The Future of Tradeshows: Evolving Trends, Preferences, and Priorities

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Abstract
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Keywords
tradeshows, exhibitors, technology, travel and tourism industry

Disciplines
Business | Hospitality Administration and Management

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Evolving Trends, Preferences, and Priorities

by HyunJeong “Spring” Han, Ph.D., and Rohit Verma, Ph.D.
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Far from supplanting trade shows, technology has augmented the shows’ interactive, informational aspect by increasing potential contacts and scheduling efficiency for participants. However, the tradeshow itself remains an essential vehicle for selling products and services, explaining and demonstrating the product, and creating lists of qualified buyers. Whereas the tradeshow exhibitors are focused on sales and prospects, this study finds a complementary set of goals by attendees, who are more interested in the show’s educational aspects (including learning about useful products). Successful execution of a tradeshow requires careful planning and coordination between different stakeholders (i.e., attendees, exhibitors, meeting planners, destination executives). In addition to integrating social media and mobile technology, tradeshows also are focusing on environmental sustainability and providing information for participants’ corporate-social responsibility interests. Based on focus groups, interviews, and a survey of over 2,500 tradeshow participants, the top reason for exhibitors to attend a show involves their sales goals, while the top purpose for attendees is education. Ironically, although a substantial number of tradeshow participants appreciate the available technology, another substantial group either doesn’t notice the technology or avoids using it.
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Despite the disruption of the internet, tradeshows continue to be a high-yield component of the travel and tourism industry. Tradeshows are seen as having greater spending power than typical business travelers, and they typically spend a longer time at a destination than regular business travelers. Tradeshows remain important for manufacturers, suppliers, and service providers because of the opportunity to connect directly with a large number of current and potential customers at one location in a relatively short time. Since tradeshows are often organized as part of an association or industry conference or convention, participants also value the educational opportunities included in a show.
Advances in information technology (notably, social media) have created additional channels for marketing to and communicating with tradeshow participants. Tradeshows and organizing and participants are making use of such technologies as RFID (radio frequency identification), touch-screen displays, computer simulations, and meeting scheduling apps. Given these innovations, tradeshows must prioritize and select the options that best meet participants’ needs. Other headwinds facing tradeshows are participants’ attention to the cost and environmental impact of travel, which puts a greater focus on the shows’ sustainability efforts.

Given the changing landscape facing tradeshows, we wanted to address two research issues. We sought to establish benchmarks for the importance that participants accord to various tradeshows and components and gauge the relative importance of tradeshows’ selection criteria for exhibitors and attendees. We also wanted to document the effects of participants’ demographics on tradeshows’ selection and preferences. These variables are age, frequency of tradeshows’ visitation, career stage, and technology readiness.

Background

The meeting, incentives, convention, and exhibition business (MICE) generally comprises small to medium sized organizations, and is not as formally integrated as many other industries. The sector does, however, maintain a high degree of continuity and consistency in what is a complex and diverse area of business activity through ongoing exchanges among industry organizations and via regular forums.

Tradeshows and MICE Research Trends

Virtual technology has so far not supplanted the tradeshow’s chief purposes of offering face-to-face demonstrations of products and services, allowing direct interaction with potential customers, getting feedback regarding the product on site, and providing educational opportunities in conjunction with an association meeting. Exhibitors’ objectives for participating in a trade show include generating high-quality leads, promoting corporate image, and maintaining contact with current and prospective customers.

There is, however, a growing body of research in this area, based on initial work carried out by Oppermann and Chon,1 which has examined the delegate attendance decision process2 and motivations for delegates to attend conferences.3 Studies have identified key motivators and considerations for attendance, including personal and professional development, networking opportunities, and cost, location, timing, and convenience of the conference.4 Papers published in recent years have considered the role of technology, social media, meeting scheduling, sustainability, and social responsibility related to the management of tradeshows.

Tradeshows do far more than book a venue. They also provide services for exhibitors during the show, as well as before and after the event. Attracting qualified attendees whom exhibitors want to meet at the show is also an essential function for organizers.5 Arranged meetings of exhibitors and buyers who have indicated their interest in each other through hosted buyer programs have become an important feature of many shows.


