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into **experience**

## Can Exhibiting Be Friendlier? What Exhibit Marketers Want for the Future

In the summer of 2010, MC<sup>2</sup> conducted a virtual focus group of exhibit marketers and managers to elicit their view of the future of exhibit management. We asked, “Can exhibiting be friendlier? Are advances in technology enough? How will program value be perceived? What will the marketer’s role be like?”

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**We asked,**  
*“Can exhibiting  
be friendlier?”*

**And 57 exhibit  
marketers told us  
exactly what they  
thought.**

Let us say right up front that the exhibitor challenges are many, varied and unrelenting. And, the exhibition industry is growing more and more complex - confirming details, costly deadlines, unwritten rules and sheer volume of responsibility – which makes the exhibit marketer a special type.

These challenges are further complicated by corporate sales and marketing demands for brand promotion, stakeholder representation and ROI. How many hats must a typical exhibit manager must wear on any given day?

MC<sup>2</sup> wanted to find out what would make exhibiting more friendly in the next five years. We asked the focus group about the biggest challenges today, which suppliers could most influence the future of exhibiting and what the future looked like.

Fifty-seven exhibit managers and marketers came right back at us with their own agenda for making exhibiting less stressful, more organized, and more rewarding. It boiled down to three important areas where the industry can (and must) improve.



Responses from our focus group suggest that until the trade show and exhibit industry resolves the time devoted to repeatable details, it can't move forward. If that one constant was removed from the exhibit program mix, imagine how much time would be freed to concentrate on the strategy and, in turn, enhancing the value of this face-to-face marketing segment.

## 1. More Time. Standardize the details, please.

Paradoxically, trade show exhibiting is about the customer—the buyer—but respondents report that the biggest chunk of their time is spent planning and executing. So when the booth is finally assembled and every last giveaway, handout, and computer is in place, there has been little time left to devote to developing communications with the customer.

### **STREAMLINED AND ONLINE**

While exhibit kits ask for the same information requirements, exhibit managers must conform to meet different vendor formats for each event submission. Respondents called for something that would simplify our industry across the board—one platform, template, or plug-and-play best practice so exhibit planners don't spend the biggest chunk of time processing the same information over and over to meet requirements for each submission.

Instead of each venue and exhibit house trying to build their own program tracking and service ordering tools, maybe it is as simple as exhibitors sending specifications in formats

that best work for their own companies and the vendors adapting them into their preferred formats. There was a shared consensus amongst the group that technology could become an even more valuable management tool if designed specifically for the exhibit industry.

*“Every good show services provider, or company that is the event host, should have an easily accessible website where forms can be downloaded, deadlines are clear and you can pick up the phone and reach a real human being at any point leading up to the show.”*

### **ONE PLACE...ALWAYS UP-TO-DATE**

Online program management is still pretty much a proprietary service offering for those manager's with a relationship with an exhibit builder. The future of online management goes hand-in-hand with the professed need

to have standard forms to reduce duplication of effort particularly concerning show management and general contractors. Other suggestions from respondents included:

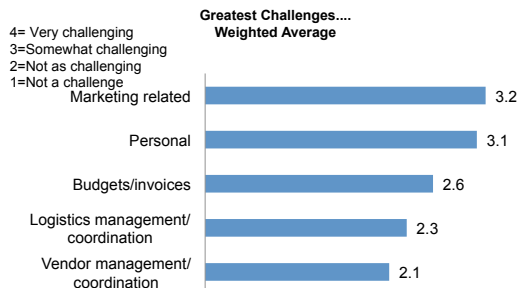
*“There would be an online management system available that all my suppliers could update and that I could access to have all my show info in one place...always up-to-date.”*

*“Ideally, there would be one software [program] that would manage all logistics that is specifically tailored towards event management. Meeting rooms and schedules with email alerts for relevant personnel, vendor tracking, and manager schedules, with printer-friendly schedule sheets.”*

For members of the focus group, having enough time for personal and program development ranked as the second greatest challenge to their success. Streamlining processes for repeatable details of each event, would not only increase efficiencies, but allow managers time to think on a higher level about developing effective exhibit and event marketing efforts.

