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Trade Show Trends

Trade show displays: Trends for exhibitors—Part 1

Anyone who has walked a trade show floor has seen it: the booth with faded and worn graphics; a table covered with brochures; outdated technology, or no technology at all; a bowl of candy; neatly arrayed freebies that don't relate to the product or speak to potential customers.

Booths like these send a message—but not one exhibitors intend. It says that this company is boring, lacks innovation and doesn't stand out from its competitors. If this is a first impression, how much does the company value its core products and customer service?

Maybe your booth hasn't been updated in a while. Like most aspects of the economy, trade show marketing budgets were challenged by the recession. Studies by the Center for Exhibition Industry Research (CEIR) show that, during the recession, 47 percent of exhibitors scaled back and 40 percent of attendees perceived a drop off in attendance.¹

But times are changing: 87 percent of exhibit and event marketers are confident that their company's trade show programs will achieve increased returns in 2015.² Yet, the trade show strategies and, to be frank, gimmicks that were successful in the past may elicit a yawn from show attendees today.

Pens and KOOZIE® coolers still have their place in the exhibit booth if they complement an overall marketing plan. But successful exhibitors today are embracing creative uses of technology and developing strategies to engage attendees with personalized experiences before, during and after the show.

What are the larger marketing trends that influence budget and planning, exhibit features and strengthen the overall trade show experience? How is technology enhancing trade show exhibits? And what will the trade show of the future look like? The first part of this two-part Blue Paper® series looks at emerging trends for trade show exhibitors. (Read the second installation to explore strategies for reaching your trade show target audience.)

¹ "Trade Shows in the Balance." *Smart Meetings*. Bright Business Media LLC, n.d. Web. 22 May 2015. <<http://www.smartmeetings.com/meeting-planning/12423/trade-shows-in-the-balance>>.

² "The 2015 Economic Outlook." *EXHIBITOR Online*. Exhibitor Media Group, n.d. Web. 22 May 2015. <<http://www.exhibitoronline.com/topics/article.asp?ID=1827&catID=9>>.



The benefits of face time

There's no doubt that attendees and exhibitors approach trade shows cautiously because of lingering financial concerns. But like Mark Twain, reports of the death of trade shows have been greatly exaggerated.

Mike Lyons, exhibitions director for ibtm® America, is one of those experts who believes that trade shows will continue to be relevant in the digital age. "Even with new technologies and tools acting as enablers, they will never replace face-to-face meetings, as they have provided and continue to provide remarkable value and business benefits," he says.³

The trade shows hit hardest by the recession were those whose industries were hit hardest, such as home building and the automotive industry.⁴ But despite a roller coaster economy, a number of trade show metrics have remained steady for the past 15 years. CEIR studies show the following:

- Total buying plans (the percentage of attendees who plan to buy one or more of the products or services exhibited at a trade show within 12 months after the event) and net buying influences (the percentage of attendees who have a decision-making role in purchasing exhibited products) have both held relatively flat for the last 10 years. About one out of every two attendees plans to purchase one or more products as a result of attending a trade show, and more than 80 percent of trade show attendees are decision makers for purchasing exhibited products.⁵
- Another flat statistic is traffic density—the number of attendees who occupy 100 square feet of exhibit space. This stat has hovered between 2.0 and 2.5 for the last decade. Of note, both high density (more than 5) and low density (less than 1.2) are undesirable. High density makes face-to-face contact a challenge, while low density forces exhibitors to compete for the time and attention of attendees.⁶
- Average hours spent viewing exhibits (the time an attendee spends on the show floor) is up from 8.1 hours in 2010 to 9.0 hours in 2013, although this is a slight dip from 9.1 hours in 2012. Exhibit Surveys suggests one possible reason for a dip is that attendees are coming more prepared—a nod to the value of a strategy that begins before the show floor is open.⁷



³ "Trade Shows in the Balance." *Smart Meetings*. Bright Business Media LLC, n.d. Web. 22 May 2015. <<http://www.smartmeetings.com/meeting-planning/12423/trade-shows-in-the-balance>>.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ "All-Show Averages." *Exhibit Surveys*. Exhibit Surveys Inc., n.d. Web. 25 May 2015. <<http://www.exhibitsurveys.com/trends>>.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

