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Executive Summary

Attendees form an impression of a show based on the number and quality of exhibitors and other attendees, the “buzz” around the show, and whether at the end of their experience they’ve achieved their goals and gained enough value for their investment of time and money. If a show does not meet their expectations, attendees vote with their feet and wallets by not attending the next show. (They also vote with their mouths, telling others about their experience.)

We found that although shows do a lot of measuring, they do not work hard enough to understand the goals and motivations of attendees and recalibrate their shows to ensure that they address those goals.

Some well-known companies are already exhibiting at fewer shows and shifting portions of their marketing budgets to corporate events or ways to form direct connections with customers. For example, an Apple spokesperson told MacWorld magazine, “Apple is participating in fewer trade shows every year, because often there are better ways for us to reach our customers.”

That trend and others are putting pressure on trade shows. Energy and environmental concerns alike will raise costs and expectations for efficiency. The quality and capability of online tools and environments make face-to-face encounters less necessary.

In addition to the narrow and small-scale improvements organizers make now, organizers need to find better ways to help people connect. Those who have a stake in the long-term viability of a show should understand how it fits into the information community of their attendees and provide value in the form of authentic connections that alternatives cannot replicate or substitute.
BACKGROUND

What Do You Really Know About Your Attendees?
Organizers employ a number of tools, techniques, and consultants in an effort to analyze attendees. These can include simple counters on entry gates, to time-lapse footage from cameras installed in the ceilings of the venues, to high-tech chips embedded in badges that allow real-time tracking of an exhibitor.

The output of these measurements is typically positioned as analysis, but is actually not much more than raw reporting of numbers in highly segmented categories in both large and excruciatingly small detail (e.g., “Number of first-time male attendees with 10+ years of professional experience who visited Vendor X on the first day of the show.”) These reports come in the form of spreadsheets full of numbers and PowerPoint presentations full of tables and colorful graphs.

Organizers presented with reams of this data might think they have really studied their attendees and can make better decisions about upcoming shows based on this data. In many cases they’re right. It can be helpful to have statistics that compare trends from one year to the next. But as we argued in our companion paper about the exhibitor experience, “The Invisible Exhibitor,” even with proper analysis such, quantitative information can go only so
Behind the Research

MAYA Design studied and documented the exhibitor experience over a six-month engagement co-funded by The Expo Group. MAYA did not set out with a formal plan to study attendees at the same time, but as part of building our understanding of the world in which exhibitors operate, we included a smaller number of conversations with attendees. This took place almost completely in face-to-face conversations at two major trade shows run by different organizers and general contractors in two different cities. At no time in our conversations did we mention The Expo Group as a co-sponsor of our research. Our findings about the attendee experience helped to inform our primary research about exhibitors by filling out the picture of how a show functions as an ecosystem. Our research that involved attendees was not exhaustive, so neither are the findings included in this paper.

far and does not readily reveal deeper motivations or thoughts that might provide a more direct view of where attendees’ thoughts are headed for the future.

Because of this, some organizers supplement their information gathering with focus groups or similar opportunities for attendees to voice their opinions. Most sessions are guided, and the results can be interesting, yet artificial. What people say out of context does not always correspond to reality.

By speaking with attendees in the context of their activities, we can gather richer and more accurate information confirmed by our own observations. Organizers should consider information they have gathered by other means incomplete without in-context qualitative research to complement it.

What Did We Ask?

Because we did not originally set out to research the attendee experience, we had no formal plan or approach to our interactions with attendees. We did, however, establish a set of focused, but open-ended questions to work from so that we had a consistent approach:

• Did you make a plan of attack for what you wanted to do at the show?
• What would you want the show organizers to know about the experience of being an attendee?
• Are you aware of an RFID system in use? If so, what information do you think is being tracked? What do you think about it?

No matter what their detailed responses were, we found some areas in which most attendees share some commonalities:

• Valuing their experience at the show as “protected” time. Even attendees who can’t ignore their day-to-day work and devote attention to it periodically during the day or every evening after the show found it helpful to be in an immersive environment that consumed most of their attention.

• Seeking a return on their “investment.” Attendees arrive at the show with something in mind regarding what they expect in return for their investment of money and time. To make sure what they’re providing meets the expectations of attendees, organizers should talk to a cross section of attendees regularly to understand their motivations and goals.
FINDINGS

Wayfinding
First impressions of attendees (or anyone walking through the door of the show) are greatly affected by the quality of the physical arrangement of the show and the signage that simultaneously identifies, advertises, and directs. Wayfinding missteps will not make or break a show, but they cause attendees to question whether organizers have their act together.

