

FOCUS REPORT:

Break Out the Lanyards

Trade shows
and marketing
events are
poised for a
rebound



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Are Trade Shows Poised for a Rebound?

A return to meeting in person may be slow, but aspects of live events simply can't be duplicated

BY PAUL NOLAN

Business-to-business sales conversations shifted en masse to video calls, telephone and digital communication in 2020, but B2B marketers and salespeople held out hope that 2021 would be different. The arrival of vaccines, it was thought, would create a way back to meeting in person.

Paul Bowers is one of those who was eager for trade shows to return. Bowers is publisher of *Airport Improvement*, a trade publication that is sent to airport managers, their consultants and suppliers across North America. “If I do the planning correctly, each of our seven issues [per year] will have something tied to bonus distribution at a trade show,” Bowers said.

Not only are *Airport Improvement*’s advertisers enticed by the issues getting into people’s hands at industry events, the publication’s sales reps rely on the trade shows to make inroads with prospects and enhance relationships with current clients.

When the American Association of Airport Executives (AAAE) announced it was reconvening its annual conference and expo in person in July in Las Vegas, it was a good news/bad news situation. Bowers and his team could reconnect with key clients and return to distributing extra copies of their publication. However, the show organizers announced their COVID safety protocols would include a limit of two staffers per exhibitor in the conference center. Bowers has two sales reps in addition to himself.

As publisher, Bowers was committed to being present all three days of the show, so the lobbying began by his two other sales reps for the magazine’s coveted second exhibitor badge. A plan was made to bring both reps to Las Vegas and have the team share time in the exhibit hall. Ultimately, the two-person limit was lifted by the time show opened, so that fix wasn’t necessary.

FEATURE STORY

Rescheduling the Reschedules

After a pandemic-induced shutdown in 2020, trade shows and other live marketing events have started to occur once again. This summer's emergence of the Delta variant forced a second year of postponements and cancellations for many shows that had hopes of relaunching, but others took place, albeit with decidedly lower attendance.

It's often said that polls and surveys are a snapshot of sentiment at a certain time. That appears to be the case with an [EXHIBITOR Media Group survey](#) of corporate exhibit managers in March that showed 89% expected their clients to return to trade shows by the end of this year. That was prior to the summer spike in COVID cases nationwide.

In a more recent EXHIBITOR poll that has not yet been published:

- 81% of corporate exhibit managers said they strongly prefer face-to-face interactions (with another 17% stating they “somewhat prefer” face-to-face contact).
- 71% said the cancellation and postponement of in-person trade shows and events negatively affected their company.
- 52% stated they have already returned to in-person trade shows and another 24% wanted to do so by the end of this year.

Many now hope a “return to normal” for trade shows will occur next year, but they can't say with any confidence that it will.

“Nobody anticipated that it would last anything close to this long,” said Terry Matson, president and CEO of Visit St. Paul/RiverCentre, the Minnesota capital city's convention and visitors bureau. “We've hit play. We've hit pause. We've hit repeat. We've scheduled, rescheduled and rescheduled the reschedule with meetings and conventions time and time again.”

Matson estimates that St. Paul's RiverCentre and the associated Roy Wilkins Auditorium hosted one-third of the events it originally had on the books for 2021. He said another

one-third was rescheduled and the last one-third “went down the drain.”

A larger concern within the exhibiting industry is that “normal” in terms of exhibiting strategies will be redefined, as some companies permanently reduce trade show marketing budgets and operate with smaller staffs. Naomi David, senior marketing manager at Chicago-based marketing agency Walker Sands, said her own company has decided since the pandemic struck to place more emphasis on smaller live marketing events going forward rather than the large trade shows they once participated in. Hosting executive dinners with 10 to 12 clients or prospects, and sponsoring marketing book clubs (virtually until meeting in person is safe) provide a more intimate connection that Walker Sands prefers, David said.

“We're not a SaaS company selling software or products. We are selling our people and our services. That in-person connection on an intimate basis has been really beneficial for folks as they decide whether they want to work with us,” she said.