- First time attendees—the percentage of new attendees to a specific show—was 38 percent in 2013, and has ranged from 30 percent to 38 percent over the last 15 years. Exhibitor Surveys notes that a good show has a mix of newcomers and returning attendees. Also, the percentage of repeat attendees is a good indicator of how often displays need to be changed up—the more returning attendees, the more often booth graphics and strategies need to be replaced with a fresh approach.⁸

In addition, CEIR reports that 90 percent of trade show professionals say that the value of exhibitions is the same or greater than it was two years ago, 80 percent of attendees report that face-to-face interactions with vendors at exhibitions are very or extremely important for them to do their jobs, and 85 percent of exhibitors said that face-to-face interactions with existing or potential clients are very or extremely important to them.⁹

The goals for trade show exhibitors—to create buzz about their companies, launch products, generate sales leads and capture contacts—are as important as ever. And while opinions vary about the future of trade shows, experts agree that the key to relevant and successful exhibits is an emphasis on in-person interaction while embracing new technologies. “Events are a more valuable channel where brands can connect more intimately with consumers in a face-to-face setting,” says Group Delphi CEO Justin Hersh. “They bring intellectual capital and engagement to the trade show experience.”¹⁰



Creative budgets and business plans

Traci Browne, author of *The Social Trade Show: Leveraging Social Media and Virtual Events to Connect with Your Customers*, says that exhibitors need to find new ways to attract attendees to their booths. Browne identifies these three effective strategies:

- Provide valued expertise.
- Design a solid digital strategy and choose the appropriate social tools to implement it.
- Focus on quality over quantity.¹¹

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ “Trade Shows in the Balance.” *Smart Meetings*. Bright Business Media LLC, n.d. Web. 22 May 2015. <<http://www.smartmeetings.com/meeting-planning/12423/trade-shows-in-the-balance>>.

¹⁰ Haniff, Zeenath. “Emerging Industry Trends and Best Practices for 2015 - Exhibit City News.” *Exhibit City News*. Mr. Tradeshow Communications LLC, 01 Nov. 2014. Web. 23 May 2015. <<http://www.exhibitcitynews.com/emerging-industry-trends-best-practices-2015/>>.

¹¹ “Trade Shows 101: The Reason, the Value and the Future of the Industry.” Mulligan Management Group LLC. Mulligan Management Group LLC, 13 Apr. 2015. Web. 25 May 2015. <<http://www.mulliganmanagementgroup.com/entries/clients/trade-shows-101-the-reason-the-value-and-the-future-of-the-industry>>.

To achieve quality over quantity, Alicia Rosen, director of client relations for Plus Studios, a Las Vegas-based trade show exhibit and design management firm, reports that several of her company's clients have "scaled back in order to scale up."

"They are really looking at the shows they attend to see if they are actually good shows for them or if they were just going because they've always gone or because their competitors go," she says. "They have also looked at their booth space sizes and gone smaller when possible. This has allowed them to cut back on the number of shows they attend and the amount of money they spend on booth space, allowing them to spend more money on cool booth designs for the shows they do go to."¹²

Global Experience Specialists Inc.SM (GES) declared 2015 "the Year of Bold," predicting that marketers would go "all in" on bolder budgets to immerse booth visitors in brand experiences. "Everybody is sharpening their swords, getting better and better with the help of technology, whether it's their pull-through strategy or booth rep engagement; it's rare now to see anyone displaying a stagnant design year over year," says Errol Ahearn, GES vice president of global design.¹³

In its annual Trend Tracker, GES identified these trends related to trade show exhibit budgets and planning:

- **The use of virtual reality and 3-D printing for exhibit planning and prototyping.** Virtual walk-throughs and 3-D printed models allow decision makers to visualize an exhibit concept and make changes quickly and inexpensively. And virtual walk-throughs can be extended to virtual attendees, offering them the exhibit experience without the travel.¹⁴
- **Tech-focused design that can be repurposed.** "Clients want to see product display elements able to be pushed out to the sales team as a multi-use platform," says Doug Shockly, GES vice president of client relations and global corporate events. "They're developing tools for the corporate event and then realizing that with a little tweaking it becomes a sales platform to take on the road, whether it's a digital catalog or an augmented reality experience."¹⁵
- **App upgrades.** When it comes to trade show app development, exhibitors are focusing on solid apps that can take on new features for the next year's show.¹⁶

¹² Sorrells, Mitra. "2014 Event Inspiration: 19 Trends for Trade Show Booths." BizBash. BizBash Media, 7 Jan. 2014. Web. 23 May 2015. <<http://www.bizbash.com/2014-event-inspiration-19-trends-for-trade-show-booths/new-york/story/27692>>.