We visited one show that had aesthetically beautiful wayfinding signage that violated some fundamental requirements of such signage. For example, in one large communal area of the venue, the ceiling height was so high that signs identifying a particular area were too small to read at a distance and too high overhead to read or notice when close up.

It can be a complicated task to coordinate wayfinding in a physical environment with program materials (e.g., schedules and maps) that are often locked in and printed well in advance of the show. Attendees are usually oblivious to that temporal disconnection and they are puzzled when they encounter mismatches, such as a schedule in a printed guide that does not match what is posted on a doorway to a room. Some of the largest trade shows print and distribute daily publications that help to update attendees about changes, but wayfinding signs that have been modified (as simply as a presenter scribbling the number of the relocated room on a piece of paper and taping it near the door) are usually the fallback means for updates.

Introducing a human into the mix is one of the most effective ways to connect attendees to their destinations. Well-positioned help desks staffed with knowledgeable people can be the quickest way for a confused attendee to get back on track.

Organizers planning wayfinding schemes (or who work with contractors who do) should anticipate spatial and temporal “breakpoints,” or barriers and gaps in experience, and make quick, simple prototypes to test ways to bridge them. This prevents errors before they happen, and saves costs by ironing out problems before an expensive, full-scale wayfinding system is built and installed.

What is an “Attendee”?
The definition of “attendee” isn’t always clear. On a simple level, it is a person at a show who is not there in another singular capacity (e.g., as an exhibitor). But organizers who lump their attendees under a single label (e.g., “They’re all radiologists!” or “They’re all geeks!”) risk overgeneralization. Organizers can make better decisions about tailoring a show by understanding what motivations people have for being there, and how those motivations are affected by such factors as:

- Experience: Attendees who are veterans of a particular trade show (or trade shows in general) will have a level of expertise necessary for navigating the complex experience that an attendee who has never been to that show (or any trade show) lacks.

- Job roles: Executives, managers, and software developers (to pick one example) will all approach a show with different goals in mind, which affects how they plan their time and how they evaluate whether a show meets their needs.

- Trade show roles: Some people might be there as passive attendees, whereas others are there in an active role directly related to the show (e.g., as a presenter in an educational session), or in an active role indirectly related to the show (e.g., as a reporter for a trade magazine).
The Invisible Attendee

Activityfinding
Whereas wayfinding connects people with places, activityfinding involves the tools and processes necessary for connecting people with what they want to accomplish.

How individual attendees differ in handling this depends on their personality more than anything. Some make detailed plans before arriving and further manage their time at the show every step of the way. Others make no plans before the show and decide what to do once they arrive. One attendee we spoke with spent an hour in the morning carefully plotting out his activities for the day.

At some point most attendees wondered something like, “I have 40 minutes to kill, what’s the best way to spend that time?” Although schedules abound in pocket guides, on signs posted next to rooms, and in common areas, attendees had a difficult time actually figuring out what options to choose next. The range of options presents such an impenetrable thicket that an attendee would rather get a coffee instead.

Attendees suggested that it would be helpful to have “dashboards” at crossroads and common areas in a venue. Such digital signage could combine wayfinding (“This way to Session A”) and activityfinding (“8 seats open”).
We did encounter a type of digital dashboard at one show, but it hindered more than it helped. It was intended to inform attendees about the status of educational sessions, such as whether a class was fully booked or not. The display consisted of columns of course numbers encoded in different ways to indicate the status of a class. Attendees registering on-site for classes would first page through large directories of information about educational sessions, find something of use or interest to them, write down the course number on paper, then walk over to a digital display to see if what they had selected was still available. The design of the interface made it nearly impossible to see the status of a class at a glance. Attendees would switch back and forth between the digital display, their registration forms, and the big program guides, never quite able to put together a satisfactory package.

This on-site registration experience felt broken to attendees, especially when they talked to others who had registered online before the show and had no obstacles doing so. Some of the attendees attempting to register on-site looked longingly at nearby Internet terminals, but show workers told them they couldn’t register for courses online while they were on-site.

We also encountered attendees coordinating their plans with other attendees. It was difficult for them to share their schedule with someone else or align two or more schedules.

**Figure 3.** These two attendees were trying to find an activity that they could do together. The one on the left had registered for one previously and was looking up his registration information on his PDA, trying to match it to what they were looking at on the board.
Figure 4. Attendees registering on-site at this show would have to look through phonebook-sized program guides, identify courses of interest, write down the course numbers on a registration form and then ... see that plasma display in the background ...

