

Criteria involved in evaluation of trade shows to visit

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Abstract

An organizer of trade shows (TSs) need to know the framework of criteria used by potential visitors in their ex-ante evaluation of trade shows. This paper comes to fill a gap in the published research, aiming to answer two research questions: which criteria are important for visitors in evaluating TSs to visit? And which is the underlying structure of criteria? A sample of retailers was interviewed and, after using a Confirmatory Factor Analysis, a measurement model was identified. The results confirm the underlying structure suggested by the integration of separate criteria or elements previously identified in other studies. Also, that the changes in the marketing orientation of companies have affected the evaluation criteria used by visitors. Additionally, the results show differences between visitants and exhibitors. The main disparity is the non-relevance of the marketing research criteria: TSs are a good marketing research tool for exhibitors but much more limited for visitors.

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1. Introduction

The abundance of trade shows (TSs) existing today, with a growing number on both the national and the international levels which are not limited to the geographical framework in which they take place (Rice & Almossawi, 2002; Smith, Hama, & Smith, 2003), increases the complexity of exhibitors' and visitors' decision to participate. They have to choose from amongst many offers, with a high level of competition among the organizers, who need to consider differentiation strategies by offering a user-oriented service. In this competitive environment, the organizers need to guarantee the trade show's (TS's) potential to attract a large number of visitors (Cox, Sequeira, & Bock, 1986), and to accomplish this objective, they need to discover the criteria underlying the decisions of potential visitors. From the exhibitors' perspective, moreover, it is crucial to understand the motivations behind the visitors'

decisions to attend TSs, since exhibitor-visitor interaction is the key factor in determining TS success (Ling-Yee, 2006).

In the pre-show phase, there is no clear cut distinction between the overall evaluation of possible TSs to visit and the evaluation of one specific TS to decide whether or not to attend, as the second might be embedded in the first. But they address two different states of mind in visitors' pre-show decision making process. This distinction is relevant for both TS organizers and for companies planning to attend TSs as exhibitors. Since organizers do have a TS portfolio, they need to know not only the specific reasons behind visitors' selection decisions but also the general framework of criteria used by potential visitors in their ex-ante evaluation of TSs. For exhibitors, identification and understanding of potential customers' motivations to attend TS are key to effectively and efficiently fulfilling the objectives of their participation (Godar & O'Connor, 2001).

Despite the importance of understanding the criteria used by potential visitors in their ex-ante evaluation of TSs, however, they have attracted little attention in the research on potential participants' TS attendance decisions. This gap in the research can be extended to all areas regarding visitor attitudes and behavior (Blythe, 2002). The specialized literature tends instead

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Table 1
Summary of empirical research about ts evaluation and selection

DECISION	Exhibitors	Visitors
Evaluation of TSs	(Dickinson & Faria, 1985; Faria & Dickinson, 1986; Gopalakrishna & Lilien, 1994; Herbig, Hara, & Palumbo, 1994; Kerin & Cron, 1987; Lilien, 1983; Munuera & Ruiz, 1999; Tanner, 2002; Trade Show Bureau, 1986; Williams, Gopalakrishna, & Cox, 1993)	
Selection of specific TS	(Dickinson & Faria, 1985; Gopalakrishna & Lilien, 1995; Gopalakrishna & Williams, 1992; Hansen, 2004; Herbig et al., 1994; Kijewski et al., 1993; Seringhaus & Rosson, 2001; Smith et al., 2003; Swandby et al., 1990)	(Blythe, 2002; Golfetto, 1988; Sharland & Balgoh, 1996; Smith, Gopalakrishna, & Smith, 2004; Trade Show Bureau, 1991)

to assign the main role to the exhibitor and has developed an accepted body of knowledge regarding either the grounds for the evaluation of TSs or the grounds underlying the decision to select one specific. Table 1 provides a list of published empirical studies that give some evidence of how exhibitors and visitors evaluate TS and/or how they select TSs: in the last 20 years, little more than 10 articles have paid attention to this important topic. On the visitors' side, moreover, only three articles have been found about the decision of selecting specific TS. Some non-empirical articles have dealt in varying degrees with the issue of TS selection by exhibitors (Bellizzi & Lipps, 1984; Bello & Barczak, 1990; Bonoma, 1983; Browning & Adams, 1988; Shoham, 1999), and visitors (Godar & O'Connor, 2001). To our knowledge, no previously published research has empirically explored the general criteria that potential visitors use transversally for TS evaluation and selection.

The goal of this paper, therefore, is to provide answers to two key questions relating to the state of mind of potential TS visitors:

- What are their main criteria in evaluating which TSs to visit, and
- Is there an underlying structure linking these criteria with different weights?

In order to accomplish these objectives, the paper is organized in different sections. In Section 1 we provide a literature review on TS research in an attempt to reveal the structure of the criteria. We propose, accordingly to parallel developments about the decisions to attend on the side of exhibitors, a decision structure with three criteria: the information about TSs, the marketing objectives of the company, and the perceived costs. In Sections 3 and 4 we describe the empirical setting and the methodology used to confirm or not the criteria's structure and their components as well as the relative importance of the three criteria. In Section 5 we discuss the results of our empirical analysis to answer the two research questions. Finally, we provide the core conclusions of the research (Section 6) and the managerial implications (Section 7) that might benefit the TS sector, and the limitations of the study and the suggested further research (Section 8).

2. Trade show visitors' evaluation and selection criteria

The outcome of attending TSs for visitors is uncertain as organizers cannot fully guarantee the achievement of the particular

objectives pursued by individual visitors. Hence, the evaluation of TS with selection purposes is mostly about the expected beneficial effects of trade shows for visitor. These benefits can be facilitated by the characteristics and management of the TS, their suitability to the marketing objectives of the visitor, and the perceived costs of attending. But from the perspective of the visitors, there is not empirical evidence on whether visitors actually get such benefits in the end and whether visitors use such expectations as selection criteria for future show selection.

But this lack of research from the visitor's perspective doesn't mean that there is not a relevant research background to rely on. As TSs are an encounter between supply and demand, the reasons for exhibitors to attend TSs should to some extent mirror those of visitors. The empirical findings about exhibitor's attitudes and behavior are therefore a good complement to the little research found about visitor's motivations to attend TSs. The literature reviewed allows us to identify different variables or indicators within three general criteria that may influence the potential visitor's TS selection decision: perception of/information on TSs, the marketing objectives of the company, and the perceived costs deriving from attending TSs. These will be considered as possible dimensions of the visitor's decision to attend TSs. Table 2 is designed to show the empirical and conceptual basis of these criteria as reported in the literature.

2.1. Trade show perception/information

TSs, and the venues in which they take place, have increased so much in number and variety that organizers are competing with more specialized TSs targeting more segmented markets. In this situation, potential visitors need to rely heavily on the perception and information they can obtain concerning some basic TS features, since the pursued outcomes of the visit are only possible if the right exhibitors meet the right visitors. The basic features suggested by the review of the literature on TS evaluation and selection are: type of TS, convenience of the location and timing, the TS reputation and its management, and the anticipated quantity and quality of attendance.

2.1.1. Trade show type

Two main measurements have been used to profile TSs: geographic market coverage, and the vertical vs horizontal focus of TSs (Gopalakrishna & Williams, 1992). Both play an important role in potential exhibitors' and visitors' decisions as to whether or not to attend. From the exhibitor's perspective,

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