¹³ 2015 Trend Tracker. Las Vegas, Nev.: Global Experience Specialists Inc., 2015. PDF.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.



- **Are you local?** Rather than busting the budget with expensive entertainment, planners are scouring local music scenes, YouTube® and reality shows for low-cost talent that still generates a buzz.¹⁷

Booth tech: From novelty to norm

Trade show exhibits may be known for their gimmicks, but technology is no longer one of them. “While technology is not the only form of engagement seen at trade shows, its growing presence affirms an overall transition from being a novelty in an exhibit booth to becoming a normal experience across all market categories,” says Zeenath Haniff of Exhibit City News.¹⁸

Emerging event technology offers exhibitors a means to tailor booth visits to individual clients. Kristin Veach of Live MarketingSM, a Chicago-based event-marketing agency, reviewed the “Then, Now and Future” (Figure 1) of exhibit tech, predicting how technology will further personalize the exhibit booth (while reminding us of a few trends and gadgets that are happily in the past):

Figure 1: Trade Show tech: Then, Now and Future¹⁹

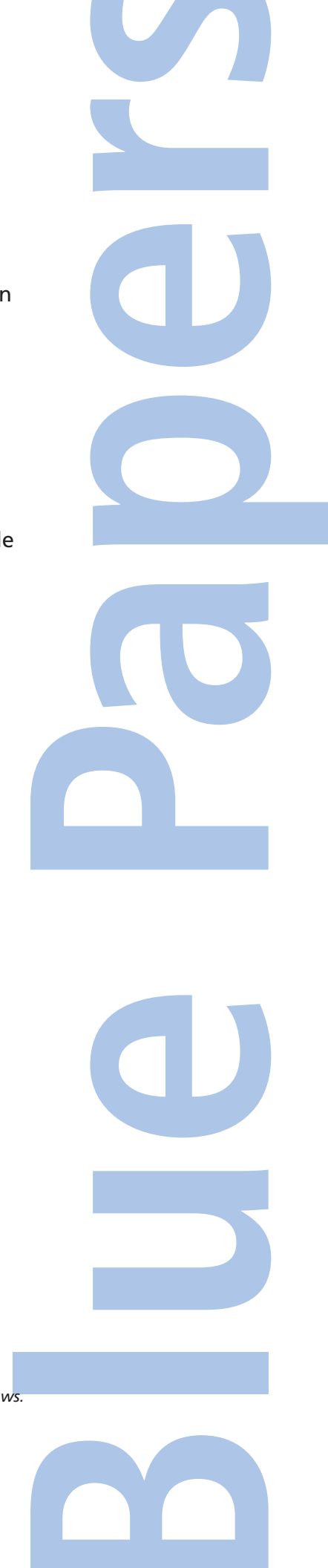
The then, now and future of exhibit tech

	Then	Now	Future
Trade show experience	All-for-one experiences: Everyone received the same information and had the same experience at a booth, regardless of where an attendee was in the decision-making process.	Custom journeys: Trade show attendees come prepared and choose which tour track aligns with their interests and needs.	Personalized experiences: Marketers will anticipate attendees’ needs and tailor show experiences to specific characteristics and preferences.
Storytelling	Slide carousels and projectors: No explanation necessary!	PowerPoint®: The most widely used presentation platform offers great flexibility to create dynamic presentations.	Prezis®: A cloud-based application with zooming and panning capabilities that may be especially useful for one-to-one or one-to-few presentations on tablets.
Bringing it to life	Scenery, staging and props: Impressive, but expensive to build, ship and set up.	Interactive touchscreens: Today’s exhibits are lighter weight due to advances in fabric and truss, and deliver information dynamically through interactive touchscreens.	Projection: This technology will improve so that it can be used outside of dim or dark spaces, providing a means to instantly transform a space.
Sharing information	Print collateral: For exhibitors, expensive to print and ship. For attendees, a pain to carry home.	Tablets and iPads®: Allows collateral to be easier to retain and update with interactive features including video, animation and testimonials.	Virtual briefcases: Attendees will opt-in to receive exactly the information they want and it will be delivered immediately.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Haniff, Zeenath. “Emerging Industry Trends and Best Practices for 2015 - Exhibit City News.” Exhibit City News. Mr. Tradeshow Communications LLC, 01 Nov. 2014. Web. 23 May 2015. <<http://www.exhibitcitynews.com/emerging-industry-trends-best-practices-2015/>>.