There still are the age-old spend justification challenges. Respondents indicated that to prove the value of the events and trade shows to management means being able to measure results in a meaningful way.

What are your greatest challenges when thinking about managing and executing your exhibit program?





As it stands today, focus group participants expressed the majority of their challenges are internal. Whether it's getting buy in from management, a lack of understanding the exhibit manager's role, or reining in the internal shareholders to set goals, such challenges make it difficult to demonstrate the true value of an exhibit program.

## 2. More Value. ■ Management buy-in & meaningful metrics.

*“Gaining cooperation from other employees to respect the needs to plan further ahead than what they expect from a trade show. Their unrealistic perception is that trade shows should be planned much closer to the event.”*

Exhibit managers reported that management often views their roles as limited to setting up booths and filling out paperwork. Differentiating between an exhibit marketer and an exhibit logistics expert would clarify these two separate jobs requiring different skill sets and thought processes. Another suggestion required upper management to attend shows to see process for themselves.

*“Internally, most of the execs have no idea the amount of planning and paperwork that go into exhibiting at a show. They like to look at the cost and comment on how*

*expensive it is. Yet, they aren't supportive of paying for an all around employee training program to improve ROI or investing in a good lead management program. They also don't see the value in my continued training/education. It's all very biased and opinion based.”*

*“I would have more help (in terms of staff) so that we could have a full time devotion to tracking shows and ROI with full executive management support.”*

To some, a friendly future would be the ability to measure success and provide valid justification to management. This would require setting measurable objectives and building in tools to capture data. Again, there are calls for standardization with suggestions to create

standard benchmarks to measure ROI and ROO against and to develop templates to present the data in a usable format for management.

*“Develop a ROI template that is easily understood by the internal stakeholders, thereby more easily justifying exhibit and show spend.”*

#### **PREPARING THE FRONTLINE**

Several focus group participants also cited a formalized approach to booth staff training as an important element of a successful show. Suggestions ranged from one-on-one training to “live training of all booth staff several times preshow by taking advantage of video conferencing.” Some responses indicated need to “have an aggressive and successful booth staff” in the ideal future. Whereas others indicated, “booth staff training would be mandatory.”

#### **Data with Accountability and Transparency**

According to the group, a friendlier future will require trade show organizers to provide greater accountability and transparency through third-party validation of their attendance and demographic trade show data. Such transparency would enable exhibitors to make effective investment decisions by comparing competitive show reports to see which demographics best meet their marketing needs.

*“Organizers [should be] rewarded by providing value to exhibitors, not because their net square footage grew or because they gained 20% attendance by reporting registration numbers instead of verified attendance of those who really showed up.”*



Not only did virtual focus group participants believe advances in technology have helped make it easier to manage their exhibit program, they also see the integration of technology into exhibit design as standard in the future. Or, as simply said by one of the participants: "More virtual, less physical."

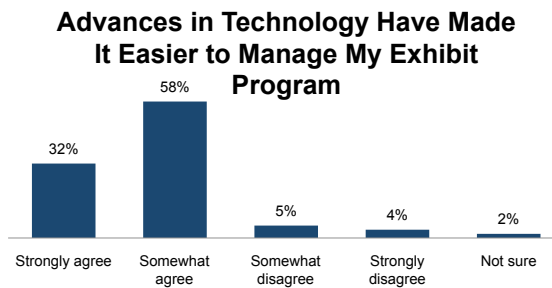
### 3. Smart technology. Increase technology by design.

Charged with "doing more with less" and "finding ways to stand out while reducing costs," perpetuates the ongoing challenges for exhibit managers. However, with the advancements in technology and new, lightweight engineered materials for booth design, technology will have a far greater impact on the exhibit experience itself.

