represent an opportunity or a threat for the MICE sectors. For example, registrations for most events are now possible online thereby streamlining communications. For this purpose, many software companies have created a variety of internet-based registration systems for use by event organizers. These apps allow the organizer to create registration spreadsheets, administer financial transactions, monitor registration, and, in some cases, even to initiate "e-badging" of delegates, enabling the delegates to print out their name tag in advance on their own computers. With the constant evaluation of internet-based database and search algorithms, a number of conference planning programs now offer powerful search engines with extensive venue and supplier listings.

Role of Technology in Tradeshows

As the influence of technology on marketing grows (Berthon et al. 1999; Frew 2000; Yesawich 2000), technology may also be affecting other aspects of the tradeshows because e-mail, online registration, and e-customer service have become commonplace. Technology helps exhibitors to capture the attendees' attention and to connect in person. Cheaper and more efficient technologies will continue to have a big impact on the way that meetings and events are organized, structured, and delivered. Touch screens, radio-frequency identification (RFID), wireless internet access, virtual reality, and customized apps are now in common use at tradeshows.

When Chiou, Hsieh, and Shen (2007) examined the effects of product innovativeness and tradeshow strategy on tradeshow performance, they found that technology does not change the tradeshow's core function. Based on a sample from the information technology industry in Taiwan, their results show that marketing innovative products requires trust and relationship building toward visitors and tradeshow organizers. They also found that information communication and relationship building strategies toward visitors affect perceived tradeshow performance.

Role of Social Media in Tradeshows

As an effective use of time and resources, social media marketing gives companies additional communication channels to build brand loyalty beyond traditional methods (Jackson 2011; Akhtar 2011). Show participants have ranked social networking and interaction opportunities among the most important benefits they receive at tradeshows (Hultsman 2001). Severt et al. (2007) also maintained that networking opportunities motivate attendance at tradeshows. With regard to the general value of social media, Mair (2010) maintained that there are significant differences in conference delegate clusters based on age, gender, and education

level. We test this assertion later in this paper. Mair found that "independent networkers were well educated, as relatively high percentage (27%) of this group held a postgraduate degree." He also found that the forty-five- to fifty-four-year-old group rated social networking more highly than the other groups.

According to S. Lee's (2011) study, meeting professionals perceived social media (Twitter and Facebook) as valuable tools that transform a meeting into an interactive session. The respondents also perceived that the use of Twitter or Facebook during meetings would enhance their meeting experience due to interactivity. However, they did not consider that Twitter or Facebook enhanced the effectiveness of their job in general.

According to Dignam, Verma and Han (2014), there was a 90 percent increase in the number of marketers using social media as a part of their exhibit strategy in the two years prior to that study. Marketers using social media for exhibit marketing cited benefits such as increased booth traffic, increased brand awareness, improved relationships with clients, increased event attendance, additional press coverage, and increased sales as a direct result of their social media campaigns.

Environmental Sustainability in Tradeshows

The rise of social media is not the only trend that is affecting the meeting business. Sustainability has also become an industry "megatrend" (Russell 2012), and the MICE industry has focused on reducing its carbon footprint. According to Convention Industry Council's Green Meetings Report (2004), "A green meeting or event incorporates the environmental considerations to minimize its negative impact on the environment." Such websites as Sustainable Communities Network, BlueGreen Meeting, and GreenMeetings.com were created to inform the industry and promote sustainable meetings. In addition, many industry associations are implementing sustainable initiatives for their membership, including Green Meeting Industry Council, Professional Convention Management Association, and Meeting Planners International.

Scholarly research on this topic is still in its early stages. Park and Boo (2010) studied the current environmental position of the convention industry in the United States and formulated suggestions for future direction with regard to "green" concepts by examining and comparing the perceptions, attitudes, and behavioral intentions of participants, meeting planners, and convention suppliers. They found that these convention stakeholders agree with the strong intention to adopt green management practices.

Sox et al. (2013) conducted an exploratory study of planners' and participants' sustainability concerns at convention centers. Results from a sample of seventy-four meeting planners and seventy-six attendees suggest that both groups are willing to pay more for meetings at sustainability certified facilities.

With the above findings in mind, we next discuss our research design, data collection, and results.