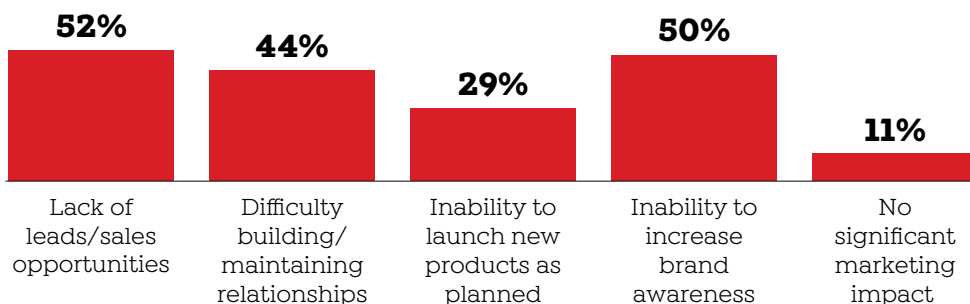
Trade Show Disciples

Others are eager to walk trade show aisles again to meet their clients and prospects in person.

When asked whether she was ready to get back to a full slate of in-person events, *Airport Improvement* National Sales Director Victoria Jensen said, “YES! With all capital letters! Not just for me, but for our industry. Being at a trade show and seeing your customers and who they are talking with, hearing what they just did, or a sale they're making, you don't get that from a telephone conversation or an email.”

The March EXHIBITOR magazine survey found that the cancellation and postponement of trade shows has generated an “absence makes the heart grow fonder” effect on upper management, but the report states not to the extent that some may have hoped. Forty-three percent of survey respondents stated the downturn has made the value of trade shows and face-to-face marketing more obvious to members of the

How has the cancellation and/or postponement of live trade shows impacted your company?



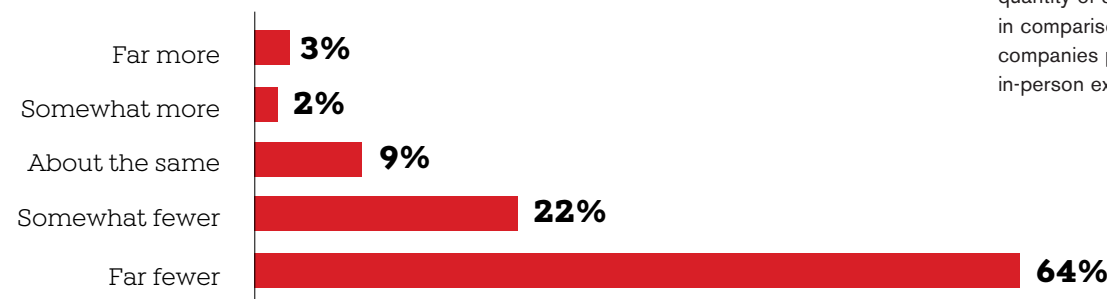
A majority of corporate trade show managers report struggling with a lack of business leads and sales opportunities resulting from the cancellation of in-person trade shows. Organizations also report difficulty building/maintaining relationships with clients and prospects and an inability to increase brand awareness.

EXHIBITOR MAGAZINE

FEATURE STORY

Have your virtual exhibits and/or digital events generated more or fewer sales leads than comparable live activations?

■ Exhibit Managers



Trade show managers say the quantity of sales leads pales in comparison to what their companies produced through in-person exhibits.

EXHIBITOR MAGAZINE

C-suite. That was an increase of 18 percentage points since a similar survey in May 2020.

EXHIBITOR Editor Travis Stanton said while he would like to see that percentage even higher, it is a strong indication that the long-term future of trade shows is secure.

Bowers, the publisher of *Airport Improvement*, said advertising revenue dropped by about 12% from 2019 through 2020, and it was the advertisers who are attracted to bonus distribution at industry events that made up the bulk of that loss.

