

10 Main Players In The Trade Show Ecosystem

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The trade show world is a large and complex ecosystem, so it took me far too many years to understand the many players involved in putting together a single show. Just when I thought I'd figured it out, someone would peel the next layer of the onion and reveal another big player. Why should you wait? Here are the top 10:

- 1. Attendees** Over 80 million attendees a year visit US trade shows, with tens of millions more in Europe, Asia and Latin America, too. Attendees come to trade shows to see and touch new products, network and build relationships with their industry peers, get training, keep up-to-date with changing industry trends, and evaluate multiple suppliers at one time. And perhaps to even have some fun, too.
- 2. Exhibitors** There are anywhere from 300,000 to 1.7 million companies who exhibit at roughly 13,000 US trade shows. Exhibitors invest thousands of dollars to get access to trade show attendees so they can generate sales leads, deepen relationships, and build their brand. About half the shows host business-to-business exhibitors, with the rest split between business-to-consumer exhibitors and hybrid shows. On the B2B side, they spend almost 30% of business-to-business marketing dollars to reach those millions of attendees. Most exhibitors are manufacturers who exhibit to show the stuff they make. On average there are about 400 exhibitors at a trade show. About two-thirds take the minimal 10 x 10 space. Only about 20% of exhibitors get an island exhibit, although at major trade shows with highly competitive exhibitors that ratio can increase. Exhibitors spend anywhere from \$5 to \$50 a square foot, but usually about \$20. Some exhibitors also spend a hefty sum on sponsorships, too.
- 3. Show Producers** is an industry term for the show owner. About 40 years ago the vast majority of trade shows were produced by associations, which depended on their annual trade show to bring in most of their revenue. For-profit media companies figured out how much money they could make owning shows, and now they own almost half of them. While most associations have just one show, media companies often own multiple shows, and also own a magazine, website, e-newsletter, and database for the same industry as the show. Recently these media companies (some multi-billion dollar companies) have seen their biggest chunk of revenues shift to come from their trade shows instead of their magazines. Many exhibitors don't know that their favorite show is actually owned by another company they've never heard of, and that it owns other shows. Some shows are produced as a

partnership between an association and a for-profit media company. The best show producers are constantly trying to top their previous show and are evolving their events in response to the changes in their industry.

4. Show Contractors and Labor It can come as a surprise to find out that the show owner doesn't actually have their own employees do all the work of setting up their trade show. The show producer hires a show contractor to perform and manage the labor. Freeman is the #1 show contractor, GES is #2, and then it's a long way to 3rd place. The general contractor controls much of the show labor as the official contractor. There are also Exhibitor Appointed Contractors, who are labor providers that are not the official contractor picked by the show, who can also provide installation and dismantle and other show labor. In some show cities (Las Vegas) the show labor is unionized, and in others (Atlanta) are in a Right To Work State, which means show labor is not required to be unionized. The show contractor controls material handling, also known as drayage, also known as Pain #1 for trade show exhibitors.

5. Visitors and Convention Bureaus They work hard to woo show producers to pick their city for their exhibition, and then help the show producer plan a successful event with their deep understanding of locations and attractions in their city. Visitors and Convention Bureaus can be at the country, state, county, or city level. (You think it's hard to brand a company? Try branding a country.) Their name is often abbreviated to VCB, and is also called Destination Marketing, and Tourism boards. The VCBs' goal is to entice large groups of visitors who will spend wads of money in their towns, boosting the local economy and paying taxes on hotel rooms. They often struggle to explain to their local tax-paying citizens that their budget is not an expense, but an investment. The VCBs from Las Vegas, Chicago, and Orlando have the most to crow about: Half the largest shows in the country take place in just those 3 cities.

6. Convention Centers These are the enormous show halls with acres and acres of bare concrete that regularly blossom into thriving trade shows. These temples of temporary commerce are all over the country, built by communities to bring in outside convention and tourist money. The biggest convention centers in the USA are McCormick Place in Chicago, The Orange County Convention Center in Orlando, and The Las Vegas Convention Center in Las Vegas. In Europe and especially Germany, the city is the show producer, convention center owner, VCB, and even the general contractor all rolled up into one, which takes out the middlemen and reduces costs. There are 7 convention centers in Europe bigger than McCormick Place.

7. Hotels Almost all shows select an official hotel, with a room block set aside for attendees and exhibitors at a discount rate (although lately with internet search sites, attendees can get lower priced rooms than available from the official show room block). Lucky is the anchor hotel that is tied to a popular convention center. Hotels are trade show venues in their own right, with their own meeting spaces that host hundreds, if not thousands of smaller shows a year. An exceptional example is Mandalay Bay in Las Vegas, a huge hotel with 3300 rooms, AND its own nearly million-square foot exhibit hall. Hotels are usually described as part of the Hospitality Industry.

8. Advertising, Marketing and Public Relations Agencies Not all ad agencies want to make TV ads for Frosted Flakes that run during the Super Bowl. There are many agencies more than happy to serve B2B companies. Some can become experts in their own right for an industry, even a specific show. As trade shows are such a major marketing expense for B2B exhibitors, getting their agencies involved is essential

for truly integrated marketing. Exhibitors can ask for as little help as providing an image file for a banner stand, or become so involved as to help determine exhibiting strategy, pre- and at-show promotions, and exhibit design.

9. Suppliers: These are the vendors that provide all the other services exhibitors and attendees need. Exhibit houses like Skyline not only provide trade show displays, they also act as their outsource trade show marketing department, providing turnkey exhibit management, design and more. The best ones act as an agency for their clients. There are also suppliers for shipping, carpet, electric, lighting, furniture, audiovisual, airlines, cleaning, photography, promotional products, training, lead management, and more.

10. Speakers If Content is King on the Internet, then speakers are the kings (and queens) of content at trade shows. Good speakers pull in droves of attendees who want to increase their skills, learn the latest industry trends, and see (and [touch](#)) a celebrity in person they would never glimpse otherwise. Educational speakers are usually pulled from the ranks of successful (and brave) show attendees, exhibitors, and industry experts. Then there are the speakers who recently graced the front pages of the newspapers, and are happily transforming their celebrity into wealth, one speech at a time. Beyond them are those extroverts of extroverts, the professional speakers, who roam from convention to convention to provide motivation, humor, entertainment and sheer star power.

So now you know the 10 main players in the trade show ecosystem. I hope it helps you see things from a new perspective. Let me know your take on your own part of the trade show world in the comments box below. Or if you think I missed another layer of the onion, go ahead and peel it away — I promise not to cry.