Research Approach

To examine and quantify these research issues, that is, the relative importance of tradeshow selection criteria among presenters and attendees, we started with a qualitative study and then proceeded to a quantitative approach, as described below.

Research Design

The qualitative research phase comprised focus groups, personal interviews, and visits to tradeshows and convention centers in the United States and Europe. We organized two focus groups in Washington, D.C., including representatives from various tradeshow organizing associations, convention bureaus, tradeshow organizers, and attendees. We then interviewed two dozen tradeshow destination, hospitality, and lodging executives, as well as exhibitors and attendees. These steps allowed us to build on the themes identified during the literature review and identify issues that are of importance to tradeshow exhibitors and delegates or attendees.

Using that information, we developed and administered a survey for both exhibitors and attendees that examined respondents' background and demographics, frequency and cost associated with visits to tradeshows, why they attended specific type of tradeshow, what types of information they received from the organizers, and their views on technology, appointment scheduling, sustainability, hosted buyer programs, virtual expos, and related trends that we had identified from our qualitative research.

Instead of questions with Likert-type scales or rankings, our survey used a best–worst analysis (also known as maxdiff). The best–worst exercise addresses the chief measurement issues of Likert-type rating scales, namely, that respondents commonly rate items rapidly, use only a limited range of scale points, or use simplification heuristics to speed through the task (e.g., Cohen and Orme 2004). Asking respondents to rank criteria also addresses those problems, but respondents are challenged to rank more than a handful of items, and we have a total of twenty-two criteria.

Noting the weaknesses in Likert-type scales, Louviere and his co-workers developed best–worst or maximum-difference choice analysis, which builds respondents' preference rankings for a set of alternatives (Finn and Louviere 1992). The best–worst approach presents participants with a series of grouped attributes and requires them to identify the best and worst alternative in each set, as they relate to a latent dimension (such as relative importance of tradeshow selection criteria).

Exhibit 3:

A Sample Best–Worst Exercise Screenshot.

Considering only the following 8 features of a tradeshow, please indicate the one that is **Least Important** and the one that is **Most Important** to you.

Least Important		Most Important
○	Use of latest technology at the event	○
○	Use of social media	○
○	The quality of speakers and panelists	○
○	Large number of attendees	○
○	Attractive event location for business purposes	○
○	Availability of advance information about the event	○
○	Ease of transportation at the event location	○
○	Topics of talks, panel discussions or workshop/education	○

Screen 1 of 6

In our survey, the respondents were shown six experimentally generated best–worst lists, each including eight criteria for selection of tradeshows (see Exhibit 3 for a sample). Each respondent was asked to identify the most important and least important criterion among those listed on the screen. The experiment was designed so that each respondent saw a completely different sequence and mix of criteria on each of the six screens. Furthermore, we ensured that on average each criterion appeared equal number of times for each respondent.

Finally, in addition to demographic-related questions, we asked respondents to fill out an attitudinal scale known as the abbreviated Technology Readiness Index (TRI). This scale measures attitudes toward new technology based on four constructs—optimism, innovativeness, discomfort, and insecurity. Based on the responses to ten questions, a "TRI" can be calculated for each respondent. This index can be helpful in segmentation and subgroup-level analyses to identify causes for any observed similarities or differences (Parasuraman and Colby 2007).

We pilot tested the survey instrument among approximately five hundred respondents representing five different types of professional association and comprising a diverse group of tradeshow exhibitors and attendees. In addition to testing and validating the survey instrument, the pilot survey allowed us to collect preliminary data related to several emerging issues identified during the qualitative research phase.

After revising the survey instrument based on the pilot study, we launched it to exhibitors and attendees from twenty-six different associations representing majority of industrial sectors within the United States. On average, it took approximately twenty-five to thirty minutes for the respondents to complete the survey. In the next section, we present the results from the interviews and focus groups, and in the following section, we present the survey results.

