



# TRADE SHOWS:

## Evolving Along the Road to Recovery

By Lisa Plummer

If this recession has proven anything to the events industry, it's that trade shows are far from bullet-proof. In a business climate that continues to be challenging, show organizers are working harder than ever to produce relevant events packed with value—or risk losing audiences. Gone are the days when tire-kickers aimlessly roamed the trade-show aisles or used an event as an excuse for a vacation. Today's trade-show participants are serious, strategic, time-restricted and selective about the shows they patronize, and according to many industry experts, that shift is no passing trend.



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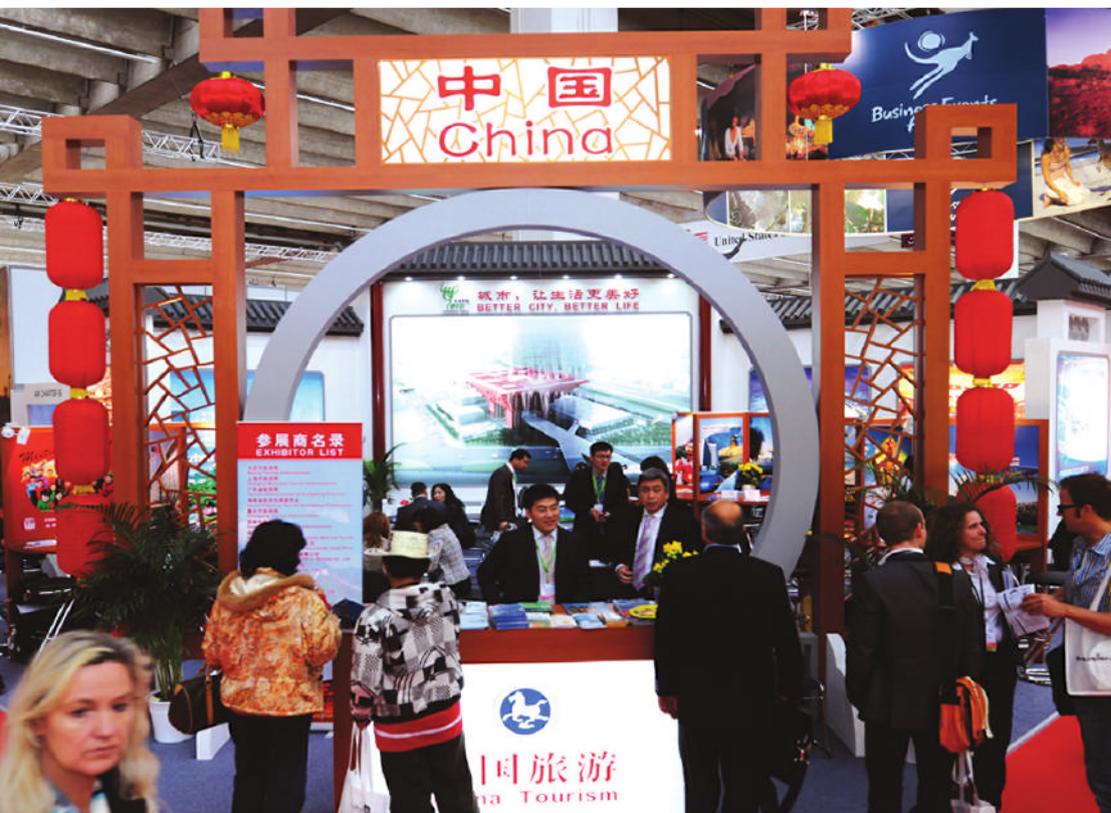
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Left, China Tourism booth at IMEX, Frankfurt; right, touch-screen survey at the World Expo in Shanghai.

According to Steven Hacker, president of the International Association of Exhibitions and Events, there definitely has been a rising sea of change in thinking and attitudes within the trade show and events industry.

“You’re not going to find anybody who’s complacent in our industry, especially about finances in the future,” Hacker says. “Everybody is pedaling as hard as possible to come up with innovation and creative solutions for a lot of different issues, so that’s a good thing. That also ushers in another major trend: the continuing search for greater value to deliver to exhibitors and attendees. It’s a very specific search that involves all kinds of things, like matchmaking technology, enhancements and making the experience of an exhibition more comfortable and more productive. All those things are in high gear right now.”

As the saying goes, necessity is the mother of invention, and never has that been truer for the trade-show industry. Although it hasn’t been an easy year for many shows, 2010 has witnessed an exciting time of innovation, including advances in technology to help streamline, improve and increase the value of the trade-show experience; a bigger focus on buyer-centric events geared to enhance exhibitor and attendee ROI; a stronger adoption of social media and virtual platforms; and steady progress in the environmental movement.

## THE TECHNOLOGY BOOM >>>>>

Ask industry experts what they believe is the biggest trend in trade shows right now, and the response is universal: the explosion of technology. According to Michelle Bruno, president of Bruno Group Signature Events and event industry writer/blogger for Trade Show News Network, the recent boom in digital, social and virtual media is due to a perfect storm of the economic recession, technological advances and the environmental movement, which all came upon the industry simultaneously.

“Before, people talked about the green movement but, really, nobody did anything about it. Before, we were riding pretty high economically, so nobody had to get experimental and try new things, and, before, you never had this zenith of Web 2.0 technologies that got easy and self-service enough that the masses could try them,” Bruno says. “Now we have all three. They’ve all hit in the past two years, and it’s caused this massive interest and movement in social media, mobile applications, and virtual and hybrid types of platforms.”