Asked how he measures return on investment from his trade show marketing, Bowers said, “I look at the big picture of what makes us unique and what is important in terms of aligning ourselves and having a sense of differentiation that others would be able to see as it relates to our editorial, circulation or our sales messaging to advertisers. I don’t put pen to paper like a bean counter would. It’s more intuitive than that. But it does need to strategically pair up with what I believe is important.

“What I relish is going to conferences where I’m the only publication there,” he added. “I have three competitors in the airport market. Who doesn’t like going into a setting where there isn’t a competitor?”

“There is no question as to the value of a face-to-face conversation with a customer or prospective customer that has made a conscious decision to walk into your booth.”

Mike Landry, director of corporate sales for Tumi

Sales Leads Suffer In a Virtual World

As the EXHIBITOR survey of corporate trade show managers makes clear, a primary reason for the broad preference of in-person events is the quantity and quality of sales leads that are generated at live shows compared to virtual events. When asked to rate the value of virtual trade shows and/or exhibits, corporate marketers averaged 3.9 (on a scale from one to 10). Meanwhile, when asked to rate the value of virtual conferences, that average increased to 5.1.

“Virtual channels may be better at approximating the live experience in terms of content and educational programming, but they are less successful at being a viable alternative to in-person exhibiting and lead qualifying,” the report states.

“One of the things we hear a lot when discussing the difference between a live trade show and a virtual trade show or conference is when you think about the way that trust is established, you’re talking about eye contact, body language, handshakes, listening to the tone of somebody’s voice. It’s very difficult to establish the level of trust that a buyer needs virtually—especially when you’re talking about a multimillion-dollar corporate relationship,” Stanton said.

Mike Landry, director of corporate sales for Tumi, leads a team that sells the luggage maker’s products to corporate users for recognition and other programs. Landry said under normal circumstances, his company participates in about a dozen trade shows annually. Tumi plans to “aggressively be on the road in 2022,” Landry said.

“There is no question as to the value of a face-to-face conversation with a customer or prospective customer that has made a conscious decision to walk into your booth,” he said. “His or her mind is open to what you have to say and, by virtue of the fact that they are physically standing in front of you, it leads to a positive interaction. In effect, this individual has self-selected to be someone that you should invest your time and resources into. I have always felt that when I look back on even some of the more average shows that I have done, it would be virtually impossible to have meaningful meetings with all of

FEATURE STORY

the individuals that I talked to, and that doesn't even take into consideration the fact that these individuals consciously made the decision to speak with me."

The David James Group is a full-service marketing firm that helped its clients — primarily associations and other nonprofits — shift to digital events during the pandemic. President and Partner Ron Zywicki said most are eager to return to holding live events.

"I've heard more than a few clients refer to coming back in person as a homecoming," Zywicki said. "There are certain things you can do virtually, but the energy from meeting face-to-face and being able to have ad hoc conversations in the hall is what people are excited about. People are generally and genuinely ready to connect in person."

Will Attendees Return?

Clearly, a majority of companies that relied on trade shows to connect with prospects and existing customers are eager to get back to meeting in person. But what about attendees?

Businesses continue to evaluate their travel needs and are in the driver's seat regarding how quickly in-person trade shows and events can return. They are mindful not only of their employees' health as the pandemic drags on, but also the savings that has resulted from a nearly complete shutdown of travel for two years. Many shows that were canceled or shifted online in 2021 were a result of insufficient attendee registration.

In September, *Wall Street Journal* business travel columnist Scott McCartney wrote, "There's increasing evidence that a

fair amount of business travel will be permanently curbed by technology. Video calls don't require hours of waiting in airports, sitting on cramped airplanes or nights away from family."

Consultants such as McKinsey and Deloitte have released reports stating that business travel will return unevenly through 2022. Estimates of permanent loss in business travel spend range from 15% to 36%.

Trade shows will rely increasingly on customers' desire to have a hands-on experience with new products to draw attendees, as well as the networking that occurs. The educational component of these events translates well to virtual audiences, and many trade show sponsors have plans to permanently incorporate a hybrid element to their events.