Results and Discussion

Qualitative Research: Interviews and Focus Groups

An attendee's ideal tradeshow. Tradeshow participants typically have specific reasons for attending, and they want to accomplish their objectives in the shortest amount of time possible. For this reason, multiday tradeshows can become stale, which raises the phenomenon that many attendees want to leave before the show concludes. Respondents commented that these early departures occur no matter how long the tradeshow is. In keeping with their goal orientation, many respondents suggested that an ideal tradeshow must provide an "aha moment" that contributes to participants' overall goal. If the show fails to deliver this "aha moment," or new experience or information, participants question whether it is worth the expense and disruption of attending a face-to-face event compared with a virtual expo. Therefore, to ensure that attendees feel like they are getting a return on their investment, the tradeshow must remain fresh, present new ideas, and offer distinctive value. In that regard, tradeshows should provide something that the attendee cannot get anywhere else, such as a prominent keynote speaker, designated areas where people can meet each other, and educational sessions on innovations. Opportunities for face-to-face communications give attendees a reason to show up in person as opposed to just browsing the information online.

Location of tradeshow. Tradeshow location can be a factor in determining attendance, but our discussions did not reach closure on this. Focus group participants said things like, "Everybody knows that major destinations such as New York, Boston, or Las Vegas are more exciting than not-so-popular destinations, such as Milwaukee or Omaha." That said, we could not gain agreement on whether attendees

would be more likely to attend a tradeshow at a location they deem more exciting. We could only conclude that while the location alone does not determine attendance rate, it certainly is a decision factor, albeit one of several.

Improving the tradeshow experience. The tradeshow's operation is a key to a good experience for all. Participants in focus groups and interviews addressed this key question: "How would one improve the overall tradeshow experience?" Industry professionals proposed the following improvements:

- Ensure that organizers work with exhibitors. Show exhibitors how the floor will be laid out and work with them on the design of the exhibit floor to increase traffic flow and discover new ways to put more exhibitors on the floor.
- Add an educational component to tradeshow displays. Exhibitors are competing for time, and attendees find that having something like a demo adds value to their experience.
- Help manage attendees' time efficiently by showcasing essential products; attendees can always look at the rest of the product line online.
- Maintain solid traffic flow throughout the show, not just during the first day. To do this, create more than a onetime buying experience and confirm that exhibitors are building relationships that can potentially turn into annual gains.

Restrictions and constraints. The focus groups and interviews identified the following three major considerations to address restrictions and constraints on tradeshows.

- The tradeshow needs to attract an appropriate number and type attendees, namely, those who are coming to learn about products and to do business. In this regard, the organizer should assist the exhibitor in determining who should be in attendance at the tradeshow. Although a critical mass is important, an inordinately high volume of attendees contradicts the goal of a high conversion rate. When there are many attendees, it will be that much more difficult to pay attention to each individual, thereby weakening the conversion rate.
- International tradeshows have their own issues. While some U.S.-based organizations conduct approximately 20 percent of their meetings at international locations, other organizations refrain from holding their meetings abroad. They face logistical (shipping), weather, and political climate problems, as well as cultural differences that may interfere with success in a foreign country, despite everyone's best efforts.
- Proper floor plan design is critical. It difficult to determine where to place specific exhibitors to keep everybody satisfied. Placement is often first-come, first-served. Beyond that, it is often based on price and other related factors. But when determining placement, focusing on satisfaction among exhibitors is important, as competitors may not want to exhibit next to one another. On the contrary, it is helpful to place exhibitors with similar products in one area of the tradeshow for attendees' convenience.

Future trends of tradeshows. The respondents believed that tradeshows are in flux. They believe that future shows will be targeted to a smaller audience with a more specific agenda, making them more valuable and focused. They also believed that the technology will play a more significant role, environmental sustainability will become a larger consideration, and exhibitors will look to experiment with marketing opportunities. We expand on these themes below:

- Technology will continue to play a growing role in tradeshows, as we discuss more later in this article. For one thing, technology will aid in tracking attendees throughout the show, and developing contacts. Tradeshows will look to capitalize on social media and apps to get clients to come to their booth. They will also look to use mobile apps to make the tradeshow more interactive.
- Some tradeshows (or parts of tradeshows) may become completely virtual. "Attendees" will be able to join meetings in a specific tradeshow that are customized to their needs, while other tradeshows will have a combination of physical and virtual components. Some focus group participants also discussed the possibility of hosting holographic tradeshows—an attendee could be in London and watch a tradeshow equipment demonstration that is taking place in San Francisco.
- People still seek personal contact. Some exhibitors believe that technology platforms will mean that they lose the valuable face-to-face interaction and the accompanying relationship that might develop into decades of sales opportunities. On the contrary, some exhibitors believe that technology will provide them new ways to take care of their customers and facilitate face-to-face interaction (e.g., connecting attendees with each other, with exhibitors, or with a main stage representative before the show).
- Sustainability will continue to grow in importance. Some tradeshows have Green Aisle components, where there is a floor for exhibitors that want to be identified as "green." The American Beverage Association (ABA) and International Bottled Water Association (IBWA) did this at InterBev 2008, for