4 Mair and Thompson, op.cit.

5 Trade Show Bureau 1988; Gramann 1994; Tanner, Chonko & Ponzu- rick, 2001; Morrow 2002; Smith, Hama & Smith 2003
Several researchers have identified the elements that attract convention attendees to certain destinations. The following seven factors were most frequently identified in this connection: accessibility, affordability, attractions and entertainment, availability of facility, destination image, quality of service, and safety and security.6

**Technology in Tradeshows**

Tradeshows and the MICE sector generally have taken increasing advantage of advances in information and communications technology, with benefits for suppliers, buyers, and intermediaries. On balance, we see tradeshows benefiting from social media. Most events have adopted technology for event registration and, as a result, many software companies have created a variety of internet-based registration systems for use by meeting and tradeshows organizers. Most of these software packages allow the organizer to create registration spreadsheets, administer financial transactions, monitor actual registration, and, in some cases, even enable the delegates to print out their name tag in advance. 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 Social Media in Tradeshows**

Given the advent of social media, one avenue for success at a trade show is finding a way to capture the attention of the largest number of attendees. Not only would social technology make connecting in person at trade shows easier, cheaper, and more efficient, but new technologies will continue to support the organization, structure, and delivery of meetings. People will continue to attend, of course, but touch screens, RFID, wireless internet access, virtual reality, and customized apps will augment the tradeshows experience.

Networking and interaction opportunities are often cited as the most important benefits participants receive at tradeshows.7 For exhibitors this means engaging in efforts to extend one’s network of business contacts.8 Networking opportunities strongly motivate attendance at tradeshows, which is one reason for the growth of hosted buyer programs.9 Beyond networking and contact development, different participants have different purposes for attending. Mair maintained, for instance, that there are significant differences in conference delegate clusters based on age, gender, and education level.10

According to Lee’s study, meeting professionals perceived social media (in this case, Twitter and Facebook) as valuable tools for transforming a meeting into an interactive session.11

**Environmental Sustainability in Tradeshows**

The conference and convention industry is well aware of the push for sustainability in the MICE industry segment.12 In response to the demand by participants for information relating to carbon footprints and other sustainability issues surrounding meetings, the industry has developed such websites as Sustainable Communities Network, BlueGreen Meeting, and GreenMeetings.com. In addition, many industry associations are implementing sustainable initiatives for their membership, including the Green Meeting Industry Council, Professional Convention Management Association, and Meeting Planners International.

**Research Approach**

With these studies in mind, we sought to describe and quantify the relative importance of tradeshows selection criteria and to explore similarities and differences in the importance of technology and sustainability for tradeshows exhibitors and attendees. We first conducted two focus groups in Washington, D.C., which included representatives from various tradeshows organizing associations, convention bureaus, and tradeshows organizers and attendees. We then interviewed two dozen tradeshows participants and destination, hospitality, and lodging executives. We also examined the facilities at some of the largest convention centers in the United States and Europe. We used the results of these focus groups and interviews to identify issues that are of significant importance to tradeshows exhibitors and participants. This allowed us to develop and administer a survey to find out more about tradeshows’ and participants’ considerations for selecting a tradeshows.

At the outset, the survey asked the respondents to identify whether they were primarily a tradeshows attendee or an exhibitor, so that we could appropriately customize the wording on the rest of the survey. We asked the respondents to report their attendance frequency and

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8 Oppermann & Chon (1997), op.cit.

9 Severt et al., op.cit.


costs associated with their tradeshow activity. We also asked them why they attended specific types of tradeshows and what types of information they received from the organizers. Finally, we asked them specific questions related to such issues as technology, appointment scheduling, sustainability, hosted buyer programs, and virtual expos.

We also drew data from a best-worst exercise (also known as a max-diff exercise). As we describe later in this report, this approach is designed to provide an unbiased estimate of the relative preference ranking for a set of alternatives.

To determine participants’ general feelings about technology, we presented respondents with the ten-question...
Technology Readiness Index (TRI), which measures their attitudes towards new technology based on four constructs—optimism, innovativeness, discomfort, and insecurity. Based on their responses a TRI Index can be calculated for each respondent. This index can be helpful in segmentation and sub-group level analyses to identify causes for any observed similarities or differences. Finally the survey included a battery of demographics-related questions.