¹⁹ Veach, Kristin. “Then, Now, and Future of Trade Show Technology.” Web log post. Live Marketing. Live Marketing, 8 Aug. 2013. Web. 23 May 2015. <<http://info.livemarketing.com/blog/99836/Then-Now-and-Future-of-Trade-Show-Technology>>.



Here are a few more specific ways technology can be used as part of a smart trade show strategy:

- **Digital badge scanners and lead apps:** Apps such as iLeadsSM allow exhibitors to customize lead capture lists, add action items or notes and perform lead analysis in real-time. And, digital badge scanners allow booth staff to collect contact information instantly. No more sorting through business cards to organize leads after a show!²⁰
- **Interactive storytelling applications:** “Interactive 3-D product storytelling applications, on touch screens and mobile devices, allow customers to create their own buyer’s journey within a trade show booth, navigating how products operate together in a variety of real-world scenarios to solve their problems,” says Dana Drissel, senior director of marketing at Kaon InteractiveSM. “By incorporating consistent marketing messages within these interactive digital experiences (via relevant notes and sales materials), companies can better tell their product/solution story in a branded user environment.”²¹
- **Game tech:** Incorporating interactive technology into games and contests gives attendees a more exciting and memorable experience than traditional booth giveaways and raffles.²²
- **3-D printing:** The GES Trend Tracker report for 2015 notes that this is a solid event attraction simply because it’s still enough of a novelty that people want to see it in action. But it also has the potential to move beyond entertainment to functioning as a booth solution, especially for brands that don’t have a physical product to touch.²³
- **Paperless events:** While there are folks who still like a brochure placed in their hand, quick response (QR) codes allow attendees to scan and download exactly the information they want and go home lighter. “Don’t bother giving me lots of collateral or thick reports,” says Carol Meyers, CMO of security software provider Rapid7SM. “I never have time to look at those materials while I am at the trade show, and when it’s time to pack, they are going to get tossed.”²⁴



20 “3 Things to Expect in the Future of Trade Shows.” Bartizan Connects. Bartizan, 31 Mar. 2014. Web. 25 May 2015. <<http://www.bartizan.com/blog/3-things-to-expect-in-the-future-of-trade-shows>>.

21 Drissel, Dana. “Top 4 Content Marketing Trends For 2015.” Chief Marketer. Access Intelligence LLC, 20 Nov. 2014. Web. 23 May 2015. <<http://www.chiefmarketer.com/top-4-content-marketing-trends-2015/>>.

22 “3 Things to Expect in the Future of Trade Shows.” Bartizan Connects. Bartizan, 31 Mar. 2014. Web. 25 May 2015. <<http://www.bartizan.com/blog/3-things-to-expect-in-the-future-of-trade-shows>>.

23 2015 Trend Tracker. Las Vegas, Nev.: Global Experience Specialists Inc., 2015. PDF.

24 Stevents, Ruth. “Trade Show Marketing Do’s & Don’ts: Ways to Annoy Your Prospects.” Chief Marketer. Access Intelligence LLC, 22 May 2014. Web. 23 May 2015. <<http://www.chiefmarketer.com/trade-show-marketing-dos-donts-ways-annoy-prospects/>>.

But as much as technology has to offer, be aware that its use must be designed to promote a larger strategy of interaction. “You still often see a touchscreen with no one near it, and it’s just wasting away for three days at the show because there’s no strategy to get people to explore,” says Ahearn of GES. “You can’t let technology self-support.”²⁵

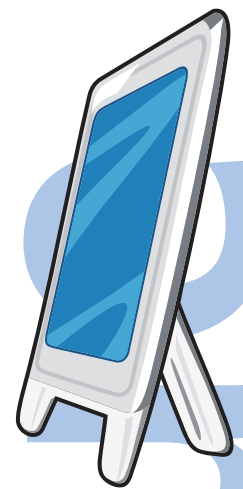
Social strategies and year-round marketing