Naomi David of the marketing agency Walker Sands said businesses that relied primarily on trade shows and other live events to connect with prospects will need to adapt. Trade shows aren't going to disappear completely, but businesses must be flexible enough to meet clients and prospects where they want to meet, she said, whether that's virtually, in the small-group settings that Walker Sands has shifted to, or at large trade shows that draw thousands of attendees.

"It's not a bad question to ask your attendees how they like to receive their content. Are they having event fatigue? We could hypothesize all day, but you don't really know unless you're asking the people who attend your events how they want to absorb content and whether they want to come to in-person events." **SM**

Cameras Off Can Lessen Fatigue

When meeting in person isn't possible, a telephone call may be the next best thing to being there

Once "Zoom" became a verb it seemed inevitable that screen fatigue would occur.

Managers are increasingly conscious of meeting fatigue, but [research](#) by a team led by University of Georgia psychologist Kristen Shockley suggests that it's not the meetings that are wearing down workers, but being on camera.

"Our study revealed that there's something about the camera being on that causes people to feel drained and lack energy," Shockley said.

Her team worked with BroadPath, an Arizona health care services company that has been in the

remote work field for nearly 10 years. BroadPath CEO Daron Robertson wanted to quantify how video adds or detracts from a remote experience.

During summer 2020, BroadPath employees took turns leaving their cameras off during virtual meetings and were asked to complete daily surveys assessing fatigue, agency (a feeling that you can speak up in meetings) and engagement for the day. It was discovered that having the camera on during meetings led to fatigue, rather than just being in more meetings. Leaving cameras off reduced fatigue, especially for women and new hires, who frequently feel more

pressure to monitor appearance in professional settings.

The researchers clarify that they are not suggesting cameras should never be used. Seeing faces can be a helpful means of building trust, an important element of B2B sales and marketing. However, once a relationship is established it's interesting to know that additional research reveals that having voice-only conversations isn't just less exhausting, it can result in more equal speaking time and increase concentration on what is being said.

It has been suggested that the most underused technology since the global pandemic broke has been the phone call.



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Virtual is a reality.

Hybrid is the new black.
What does that mean for
show sponsors and attendees?

BY PAUL NOLAN

Hybrid events, whether you like them or not, are here for good.

There is ample evidence that screen fatigue is real. And, in “you don’t know what you’ve got ‘til it’s gone” fashion, marketers and salespeople are eager to return to face-to-face interactions. Buyers may be slightly less enthused about returning to in-person presentations, but most would also likely agree that in-person meetings lead to smarter, more confident buying decisions.

Still, the COVID-19 pandemic forced the B2B world to pivot to interacting through video calls and other digital means, and the general consensus is there’s no going back — not completely, anyway.

Virtual Learning Curve

Many businesses utilized webinars and other online interaction prior to the pandemic. The total shutdown of business travel accelerated the learning curve for how to effectively present virtually. Now, as B2B marketing departments emerge from lockdown, they should have a better handle on which projects can remain virtual, which will be more effective in person, and which should get a hybrid treatment.

Eric Holmen, CEO of Splash, a provider of event marketing software for live and virtual events, said his clients instantly realized during the pandemic the force multiplier capability of virtual presentation tools in terms of sheer audience numbers. Splash clients pivoted from intimate in-person marketing events with 50 or fewer people to online presentations with 3,000 or more registrants.

As a general rule, Holmen said, in-person attendees are more likely to show up, and they are more engaged when they are



present. During a 30-day period this summer, when Splash clients were holding both in-person and online events, over 66% of registrants for in-person events checked in compared to 39.5% of registrants for virtual presentations. The virtual events drew larger audiences because more people registered.

Marketers have used a heavy dose of trial and error in the past year and a half to pinpoint what works with virtual presentations. Tech skills that were learned and honed during the pandemic will be beneficial as more live and hybrid events are added to companies’ marketing mix. This includes using tools that allow for more personalized event promotion and invites, improve targeting of prospective attendees, and produce more informative post-event follow-up.