Figure 5. ... the attendees would have to go over to that display and try to match the numbers they had written down to the numbers shown on the screen in hopes of determining whether or not their chosen courses were still available. Unfortunately, this still image doesn’t show the scrolling display or the flashing numbers that further confused attendees.
Information Community

Related to activityfinding is the issue of forming connections. That might sound vague, but it is the primary reason for most attendees to be at a show, which serves as a convergence point for an information community. Show organizers must do everything they can to provide opportunities for these connections to happen. Wayfinding plays a small role in this and activityfinding is certainly a component, but supporting and nurturing an information community is a distinctly different effort.

We found that show organizers devote attention to their information community, but in a disjointed way. They employ technology or processes that are dropped into place without making plans for an integrated experience or understanding attendee needs as a whole. The following are some areas in which we found opportunities for improvements.

Common Areas

The simplest way to foster connections is to provide areas in the physical environment designed to support them. This might seem like a no-brainer, and some of the larger venues certainly provide plenty of space that functions as gathering zones or neutral areas. Most of the time, these common areas are unplanned or overly planned—such as meeting rooms set aside for salespeople. After we completed our work with The Expo Group, we happened to be at another trade show where we saw common areas done perfectly. Carefully planned setups of modular furniture in common areas made it possible for attendees to reconfigure them at will to support all kinds of interactions. We recommend that organizers work with contractors and facilities to plan this part of their physical environment as much as they do the exhibit floor and areas for educational sessions.

Figure 6. A common area done right with modular, flexible furniture.
Communications

No show experience would be complete without attendees receiving, along with their show badge, a bag stuffed (or ready to be stuffed) with marketing materials. Organizers depend on it as a sponsorship opportunity, and exhibitors arrive with boxes and pallets of marketing materials intended to go home in the bags with attendees. Organizers that have really worked out the whole chain of sales opportunities even make sure attendees find more bags of marketing info waiting for them at their hotel room every evening if they booked the room through the show. From the perspective of the organizers and exhibitors, a lot of communication is happening. From the perspective of attendees, they’re getting spammed right and left. Some attendees we spoke with did make an effort to go through each piece in their pile and look for things of interest to them. But most attendees felt burdened by the sheer volume of material and by the large percentage that did not apply to them. Judging not only by this feedback, but also by our own observations of waste, organizers and exhibitors alike are spending a lot of money on inefficient communication. Attendees would welcome some other alternative.

Exhibitors

Attendees told us that they felt like they were wearing big targets on their backs, or like lambs led to the wolves in terms of their interactions with exhibitors. They felt like the quality of those interactions was low due to the staff in the booth primarily focused on capturing contact information about the attendee (a.k.a. lead retrieval) and because of lingering hucksterism still evident on the floor. Although attendees might be attracted and entertained, they are not satisfied with what they are able to learn or accomplish with the current model. Organizers also do not provide much to support the scheduling of appointments for

Figure 7. Exhibitors often abandon piles of leftover material after a show. Is this evidence of how ineffective and inefficient their communications are?
meetings or better discussions, so that largely happens accidentally or when a salesperson has scheduled appointments outside the context of the show.

Another interesting issue that became evident in our conversations was that attendees and exhibitors alike were dissatisfied with how difficult it was to filter out the “product noise” to find truly new and innovative products. Of course, almost every exhibitor with a product would argue that they have something new or innovative, but attendees were frustrated that there was a lot to look at and evaluate on the floor, and they had a difficult time figuring out what was worth their attention.

This was partly because smaller, innovative companies can afford only the least expensive booths, which tend to be in unfavorable locations, and partly because the points system rewards large or long-time exhibitors. The result at one show was that a group of long-time exhibitors selling a particular type of product that was rapidly becoming obsolete in their industry had prime positions at the show. We heard from attendees that they happened upon an exhibitor with a particularly innovative product only by accident, and we heard from that exhibitor their frustration about getting buried at the back of the show.

One solution that organizers could consider, and which we heard favorable comments about, would be to have a distinct zone on the show floor devoted to small innovators.

Some attendees said it could be helpful to have a qualified and neutral selection committee evaluate and designate their selections of notable innovators or innovative products at the show. This shifts the burden of filtering through loads of information away from attendees.

**Technology**

The largest trade show we visited augmented standard “you are here” maps with computer kiosks that attendees could use to search for exhibitors by name. Attendees told us that the kiosks were somewhat useful, but fell short of ideal. For example, one attendee was looking for a product that had a specific name, but he did not know which exhibitor made or distributed it, and the kiosk could not make that connection for him. Although the kiosk interface could show the floor location of a specific exhibitor, an attendee couldn’t select a group of exhibitors or a sequence of exhibitors and view a map highlighting just those exhibitors. The kiosk interface also did not allow attendees to look up an exhibitor that handled a certain kind of product, and then see all other exhibitors that handled similar products. Finally, although listings for individual exhibitors included company contact information, once the attendee was “at” that exhibitor in terms of that page on the kiosk, they had no way to contact the exhibitor directly right there. All contact information led back to company headquarters, not to their representative(s) in close proximity on the show floor.