example (Ameribev.org 2008). This approach has been hugely successful, as these aisles have sold out almost immediately. Furthermore, many exhibitors are no longer using paper and brochures but rather are using flash drives and quick response (QR) codes for collateral.

- Marketing, public relations, and communication for tradeshows are constantly evolving. The shift away from traditional communication materials such as magazines and brochures involves more than sustainability. Instead of carrying piles of paper, participants prefer to receive information via podcasts, e-mail, webinars, testimonials, and social media. The popularity of electronic media creates a different problem, in that potential attendees feel like they are being bombarded with e-mails or that they are simply not being viewed with the same level of attention as with the traditional, more personal communication options. Most firms have Facebook pages, and some companies have found Bitworks to be a good form of communication because it provides for shorter messages with a link at the end to facilitate more actionable communication on people's phones or tablets. Sending bits (almost like a text message) has increased response rates to 30 to 40 percent, up from 10 to 20 percent, according to a focus group participant.

We observed that many of the themes identified during the focus group discussions and interviews nicely build on past research, such as the emerging role of technology and environmental sustainability. Our quantitative results likewise build on these trends.

Quantitative Research

As described above, our final survey was launched to exhibitors and attendees representing twenty-six different professional associations in the United States. We received more than 2,500 completed and usable responses from nearly 700 exhibitors and over 1,800 attendees. The data collection effort was strongly aided by the American Society of Association Executives (ASAE) Foundation, which invited several of its partner associations and to participate in this survey by distributing the questionnaire to their members who had visited tradeshows.

To ensure that there was no misclassification of a respondent as an attendee or an exhibitor, we asked respondents at the outset to declare whether they were an exhibitor or an attendee. This resulted in some re-classification from the original lists. Overall, approximately 10 percent of the respondents originally on the attendee mailing lists re-classified themselves as exhibitor, and about 35 percent of respondents on the exhibitor mailing list re-classified themselves as attendees.

Sample demographics. The respondent pool for the final sample includes 674 exhibitors and 1,853 attendees, giving a final sample size of 2,527. With the exception of ethnicity, the sample represents a diverse group of respondents based on several demographic characteristics. The sample comprised 86 percent Caucasians, of whom 70 percent were men. Interestingly, the racial distribution of respondents within the pilot survey and final survey was almost same.

Most respondents are within the ages of thirty-five to sixty-four years old and are fairly highly educated (a majority held at least undergraduate college degrees). Most respondents are in mid-career to senior level within their organizations, and approximately 23 percent are either a chief executive or an owner or partner. A small proportion of respondents are from outside the United States (not surprising because the survey was sent primarily to U.S.-based associations).

A majority of exhibitor respondents are used within the private sector, whereas the majority of attendees are used within the government, academic, or not-for-profit sectors.

Past attendance in tradeshows. Our respondents (both exhibitors and attendees) attended several tradeshows each year (as shown in Exhibit 4). This included stand-alone tradeshows, tradeshows that are part of larger conferences, and tradeshows with smaller conferences attached to them.

Approximately 50 percent of the tradeshows attended by the respondents had 2,000 or fewer attendees, but approximately 20 percent drew at least 7,500 attendees. Similarly, approximately 50 percent of the tradeshows had one hundred or fewer exhibitors, but 20 percent had at least four hundred exhibitors. Most of the tradeshows were scheduled for two to three days. Both exhibitors and attendees were asked a series of descriptive questions related to their attendance at tradeshows, and their responses are presented in the bar charts in Exhibit 4.