The ideal marketing plan for a trade show exhibit doesn’t end when the show ends. Rather, it’s part of a year-round marketing program that begins long before the show floor opens and continues the dialog after the event so that leads don’t fall through the cracks. In addition, it sets goals and measures them to show that the exhibit is worth the investment.²⁶

“Determine in advance, long before the event, what it is you actually are looking to accomplish, because everything you do related to the tradeshow should be connected back to accomplishing your event objectives,” says Tim Asimos of Circle S Studio, Richmond, Va. “Be sure to set specific, quantifiable metrics for measuring the success of your tradeshow.”²⁷

Veach of Live Marketing cites an often-repeated statistic that 76 percent of trade show attendees decide what booths to visit before they arrive at a show.²⁸ She offers these tips for a show’s social media strategy to reach attendees before they’ve packed their bags and after they’ve headed home:

- Develop a series of pre-written and pre-approved messaging statements scheduled to auto-publish before, during and after the event.
- Incorporate the event hashtag, even on platforms such as LinkedInSM, Facebook[®] and Google+[®].
- Create your own creative hashtag that puts a fun spin on your message and/or activity.
- Designate a visible “social media command center” to encourage attendees to share.
- Pre-event, provide teasers of what’s to come through compelling images and visuals.
- At-event, ask your staff to share “in-the-moment” images and tweets (although not when they’re on booth duty!).
- Post-event, publish Vine[®] and HyperlapseSM videos for a great recap.²⁹



²⁵ 2015 Trend Tracker. Las Vegas, Nev.: Global Experience Specialists Inc., 2015. PDF.

²⁶ “Trade Show and Event Marketing.” Marketing MO. Moderandi Inc., 11 Nov. 2014. Web. 25 May 2015. <<http://www.marketingmo.com/campaigns-execution/trade-show-and-event-marketing/>>.

²⁷ Asimos, Tim. “9 Steps to Revitalize Your B2B Tradeshow Marketing Strategy.” Web log post. Spur Marketing Blog. Circle S Studio, 26 Mar. 2015. Web. 26 May 2015. <<http://www.circlesstudio.com/blog/9-steps-to-revitalize-your-tradeshow-marketing-strategy/>>.

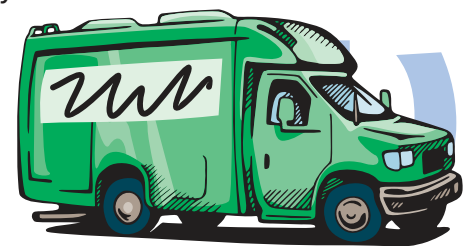
²⁸ Veach, Kristin. “4 Easy Tricks to Get More Results from Your Trade Shows and Events.” Web log post. Live Marketing. Live Marketing, 31 Oct. 2014. Web. 25 May 2015. <<http://info.livemarketing.com/blog/4-easy-tricks-to-get-more-results-from-your-trade-shows-and-events>>.

²⁹ Ibid.

While social media has become integral to trade shows, this may not be the place to spend a lot of time developing a marketing strategy that utilizes emerging platforms, no matter how cool or game-changing they seem to be. Social media standbys Facebook and Twitter® remain the dominant social media platforms for trade shows, according to Casey Ayars, COO at EventStaffr, a Florida-based marketing and advertising agency. “Twitter is No. 1 because it’s a conversational platform that makes it easy to connect with people in real-time,” he says. “People can search Twitter for the show hashtag and easily join conversations people are already having. Facebook is a great platform for posting updates, sharing photos and running ads before the show, but it’s not the best platform for engaging with attendees at the show.”³⁰

Newer platforms, on the other hand, are only appropriate if they match the demographic of the attendees, Ayars explains. “Vine, Snapchat®, InstagramSM and Tumblr®, statistically, have a much younger user base than Facebook, Twitter and Pinterest®,” he says. “You’re more likely to see Vine or Snapchat being used at an event like SXSW [South by SouthwestSM] or Comic-Con® because the crowd is generally younger and more tech-savvy. I expect to see Instagram and LinkedIn being used more in the future.”³¹

Finally, social media isn’t the only way to extend the show buzz. GES Trend Tracker notes that companies are getting the most out of their exhibit investment by taking successful booths on the road for smaller gatherings.³² Steve Randazzo of Pro Motion Inc. suggests a mobile trade show tour that takes the product, messaging and key executives into a customer’s parking lot. “The coach [bus] can act as a giant mobile billboard a marketer can take on the road and directly to a customer’s front door, creating buzz throughout the organization,” he says. “A branded mobile trade show coach can also serve as a place to hold VIP events or hospitality suites. This creates a more casual atmosphere, where brands can build relationships and ultimately, sales volume.”³³



The booth of the future

The often-discussed alternative to the traditional trade show—a virtual show—has a lot of appeal. Virtual shows reduce the hassle and expense of travel, have lower entry costs and allow exhibitors to track sales and marketing data in real time.