“A lot of should-haves that weren’t practiced that often pre-pandemic became must-haves when virtual presentations became a necessity,” Holmen said. “[Event sponsors] see how much better their ROI is when they take the time to use the digital marketing muscle that can transform event marketing.”

Splash’s event management software connects to existing CRM systems to track an event’s impact on the sales pipeline and facilitate more precise ROI measurement.

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In an informal survey held during
Global Meeting Industry Day last April,
62% of event planners said their events **will contain hybrid
aspects** moving forward, while 18% said there will be a
greater demand for virtual-only events.
That’s an **80% uptick** in the prevalence of virtual events.

Six Steps to More Engaging Virtual Meetings

John Chen is CEO of Geoteaming, a provider of virtual team-building exercises, and the author of [“Engaging Virtual Meetings.”](#) He uses ENGAGE as a mnemonic means of remembering six steps to defeat virtual meetings fatigue.

Engage and interact with every attendee. Greet all of your attendees as they arrive and check in with those who haven’t said anything for a while. Of course, this assumes that your audience is a controllable size to greet individually.

Never lead a meeting alone. Assign another team member or an attendee roles (with training) such as monitoring chat or muting and unmuting participants. This allows the host to focus on attendees.

Good looks. Nothing fancy here. Look good. Wear bright colors — company gear if possible. Turn on your lights. Clean up your background.

Air traffic control. Help find a way for attendees to communicate without stepping on each other’s auditory toes.

Get productive with virtual tools. Arrive on time. Plan. Value each other’s time. Make decisions everyone buys into and document those decisions. Attendees will be more engaged and feel valued if you can host productive virtual meetings.

End your meeting on a high note. When you end positively, attendees are more likely to come back and more likely to be engaged. Ask for feedback. Do a cheer. Play a video. Celebrate success. Say thank you. Then log off.



Virtual Exhibits Lose Effectiveness



Virtual corporate events during the pandemic have mainly fallen into two categories: informational/educational and those that tried to replicate a trade show floor with virtual exhibitors. Educational programming gets higher marks from virtual event attendees than virtual trade show productions. When trade show sponsors talk about a hybrid approach to future events, they mostly mention the speakers and educational component that will be beamed to attendees who aren’t there in person.

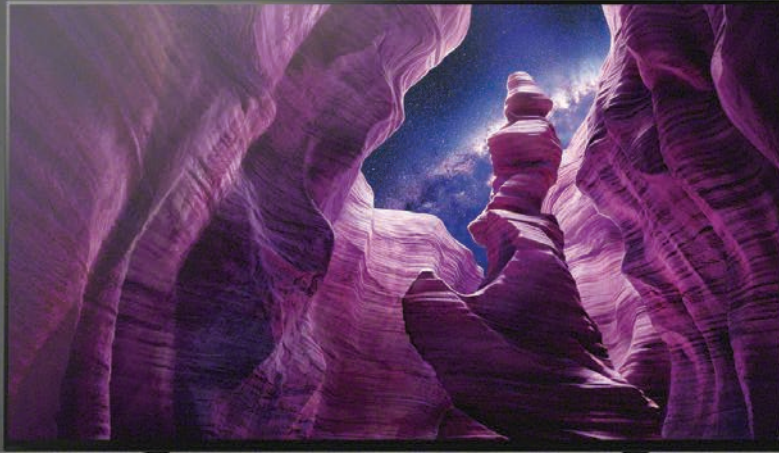
Paul Bowers, publisher of *Airport Improvement* magazine, a trade publication for airport managers and the consultants that serve them, said his experience with both virtual exhibit halls and virtual conferences during the pandemic have left him convinced that the former doesn’t work and the latter is a worthwhile substitute for learning in person.

“Virtual trade show substitutes weren’t a complete waste, but I’d be hard-pressed to ever exhibit at one again,” Bowers said. “There is no return on my investment. On one I participated in, I paid the same amount that I pay for the in-person conference, and it was a waste of money. The seminar part can be done well virtually. I’ll spend money to send our editor to attend a virtual conference, but I won’t spend to exhibit virtually.”