Exhibitors and attendees diverged regarding the main reasons for their attendance at tradeshows. Exhibitors' goals are primarily to promote their brands, to enhance relationships with existing partners, and to develop market leads. The attendees, on the contrary, attend tradeshows to attend educational sessions, to learn about the latest products and services, to network with industry peers, and to attend panel discussions and workshops. Notwithstanding the discussion of destination excitement, neither the exhibitors nor the attendees travel to tradeshow locations primarily for recreational purposes or personal reasons.

Best–Worst Exercise Results

The best–worst exercise evaluated the relative preferences for twenty-two criteria identified in the literature review, focus groups, and interviews. We calculated relative utilities of each criterion using a multinomial logit model.

Exhibit 4:

Frequency of Tradeshows Attended per Year.

Estimated utilities are standardized in a range between zero and one. A score of one indicates that a particular criterion was most important, while criteria with a score of zero are least important to the respondents.

With regard to the most important tradeshow criteria, once again the preferences of attendees and exhibitors diverged. The top three criteria for exhibitors are large number of attendees, affordable event registration costs, and topics of talks, panel discussions, and workshops. For attendees, the top three attendance criteria are quality of educational programs; topics of talks, panel discussions, and workshops; and quality of panelists and speakers. The distribution of remaining criteria was also different within the two samples, as shown in Exhibit 5.

To further explore the similarities and differences within groups of exhibitors and attendees, we developed a series of segment-level best–worst models based on frequency of past visitation to tradeshows and career levels, as shown next.

In general, the important criteria for tradeshow attendance are not affected by the number of shows attended, as shown in Exhibits 6 and 7. These figures include results for the respondents who did not attend any tradeshows during the previous year but hope to attend some during the upcoming years (marked "zero").

We did see slight systematic differences in tradeshow criteria for attendees based on their career level. The respondents with lower career levels assigned higher weights to quality of talks, speakers, educational programs, and ability to get advance information about the event, as compared with more senior respondents. Junior attendees were also less concerned about the cost of the event.

Discussion and Conclusion

The scope of this study is extensive, and we have compiled a wealth of literature review, qualitative data, and quantitative analysis from a diverse group of exhibitors and attendees. We continue to analyze the different components of the information collected, but here, we offer some of the high-level conclusions.

First, we notice that our qualitative and quantitative findings have considerable support from past research. It is clear that the basic objective of a tradeshow remains the same regardless of trends or technology, namely, to facilitate interaction between exhibitors and attendees so that they can have a favorable business outcome. This overarching goal was mentioned repeatedly in the papers we reviewed, during the focus group discussions, and in the interviews. It also stands out in the best–worst and

Exhibit 5:

Best–Worst Score Comparison between Attendees and Exhibitors. Sorted highest to lowest in importance for all respondents.

Variable	Description	Exhibitor	Attendee	Total	
V12	Quality of educational program offerings	0.6449	1.5502	1.3087	
V10	Topics of talks, panel discussions or workshop/education	0.6337	1.4653	1.2434	
V11	The quality of speakers and panelists	0.5503	1.3543	1.1398	
V3	Affordable event registration cost	0.8368	0.8028	0.8119	n/s
V4	Affordable transportation and lodging cost	0.3737	0.4809	0.4523	
V5	Timing of the event	0.4032	0.3683	0.3776	
V22	Location of the event	0.4008	0.3648	0.3744	n/s
V9	New product/service demonstrations at the event	0.1193	0.4125	0.3342	
V20	Availability of advance information about the event	0.4575	0.2868	0.3323	
V19	Ease of travel to event destination	0.2202	0.2891	0.2707	
V7	Large number of exhibitors	0.3165	–0.0745	0.0298	
V6	Large number of attendees	1.4762	–0.6053	–0.0499	n/s
V1	Attractive event location for business purposes	0.2028	–0.1962	–0.0897	
V18	Ease of transportation at the event location	–0.2131	–0.1243	–0.1480	
V8	Duration of the event	–0.0161	–0.2883	–0.2157	
V15	Use of latest technology at the event	–0.3672	–0.2395	–0.2736	
V2	Attractive event location for recreational purposes	–0.8440	–0.5505	–0.6288	
V17	Environmentally sustainable practices at the event	–1.0584	–0.8289	–0.8902	
V13	Personalized meeting scheduling software	–0.9347	–0.9424	–0.9403	n/s
V14	Hosted buyer program	–0.8452	–1.1961	–1.1025	
V16	Use of social media	–0.9853	–1.2344	–1.1679	
V21	Tour/recreational program at the event	–1.3718	–1.0945	–1.1685	
n/s	differences not significant at p <= 0.05				

Exhibit 6:

Best–Worst Scores for Exhibitors # of Tradeshow Attended Groups. Sorted highest to lowerst in importance for exhibitors who have not attended any tradeshows.