The survey instrument was first pilot tested by approximately 500 respondents representing five different types of professional associations and comprising a diverse group of tradeshow exhibitors and attendees. Based on those results, we revised the survey and launched it to exhibitors and attendees from 26 different associations representing the majority of industrial sectors within the United States. On average the survey took 25 to 30 minutes to complete.

Results and Discussion

Data collection. Distribution of our quantitative survey was supported by the ASAE Foundation, which invited several of its partner associations to participate in the study by distributing the survey to their members who had visited tradeshows. With this assistance, we received 2,527 completed and usable responses. Although we had lists of exhibitors and attendees, we used the respondents’ declaration about their status to finalize the lists. This meant reclassifying 10 percent of the respondents originally on the attendee mailing lists as exhibitors, and moving about 35 percent of respondents on the exhibitor mailing list to the attendee list for final analysis. Participating associations are listed on page 19, at the end of this report.

Sample Demographics

The sample represents a diverse group of respondents based on several demographic characteristics, as shown in Exhibit 1. The ethnicity of the sample was not particularly diverse, though, with 86 percent of the respondents being Caucasian. This may, however, reflect the larger populations from which the samples were drawn. Interestingly, the racial distribution of respondents within the pilot survey and final survey was almost same.

Most respondents are within the ages of 35–64 years old and fairly highly educated (a majority held at least undergraduate college degrees). Most respondents are at least at the mid-career to senior level within their organizations, and approximately 23 percent are a chief executive or an owner or partner. A tiny proportion of respondents are from outside the United States, because the survey was send primarily to U.S.-based associations.

Within the exhibitor sample a majority of respondents are employed within the private sector, while the majority of attendees are employed within the government, academic, and not-for-profit sectors. Within both samples the gender proportions are similar, at about a 55 percent to 45 percent women to men.

As shown in Exhibit 2, the distributions of participants’ technology readiness index (TRI) are similar to a normal distribution. The respondents with a TRI score of zero or less are classified as “low TRI” group, those with scores between zero and 10 are classified as “mid TRI,” and those above 10 were classified as “high TRI.” Interestingly, the TRI distribution is similar for both exhibitor and attendee samples.
Exhibit 3

Frequency of annual tradeshow attendance

Exhibit 4

Descriptive information regarding the tradeshow most recently attended
Tradeshow Attendance Patterns

As shown in Exhibit 3, the respondents (both exhibitors and attendees) attended several tradeshows each year. They attended standalone tradeshows, tradeshows that are part of large 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 had at least 7,500 attendees. Similarly, approximately 50 percent of the tradeshows had 100 exhibitors or less, but 20 percent had at least 400 exhibitors. Most of the tradeshows were scheduled to last two to three days. Exhibit 4 summarizes the data regarding tradeshow attendance.

Exhibitors and attendees cited substantially different reasons for their attendance, as shown in Exhibit 5. The exhibitors primarily attend tradeshows to promote their brands, to enhance relationships with existing partners, and to develop new market leads. The attendees, on the other hand, 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. It is also clear that neither the exhibitors nor the attendees travel to the tradeshow locations primarily for recreational purposes or for personal reasons.

Exhibit 6 shows the frequency and type of information provided by the tradeshow organizers to the attendees and exhibitors. While there are slight differences between the two...
sub-groups, both exhibitors and attendees receive information about event registration, schedule, lists of exhibitors, travel and hotel information, and locational details. Relatively smaller percentages of respondents indicated that they received information about scheduling meetings with other exhibitors or attendees or building a personalized schedule.

The respondents who indicated that they have received information about scheduling meetings were asked follow-up questions about the type of resources available for doing so. As shown in Exhibit 7, about 80 percent of the attendees and 60 percent of the exhibitors responded that a software solution was provided for scheduling meetings and appointments. The other options were not checked by a majority of respondents, indicating that even now the exhibitors are mostly left on their own to schedule meetings and to develop their conference plans. As another follow-up question, when we asked the respondents if they are familiar with a hosted buyer program, we found that a majority of respondents were either not familiar with the hosted buyer program or were not sure.