There was a similar lost opportunity for connection in the larger sense of how an attendee’s experience at the show related to their larger professional and personal life experience. Organizers typically treat a show as a standalone moment in time. Some are beginning to make audio and video recordings of sessions available online following a show, but what people can do with those is still rudimentary. For example, some attendees were sent
as representatives from their organizations, and they had a responsibility to carry back information upon their return. Aside from their own notes and collections of marketing material, it was not possible for them to assemble a collection of experiences in sharable format, such as selecting a subset of session recordings and adding notes or commentary tailored to co-workers.

Some organizers provide a way for presenters to post materials online following a show, but there is a lost opportunity to continue a dialog online following their presentation. We’ve all seen people descend on presenters following particularly good sessions, but then the room has to clear for the next one and the dialogue peters out. Sometimes people exchange contact information and a few e-mails, but a good dialog that was forming in that room during and after the session is lost.

We were also curious about RFID, or Radio Frequency Identification—a way to uniquely identify people via a tiny strip of metal that can be sensed and registered at fairly close range by special sensors. We were interested partly because it is getting more attention as a tool for capturing detailed information about attendees, but also because every attendee badge at one of the shows we visited had an RFID tag embedded in it.

Almost no attendees we spoke with were aware that their badge contained an RFID tag, despite large signs notifying them of the presence of RFID. The show organizer also told us that when attendees registered, they had been presented with a similar notice as part of their registration agreement. A few of the attendees who became aware of the RFID tags said

**Figure 7.** RFID sensors placed overhead on entry gates to an exhibit floor. The sensors are more than fancy people counters because they don’t just record how many people passed through the gate. They can also record who passed through and when they did it.
it did not concern them too much, and that it was the way the world was going. But most attendees expressed frustration or anxiety for reasons that, real or not, included:

- Feeling like they had been tricked into being tagged, despite all the notices about it, which they had not noticed.
- A sense that now all of their movements were being tracked.
- Loss of control over their personal information.
- Exposure to more spam and marketing information.

Examples included an attendee who occasionally visited the booths of job placement agencies, and he worried that his current employer might somehow find out. Another attendee worried that highly personal information, such as how many times he went to the bathroom, would be exposed.

Many attendees said they would be fine with an RFID tracking system if they could only control it better themselves, such as “turning it off” at certain times, or being sure some aspects of their personal information remained hidden or unavailable to exhibitors and analysts. One attendee said that she would “take care of the problem” by simply printing a new badge for herself on a color printer—that the guards at the gates of the show would never notice the difference and she would have peace of mind to come and go as she pleased.

RFID tracking systems can give organizers and exhibitors (and even attendees) extraordinarily detailed information. But this is a developing technology with as many dangers as benefits. Organizers should implement it cautiously, and transparently, keeping attendees as informed as possible. Organizers should also encourage RFID vendors and analysts to develop interfaces and controls to allow taggers and those tagged to better manage information and privacy.

People

Many attendees go to a trade show individually, yet almost all attendees are there in conjunction with someone or to meet someone. We encountered attendees who were there as co-workers in groups of two or three to take part in a mutual, rather than individual experience. Some attendees were there to seek out peers so that they could exchange information about problems and solutions they had encountered in their professions. Others went just to be near experts.

All of the information-community support mechanisms noted above exist to make it more likely that the high-quality, high-value connections attendees seek will actually take place.

Personal connections are one of the primary ways attendees assess the value of their experience at the show, yet they are one of the least understandable or measurable. Organizers should work this into their own assessments of the success of their show, and they can start by understanding the goals and motivations of attendees.
Figure 8. Attendees are looking to connect with other attendees and exhibitors. Organizers provide a trade show that functions as that point of convergence, but they have an additional responsibility to help make those connections happen easily.

RECOMMENDATIONS
Organizers should take a big-picture view of their role in the lives of their attendees. Expectations are high, short-term risks are low, and the impact on long-term survival is large.

Communicate
- Aim for better, higher-quality communications with attendees, not just more of them.
- Use dynamic, real-time information displays that help bridge breakpoints and keep attendees aware of what they can do next.

Connect
- Provide opportunities for attendees to make authentic connections with people.
- Break down real and artificial barriers between related information.
- Understand how the show fits into the lives of attendees.

Explore
- Experiment with new ways to achieve the goals above by making prototypes or approximating the experience, and test them with attendees before committing to a costly full-scale rollout.
- Prevent waste by aiming for efficiency and optimization.
- Understand what’s changing in the world outside your show and develop a long-term strategy for providing value that exhibitors and attendees can get no other way.