Variable	Description	Zero	One	Two - Three	Four or More	
V6	Large number of attendees	0.9773	1.3546	1.1744	1.5717	
V3	Affordable event registration cost	0.9317	0.7288	1.0166	0.8018	
V10	Topics of talks, panel discussions or workshop/education	0.7088	0.6526	0.8131	0.5896	n/s
V12	Quality of educational program offerings	0.6515	0.6523	0.7823	0.6137	n/s
V11	The quality of speakers and panelists	0.6254	0.5293	0.6742	0.5216	n/s
V22	Location of the event	0.4231	0.5685	0.4200	0.3827	n/s
V4	Affordable transportation and lodging cost	0.3984	0.2668	0.4832	0.3569	n/s
V20	Availability of advance information about the event	0.3968	0.4196	0.4598	0.4622	n/s
V19	Ease of travel to event destination	0.3786	0.2846	0.2670	0.1985	n/s
V7	Large number of exhibitors	0.2542	0.4142	0.1827	0.3408	n/s
V5	Timing of the event	0.2446	0.5203	0.3971	0.4017	n/s
V9	New product/service demonstrations at the event	0.1044	0.1908	0.0205	0.1360	n/s
V1	Attractive event location for business purposes	–0.0196	0.2799	0.0593	0.2372	
V8	Duration of the event	–0.1159	0.0053	–0.0267	–0.0115	n/s
V18	Ease of transportation at the event location	–0.1401	–0.1902	–0.1859	–0.2237	n/s
V15	Use of latest technology at the event	–0.1763	–0.3846	–0.4035	–0.3654	n/s
V14	Hosted buyer program	–0.7389	–0.9325	–0.9958	–0.8094	n/s
V17	Environmentally sustainable practices at the event	–0.7621	–0.9655	–1.0441	–1.0804	n/s
V2	Attractive event location for recreational purposes	–0.8816	–0.8049	–0.8094	–0.8531	n/s
V16	Use of social media	–0.8975	–1.0970	–0.9993	–0.9770	n/s
V13	Personalized meeting scheduling software	–0.9651	–1.1197	–0.9457	–0.9166	n/s
V21	Tour/recreational program at the event	–1.3978	–1.3735	–1.3401	–1.3776	n/s
n/s	differences not significant at p <= 0.05					

Exhibit 7:

Best–Worst Scores for Attendees # of Tradeshow Attended Groups. Sorted highest to lowest in importance for attendees who have never attended a tradeshow.

Variable	Description	Zero	One	Two - Three	Four or More	
V12	Quality of educational program offerings	1.4998	1.5104	1.5966	1.5332	
V10	Topics of talks, panel discussions or workshop/education	1.4305	1.4124	1.5022	1.4590	n/s
V11	The quality of speakers and panelists	1.3195	1.3133	1.3860	1.3486	n/s
V3	Affordable event registration cost	0.9097	0.8279	0.7753	0.7866	
V4	Affordable transportation and lodging cost	0.5316	0.4895	0.4818	0.4593	n/s
V22	Location of the event	0.4301	0.4611	0.3431	0.3259	
V9	New product/service demonstrations at the event	0.3980	0.4423	0.3842	0.4356	n/s
V19	Ease of travel to event destination	0.3501	0.3615	0.2797	0.2484	
V5	Timing of the event	0.3011	0.3996	0.3660	0.3800	n/s
V20	Availability of advance information about the event	0.2920	0.2548	0.2867	0.2986	n/s
V18	Ease of transportation at the event location	–0.0536	–0.0614	–0.1385	–0.1590	
V7	Large number of exhibitors	–0.1969	–0.1325	–0.0759	–0.0076	
V15	Use of latest technology at the event	–0.1971	–0.2345	–0.2402	–0.2552	n/s
V1	Attractive event location for business purposes	–0.2761	–0.2315	–0.1907	–0.1605	
V8	Duration of the event	–0.3660	–0.2803	–0.2698	–0.2861	
V2	Attractive event location for recreational purposes	–0.5606	–0.5448	–0.5416	–0.5594	n/s
V17	Environmentally sustainable practices at the event	–0.6877	–0.7812	–0.8333	–0.8916	
V6	Large number of attendees	–0.7398	–0.7370	–0.6041	–0.5058	
V13	Personalized meeting scheduling software	–0.8928	–0.9646	–0.9309	–0.9621	n/s
V21	Tour/recreational program at the event	–1.0689	–1.0655	–1.0898	–1.1206	n/s
V14	Hosted buyer program	–1.1771	–1.2037	–1.2548	–1.1350	
V16	Use of social media	–1.2458	–1.2359	–1.2321	–1.2324	n/s
n/s	differences not significant at p <= 0.05					