The respondents were asked to indicate the technology and environmental sustainability options available at the most recent tradeshow they attended (see Exhibits 8 and 9). It is interesting to note that compared to attendees, a higher proportion of exhibitors indicate the presence of various types of technology and environmental sustainability options. Responses from both segments indicate that the availability of wi-fi, an internet café, and video displays have become common technology options at trade shows. A large proportion of respondents also indicate the availability of mobile apps and integration of social media within the tradeshow offerings. Newer technologies such as QR codes
Exhibit 9

**Sustainability options at tradeshow attended most recently**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Exhibitors (%)</th>
<th>Attendees (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>On-site recycling programs</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduced amount of paper for handouts and flyers</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reusable and environmentally friendly display items</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEED certified event facility</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energy efficient lighting</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motion sensors for controlling lighting and climate control</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electric or hybrid transportation at the event</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programmable temperature control</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Exhibit 10

**Tradeshow participants who did not use available technology**

- Wi-fi internet access at event location
- Video displays at event
- Internet café at event location
- Programmable temperature control
- Matchmaking software for scheduling meetings and appointments
- Virtual displays of exhibitors
- Social media integrated with event website
- Mobile apps for smartphones or tablets
- Event website configured to provide customized information
- LEED certification in buildings
- Use of energy efficient lightings

are also being used but the proportion of tradeshows using RFID technology and matchmaking software for scheduling meetings is still low.

Within the sustainability options, a significantly high proportion of exhibitors indicated the presence of onsite recycling programs and an emphasis on reduced amount of paper for flyers and collateral. They also indicated the use of reusable and environmentally friendly display products, LEED certification in buildings, and use of energy efficient lightings. Respondents didn't notice most of the other forms of environmental sustainability options.

As shown in Exhibit 10, up to 20 percent of the respondents reported that they personally did not use certain technology options, notably, social media and the internet café. These results are consistent with the percentage of respondents who scored low on the technology readiness
**Exhibit 11**

Participants’ assessment of tradeshows technology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technology Feature</th>
<th>Rating (5-point scale)</th>
<th>Exhibitors</th>
<th>Attendees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wi-fi internet access at event location</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video displays at event</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet cafe at event location</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobile apps for smartphones or tablets</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virtual displays of exhibitors</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social media integrated with event website</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event website configured to provide customized information</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matchmaking software for scheduling meetings and appointments</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Event website configured to provide customized information</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Exhibit 12**

Participants’ impressions of sustainability options

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sustainability Option</th>
<th>Rating (5-point scale)</th>
<th>Exhibitors</th>
<th>Attendees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>On-site recycling programs</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduced amount of paper for handouts and flyers</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electric or hybrid transportation at the event</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energy efficient lighting</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motion sensors for controlling lighting and climate control</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programmable temperature control</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEED certified event facility</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reusable and environmentally friendly display items</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On-site recycling programs</td>
<td>4</td>
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</table>
The respondents who did use the technology and sustainability options indicated a high degree of positive feelings about them (most of the ratings were close to four on a five-point scale, Exhibits 11 and 12). While the impact of sustainability options on the decision to attend a trade show was mostly neutral, sustainability had a slightly higher positive impact on satisfaction (Exhibit 13).

Regarding the overall cost of tradeshow attendance, booths were the single item that cost exhibitors the most money (average over $5,000, see Exhibit 14), followed by freight, logistics, and parking, booth materials, gifts, and samples, and networking and entertaining clients. Other costs were also substantial. These included additional booth-related expenses, insurance, costs for entertaining clients or customers, freight, leisure activities, shopping for tradeshow attire, and sponsorships. The attendees indicated that travel, lodging, dining, and registration were their main costs (Exhibit 15).

**Best-Worst Exercise Results**

Respondents in the best-worst survey are presented with a series of lists of factors, and in each list they are asked to indicate the best item and worst item on the list—in this case, tradeshow selection criteria. In our survey, the respondents were shown six experimentally generated best-worst screens, each with a list of eight criteria for selection of tradeshows. On each screen, the respondent was asked to identify the most important criterion and the least important criterion in the list that was displayed. The experiment was designed in such a manner that each respondent saw a completely different sequence and mix of criteria in each list. Furthermore, we ensured that on average each criterion appeared an equal
number of times for each respondent. A sample best-worst exercise screenshot can be seen in Exhibit 16. Our best-worst analysis asked respondents to evaluate 22 criteria for meeting attendance that we had identified in the literature review and our qualitative research. We calculated the relative utilities of each criterion using a multinomial logit model, and we standardized estimated utilities between zero (low utility) and one (high utility).