³⁰ Obeng, Kristin. “The Future of Social Media at Tradeshow.” *Exhibit City News*. Mr. Tradeshow Communications LLC, 01 Dec. 2014. Web. 25 May 2015. <<http://www.exhibitcitynews.com/future-social-media-tradeshow/>>.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² 2015 *Trend Tracker*. Las Vegas, Nev.: Global Experience Specialists Inc., 2015. PDF.

³³ Odell, Patricia. “Taking B2B Trade Shows on the Road.” *Chief Marketer*. Access Intelligence LLC, 18 Mar. 2013. Web. 25 May 2015. <<http://www.chiefmarketer.com/taking-b2b-trade-shows-on-the-road/>>.

New platforms are making it easier than ever to set up a virtual booth.³⁴ But the technology has yet to replace the benefits of face-to-face networking for most industries. The American Society of Association Executives (ASAE) held a strictly virtual meeting in 2010, and although participants liked the general production, they missed having in-person connections. “For them, it was like being invited to go to a party, but looking through a window and seeing people talking with each other, rather than actually being with them,” says ASAE CEO John Graham. “There is no viable substitute for face-to-face relating at shows and meetings.”³⁵

Five organizations—the ASAE Foundation, the CEIR Foundation, Freeman, Gaylord Entertainment and the Professional Convention Management Association (PCMA) Educational Foundation—funded a recent study to explore the issue of struggling trade shows and create new models. The study suggests five potential scenarios for the future of trade shows that exhibitors need to be prepared for, acknowledging that a hybrid of traditional and virtual shows is also possible.³⁶ The five identified scenarios are:

1. **The future is now:** The existing trade-show model will remain viable, integrating new technology and other tools.
2. **The future is the future, and we will build it all:** Trade shows in the future will be so fundamentally new and digital that they will be their own self-contained worlds.
3. **A slow walk to the future:** Change is a slow march, and trade shows will gradually adjust toward the future.
4. **The show’s over (but let’s keep playing):** The pace of technological change demands more than a shift in energy and adjustments in strategy. Marketers need an entirely new context focusing on building business relationships rather than sales.
5. **The big reset:** Rather than maintain the existing trade show model or reinventing it, marketers need to start over and build from the bottom up.³⁷

There’s no exhibit booth with a crystal ball to help us visualize the future (imagine the traffic that would generate!). So while it’s vital to stay on top of trade show trends, the best exhibits result from marketing plans that include clear goals, a solid understanding of a company’s or brand’s best customers and prospects, and technology strategies that promote human interaction.



³⁴ Gard, Sabuhi. “Virtual Trade Fairs: The Future of Small Businesses?” *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media Ltd., 18 Sept. 2014. Web. 22 May 2015. <<http://www.theguardian.com/small-business-network/2014/sep/18/virtual-trade-fairs-future-small-businesses>>.

³⁵ “Trade Shows in the Balance.” *Smart Meetings*. Bright Business Media LLC, n.d. Web. 22 May 2015. <<http://www.smartmeetings.com/meeting-planning/12423/trade-shows-in-the-balance>>.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

"You don't have to have the largest booth in the hall, hire celebrities to man your booth or give away a BMW to achieve trade show success," Asimos of Circle S Studio says. "Any company on almost any budget can be successful at trade show marketing if they take the time to develop a solid strategy, execute it and follow through on post-event activities."³⁸



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³⁸ Asimos, Tim. "9 Steps to Revitalize Your B2B Tradeshow Marketing Strategy." Web log post. Spur Marketing Blog. Circle S Studio, 26 Mar. 2015. Web. 26 May 2015. <<http://www.circlesstudio.com/blog/9-steps-to-revitalize-your-tradeshow-marketing-strategy/>>.