Exhibit 8:

Best–Worst Scores for Exhibitors' Career Groups. Sorted highest to lowest in importance for CEOs.

Variable	Description	Mid Level	Sr. Level	CEO Level	
V6	Large number of attendees	1.4768	1.4425	1.5469	n/s
V3	Affordable event registration cost	0.7966	0.8068	0.9309	n/s
V12	Quality of educational program offerings	0.6752	0.6460	0.6102	n/s
V10	Topics of talks, panel discussions or workshop/education	0.6740	0.6155	0.6050	n/s
V11	The quality of speakers and panelists	0.5808	0.5436	0.5234	n/s
V4	Affordable transportation and lodging cost	0.3307	0.3852	0.4394	n/s
V22	Location of the event	0.3771	0.4072	0.4239	n/s
V20	Availability of advance information about the event	0.5047	0.4197	0.4001	
V5	Timing of the event	0.4080	0.4074	0.3918	n/s
V7	Large number of exhibitors	0.3029	0.3343	0.3073	n/s
V19	Ease of travel to event destination	0.1773	0.2432	0.2469	n/s
V1	Attractive event location for business purposes	0.1789	0.2562	0.1946	n/s
V9	New product/service demonstrations at the event	0.1152	0.1254	0.1106	n/s
V8	Duration of the event	–0.0189	–0.0199	–0.0096	n/s
V18	Ease of transportation at the event location	–0.25	–0.1929	–0.1915	n/s
V15	Use of latest technology at the event	–0.3512	–0.3870	–0.3714	n/s
V14	Hosted buyer program	–0.8756	–0.7912	–0.8583	n/s
V2	Attractive event location for recreational purposes	–0.8544	–0.8074	–0.8611	n/s
V13	Personalized meeting scheduling software	–0.9366	–0.9408	–0.9229	n/s
V16	Use of social media	–0.9287	–1.0482	–1.0008	n/s
V17	Environmentally sustainable practices at the event	–1.0412	–1.0609	–1.1073	n/s
V21	Tour/recreational program at the event	–1.3419	–1.3849	–1.4083	n/s
n/s	differences not significant at p <= 0.05				

Exhibit 9:
Best–Worst Scores for Attendees' Career Groups. Sorted highest to lowest in importance for CEOs.