There is some sentiment among program sponsors and attendees that hybrid events are actually two separate events — one for the audience on site and one for those attending virtually. Those at the forefront of staging hybrid events say a more seamless connection between the virtual side and the in-person audience must become a priority for companies as they produce more hybrid events. Doing so creates a better value proposition for both audiences, said Kathryn Frankson, director of event marketing for Informa, a British publishing, business intelligence and exhibitions group.

“If they realize, ‘I can get a level of education I was receiving online,’ then you have to think about what you are offering for more immersive experiences for networking and education that isn’t just speakers talking to audiences,” Frankson told David Bain, host of [Digital Marketing Radio](#). “You have to find a new story to tell because it’s harder to get audiences to book travel, justify the budget...It starts with defining what that new product is and then you start to work backwards from there with your messaging.” **SM**

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Show Floor Buzz

B2B professionals share thoughts about live vs. virtual

We asked B2B sales and marketing professionals how they were feeling about the future of live events. Here's what they had to say.

Virtual expands the audience

Many of our clients hosting trade shows (and other live events) this season are adding virtual components for those unable (or unwilling) to travel and attend. This has enabled them to offer different tiers of attendance and participation. Allowing someone to view an in-person keynote remotely costs very little but makes that event (and the opportunity to derive incremental revenue from it) more accessible. Even when things get back to normal, there will always be people who want to attend but can't. Virtual participation (to one degree or another) is likely here to stay, and should be viewed as a net positive (both for hosts and attendees).

*Terry Kasdan, founder
[atCommunications, LLC](#)*

Eager to return to in-person

We are a SaaS company that relied on trade shows to meet and connect with U.S. prospects. We did try a handful of virtual tradeshow, but they did not yield the same results as in-person events do. I think that's because fewer people attended and the attendees who did show up didn't enjoy starting Zoom calls with sales reps. It's much easier and more natural to talk to someone face-to-face. To compensate for these lost opportunities, we have been hosting more in-house webinars. We have had some success with this strategy and we'll likely continue with it. However, we will return to in-person trade shows once they are up and running again.

*Kim Brown
[Condo Control Central](#)*

Size doesn't always matter

I've spoken at some really prestigious live events that I expected to bring a lot of new leads for my marketing agency. Instead, they generated nothing. On the other hand, during COVID-19, I presented at small webinars that brought a lot of new business. I think it's more important to have a relevant audience than a crowded one.

*Taylor Ryan, CEO
[Klint Marketing](#)*

A permanent shift to digital

As a B2B company catering to a global group of distributors and retailers, trade shows were in the DNA of our sales strategy. We attended five to seven international fairs, and they took up a big part of our marketing budget. Since COVID hit and the fairs were cancelled, we had to settle for digital trade shows. We didn't find them very successful. It can be difficult to engage the visitors, make an impression and present your merchandise in a more in-depth way.

What we did instead is refocus our energy into creating a 360-degree digital marketing strategy. We used our budget to reconstruct our website and create better digital content. Surprisingly, we've seen more success in terms of conversion. Comparing the budget we spent and the leads we've acquired, focusing on a more comprehensive digital marketing strategy has been more effective for us than the trade shows. If fairs do open up again, we will probably put in a maximum of 50% effort than we did before and continue to put our focus on digital marketing.

*Rob Zwanenburg, Chief Commercial Officer
[Difuzed](#)*

Silver linings

I might be in the minority, but done right, online events can be even better than in-person events.

**When was the last time
you went to an in-person event
and every attendee had their
easily discerned name floating
over their face?**

When could you easily browse their LinkedIn profile while also talking with them? When could you, as a sponsor, speaker or host, easily see the number of minutes an attendee spent with a particular talk or on a particular page of content at an in-person event?

There are a lot of things I love about live events, but they don't include the huge expense, the travel, the sore feet and time away from my desk and away from my family.

*Bobbie Carlton, founder
[Carlton PR and Marketing](#)*

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