The best-worst analysis results largely reinforce the findings of the questionnaire section of the survey. This analysis, shown in Exhibit 17, again highlights the significant differences between preferences of attendees and exhibitors. Although there are points of overlap in the rankings of attendance criteria, the utility scores are widely divergent. The top criterion for exhibitors is a large number of attendees, by a wide margin, followed by affordable event registration costs and topic of talks, panel discussions, or workshops. For attendees, the top three attendance criteria for a tradeshow are quality of educational programs, topic of talks, panel discussions, or workshops, and quality of panelists or speakers.
Note that the utility for the “topic of talks” criterion is much lower for exhibitors than for attendees. Exhibitors were then looking at location and timing of the event, and even whether there would be a critical mass of exhibitors (which would attract more attendees). Attendees, on the other hand, were more interested in costs and new-product demonstrations than the exhibitors.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study gives us some indications of the future of trade shows. They are by no means going to be replaced by technology, but it’s clear that technology will be a larger part of future shows and will augment the participants’ interaction. We now have a benchmark for current practices, and we have identified the relative importance of different criteria for trade show selection, by quantifying the relative utilities for different attributes of a trade show.

In conclusion, we first notice that there is considerable synergy between the past research and our analysis. Throughout all aspects of our investigation, it became clear that the basic objective of a trade show remains unchanged—that is, to facilitate interaction between exhibitors and attendees so that all participants can have a better business outcome. This overarching purpose was mentioned repeatedly in the papers we reviewed, during the focus groups and interviews, and also in the best-worst results.

Second, we notice clear and sometimes substantial differences between exhibitors and attendees with regard to reasons for attendance, cost, usage and preferences for technology, scheduling and sustainability options, the relative importance of criteria for trade show selection, and relative utilities of various trade show attributes. Taking their demographic differences into account, these results suggest that exhibitors and attendees are fundamentally different groups.
that attend tradeshows with different mind-set and objectives. That said, both groups must attend and be satisfied to create a successful tradeshow, which means that organizers have a complex task of managing the needs and expectations of these two complementary groups.

Third, we notice a clear synergy between a tradeshow’s educational components and those of the conference or convention connected to the show. Although education did not come out as strongly in other parts of the study, the best-worst results indicate the importance of speakers, topics of talks, and education for both attendees and exhibitors. These results confirm the associations’ approach of connecting tradeshows with their annual meetings or conferences for better attendance. Since educational components are positively viewed by both attendees and exhibitors, they may provide opportunities for improving overall participant satisfaction.

Finally, we notice a mixed set of results for technology, scheduling, and sustainability options. Even though these features are an important consideration for both attendees and exhibitors in the tradeshow decision, their relative utilities are not as high as the core components of a tradeshow (namely, location, cost, duration, number of attendees, and number of exhibitors). We also notice that these features currently exhibit similar utility levels. These results indicate that at this time no single technology, scheduling, or sustainability approach criterion has emerged as an absolute favorite or necessity, compared to those core components. There’s little doubt that these utilities will change over time, and perhaps quickly (in the case of technology).

Organizations supporting this research

- ASAE – participants at MM&C Conference
- American Academy of Pain Medicine
- American College of Health Care Administrators
- American Optometric Association
- American Society of Health-System Pharmacists
- American College of Rheumatology
- American Occupational Therapy Association
- American Society of Civil Engineers
- American Speech-Language Hearing Association
- Association Execs of North Carolina
- Association Forum of Chicagoland
- Awards and Recognition Association (ARA)
- Canadian Institute of Plumbing & Heating
- Ceilings & Interior Systems Construction Association
- Construction Specifications Institute
- Georgia Society of Association Executives
- Illinois Health Care Association
- International Association of Fire Chiefs
- Maryland Municipal League
- Medical Fitness Association
- Missouri Pharmacy Association
- National Association of Neonatal Nurses
- National Frame Builders Association
- Professional Beauty Association
- SAE International
- School Nutrition Association
- Society of Actuaries
- Southern Association of Orthodontists
- Western Nursery and Landscape Association

These organizations supported this research by distributing the survey to their members.