Variable	Description	Mid Level	Sr. Level	CEO Level	
V12	Quality of educational program offerings	1.5931	1.5745	1.4778	
V10	Topics of talks, panel discussions or workshop/education	1.5031	1.5049	1.3717	
V11	The quality of speakers and panelists	1.3708	1.3935	1.2964	
V3	Affordable event registration cost	0.8406	0.7799	0.7501	
V9	New product/service demonstrations at the event	0.3175	0.4368	0.5412	
V4	Affordable transportation and lodging cost	0.5132	0.4732	0.4238	
V22	Location of the event	0.3945	0.3075	0.3923	
V5	Timing of the event	0.3897	0.3742	0.3626	n/s
V20	Availability of advance information about the event	0.2709	0.3058	0.2765	n/s
V19	Ease of travel to event destination	0.3155	0.2641	0.2652	
V7	Large number of exhibitors	–0.1622	–0.0547	0.0834	
V1	Attractive event location for business purposes	–0.2477	–0.1922	–0.1202	
V18	Ease of transportation at the event location	–0.1044	–0.1369	–0.1667	
V15	Use of latest technology at the event	–0.2685	–0.2204	–0.2147	n/s
V8	Duration of the event	–0.2726	–0.2851	–0.2878	n/s
V2	Attractive event location for recreational purposes	–0.5324	–0.5929	–0.531	n/s
V6	Large number of attendees	–0.6542	–0.6081	–0.5509	n/s
V17	Environmentally sustainable practices at the event	–0.7779	–0.8385	–0.9380	
V13	Personalized meeting scheduling software	–0.9421	–0.9271	–0.9645	n/s
V14	Hosted buyer program	–1.2495	–1.2084	–1.0918	
V21	Tour/recreational program at the event	–1.0632	–1.1386	–1.1048	
V16	Use of social media	–1.2341	–1.2115	–1.2708	n/s
n/s	differences not significant at $p <= 0.05$				

discrete-choice modeling results. The quantitative analysis shows that all the attributes that can be considered core tradeshow components exhibit higher utilities than other attributes.

Second, we notice clear and sometimes substantial differences between exhibitors and attendees. These differences extend to the reasons for attendance, cost, use, and preferences for technology, scheduling, and sustainability options; the relative importance of criteria for tradeshow selection; and relative utilities of various tradeshow attributes. Collectively these results suggest that exhibitors and attendees are fundamentally different groups attending tradeshows with a different mind-set and objectives. Because a successful tradeshow allows both groups meet their objectives, organizers must manage the two groups' needs and expectations to ensure that they are complementary.

Third, we notice a clear synergy between a conference's tradeshow and educational components. The best–worst results clearly indicate that all criteria related to the speakers, their topics, and the resulting education value carry heavy decision weights for both attendees and exhibitors. These results suggest that associations should continue to marry commerce and education by associating their tradeshows with their annual meetings or conferences. Because educational components are positively viewed by both attendees and exhibitors, they may provide opportunities for better satisfying the needs of the two groups.

Fourth, we notice a mixed set of results for technology, scheduling, and sustainability options. While many of these features were heavily used by both attendees and exhibitors, their relative preferences are not as high as the core components of a tradeshow (namely, location, cost, duration, number of attendees, number of exhibitors). We also notice that many tradeshow technology or sustainability features exhibit similar levels of utilities. These results indicate that at this time, no single technology, scheduling, or sustainability approach has emerged as an absolute favorite compared with the other options tested in this research. Additional analysis and follow-up research targeted toward these attributes may be necessary to track the continued emergence of these tradeshow aspects.

Finally, the segmentation schemes used to identify subgroup-level differences within exhibitor and attendee groups (i.e., attendance frequency, technology preference, age, and career level) show moderate to substantial differences. These results indicate that tradeshow organizers may need to focus their attention on identifying the needs, preferences, and mix of their exhibitors and attendees based on age, career levels, frequency of tradeshow attendance, and their willingness to adopt new technologies, as measured by the TRI.

The purpose of this research was to explore the future of tradeshows by benchmarking current practices, by identifying the relative importance of different criteria for tradeshow selection by exhibitors and attendees, and by quantifying the relative utilities for different attributes of a tradeshow among these two groups. We found notable differences between exhibitors and attendees. Future research will continue to mine the data acquired in this extensive study, which has accumulated substantial breadth and depth of information related to each subgroup. Follow-up study will explore and provide additional insights related to the subgroups who exhibit in and attend tradeshows.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the ASAE Foundation (https://www.asaecenter.org) for providing research support for this project as part of their Sr. Partnership with Cornell Center for Hospitality Research. The authors would like to acknowledge the active collaboration from the ASAE Foundation's advisory board members and several participating associations for facilitating survey-data collection for exhibitors and attendees. The authors are especially grateful to Susan Robertson, Sharon Moss and Chelsea Killam for their comments, feedback and insights throughout the project and to Monica Dignam for initiating this research project.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, or publication of this article: This research is supported by The ASAE Foundation and The Center for Hospitality Research (CHR), School of Hotel Administration, Cornell University.

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