*"In the future, the best 'circus act' will be the one that involves the most senses. For example, a scent that when inhaled gives the interior view of the next generation car driving down a country road (sound of the wind) showing the sleek design and handling capability (touch of the wheel), etc. So relationships will change as electronics gives way to biochemistry and sensory/perception engineering."*

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Advances in technology (communications, tracking, etc) have made it easier to manage my exhibit program.



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#### TECH SAVVY

Exhibit managers and marketers expect their supplier partners to stay on top of technology in order to integrate into the exhibit experience. Suppliers will have to be more electronic and social media savvy to provide the "pop" necessary to stand out.

The important relationship between the exhibit house and exhibit marketer was credited as having the largest influence on trade show and event programs. As one focus group participant put it, "[the] exhibit house is most important and the most changing--as we evolve and grow our company, I'm able to integrate our exhibit house more into our plans."

Offering greater flexibility, the use of technology can also offer more customization to specific shows instead of a template with a few variations.

*“We would do away with printing the large, graphic panels on our booth and opt for some kind of large plasma screen or smaller, modular touch-screen computers to showcase [our] website and our capabilities.”*

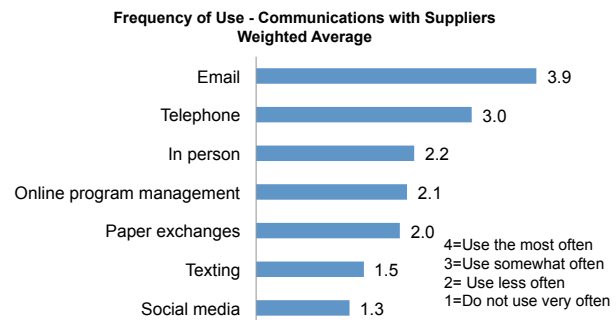
### GET SOCIAL

As the use of social media and on-the-ground reporting proliferates, exhibiting will require the technology to facilitate instantaneous communication from the show floor. Exhibit managers indicated the future would see more and more integration of social media into events and exhibit planning.

*“Booth design has the greatest influence at this time; however with social media networks, there is no real need for large displays if content, specifications, and contact information can be delivered electronically to all participants before the show begins.”*

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How often do you use the following communications methods with your suppliers once the relationship is established?





## 4 Suggestions for the Future of Exhibiting

### 1. Reduce duplication of information

*Standardize forms, requirements, measurement and reporting so exhibit managers can focus on the customer rather than the process.*

### 2. Re-examine roles

*As a nexus of strategy and logistics, the exhibit manager's role must be redefined to emphasize the customer and the brand experience.*

### 3. Standardize ROO and ROI

*Program success needs to be based on standardized ROO/ROI. Budget should not be the highest-weighted criteria for success.*

### 4. Create an environment for collaboration

*Exhibit suppliers, show organizers and general contractors must be technology savvy to support exhibit managers strategy, logistics and reporting.*

The responses revealed that every challenge and future look cited in this study has been repeated multiple times over the past ten years. Technology has indeed increased the accessibility and ability for quicker turnarounds and responses, but it has not erased the problem of no standardized forms and vehicles for exhibit planning.

The results suggest that the trade show and exhibit industry must resolve the time devoted to repeatable details, streamline communications among exhibitors, organizers and suppliers, and acknowledge the value exhibit planners bring to face-to-face marketing.

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#### ABOUT MC<sup>2</sup>

*MC<sup>2</sup> is a nationally recognized leader in the exhibit and event marketing industry. The company specializes in trade show booth design and production as well as the management of integrated marketing programs including events, exhibits, permanent and mobile environments and executive briefing centers. Headquartered in Chestnut Ridge, NY, MC<sup>2</sup> has 11 locations throughout the United States and alliances around the world to serve such customers as Canon USA, Samsung Electronics, The Hershey Company, Cisco Systems, and Rubbermaid. MC2Talks blog <http://MC2Talks.mc-2.com/> • MC2 on Twitter @MC2\_Exhibits and @MC2\_FastTrak • MC2Exhibits on Facebook.*