One of the biggest booms has been in event-related mobile applications, Bruno says. Whether offered by a show or accessed independently, there are now nearly 50 apps that allow exhibitors and attendees to access a host of information and services from their mobile devices, including show websites, exhibitor directories, show floor plans, conference

schedules, virtual trade shows, webinars, social networking, buyer-and-seller matchmaking, and real-time event updates—before, during and after a trade show.

“No more carrying around a big directory, no more highlighter pen to figure out where you’re going or how you’re going to connect with people at the event; it’s all there, in the palm of your hand,” Bruno says. “[Mobile apps] are really taking off, and I believe they will continue to do so.”

High-tech innovations are also transforming the modern exhibit into a more fun and compelling experience. By integrating new technology into booth environments—including video monitors, touch screens, iPads and hand-held wireless devices; plasma and flat-screen TVs; and state-of-the-art lighting technologies—a traditional exhibit can transform into an entertaining, educational and comprehensive marketing tool. Rather than

relying on booth staff, audiovisual or just graphics, attendees can gather information using such integrated features as hand-held devices, video kiosks, interactive displays and small theaters with virtual or live presenters. This allows attendees to navigate the space and get the information they want quickly and independently, without having to interact with booth staff.

These eye-catching environments are fun for attendees, yet provide a host of built-in benefits for the exhibitor. Not only do interactives help generate more booth buzz, they allow companies to strategically collect, monitor and measure booth and attendee data through integrated computer programs. And although experiential exhibits are nothing new, recent technological advancements have taken their sophistication to a whole new level, according to Errol Ahearn, executive creative director for Global Experience Specialists, an exhibition and event services company.

“Things like the iPad are totally revolutionizing how interactives are being used on the trade-show floor and in live events,” Ahearn says. “It’s something different...it’s about a tease, creating something visually appealing that’s going to get [attendees] off their path and into your environment. You can create one medium of content and either rent the technology or use limited amounts of technology based on your budget.”

## THE SOCIAL MOVEMENT >>>>>>

Unless you’ve been hiding under a rock the past couple of years, you’ve noticed how social media has evolved from a trend into a growing fixture in the events landscape, with more shows, exhibitors and attendees jumping on the Web 2.0 bandwagon this past year. It’s almost become a given that any major trade show will have a social media presence on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and YouTube. Besides posting updated show information and content to generate buzz pre-, during and post-event, show organizers are leveraging these cost-effective communication platforms to develop relationships with their audiences, extend the life of their events, and be an exhibitor’s and buyer’s resource 365 days a year. So now that pretty much everyone is doing it, is this trend really here to stay?

“These platforms may or may not change, evolve and stay around, but social media is not a trend, it’s a movement,” Bruno says. “It’s this whole different way of communicating, collaborating and sharing ideas that will only get larger. Once the Pandora’s Box is opened and [people] see how much they can take advantage of this new mindset and this new collaboration of tools, it’ll just keep growing and move onto bigger and better things.”

Besides helping make connections in the virtual space, social media is increasingly bringing people

together face-to-face. Live, impromptu gatherings such as tweetups and other physical networking opportunities are becoming more and more commonplace during physical trade shows and events,

or product around a particular group and be the sponsor of that particular event. Show organizers are encouraging it because it provides more energy to the marketplace...you’re not tied down to the

## Once seen as a potential threat to face-to-face, virtual and hybrid events are emerging as valuable tools in the show organizer’s arsenal.

says Chris Meyer, vice president of sales, Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority.

“There seems to be a lot more networking opportunities at the marketplaces themselves, and I think that is born out of things like flash mobs, tweetups and some of the social networking tools we’re using,” Meyer says. “What the marketplaces are providing are safe havens for people to do that. That’s also providing marketing opportunities for exhibitors, who can structure their service

regular, tried-and-true networking reception that you would see at a lot of industry events.”

## VIRTUAL EVENTS >>>>>>

Once seen as a potential threat to face-to-face, virtual and hybrid events are emerging as valuable tools in the show organizer’s arsenal. Besides costing less to participate in, virtual events enable shows to reach a wider audience of individuals who are unable to attend live shows due to slashed travel



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budgets and time constraints. From the comfort of their home or office, participants can attend educational sessions and keynotes, “walk” the virtual trade show floor, gather product information, visit virtual lounges for networking opportunities and even see what’s happening at the show in real time through streaming video. Once virtual attendees see what they’re missing, they may be inspired to attend the next face-to-face event in person.

As a company that has integrated virtual platforms into many of its trade shows, user conferences and proprietary events over the past two years, Cisco is an exhibiting company that has fully embraced the hybrid movement. Although the company went mostly virtual during 2009 in reaction to the recession, Cisco’s strategy now includes a healthy face-to-face presence augmented by strong hybrid and virtual platforms, says Mary O’Neil, Cisco’s senior manager of industry events.

“The economy dive hit at pretty much the same time as this technology came up to speed, so there was this frenzy about doing everything virtually,” O’Neil says. “Now we’re getting to a much more practical application of virtual as a strategic arm when it makes sense. We need the face-to-face component. Our customers want to see, touch, feel and hear, and that’s not going away. Virtual is becoming a much more rational part of our strategy to reach the largest audience possible and not just as a replacement for live events.”

Meeting Planners International has also recently jumped onto the virtual bandwagon. This past year, the association adopted hybrid models for both its World Education Conference and MeetDifferent events. “More and more consumers globally are finding content online and accessing educational programming either for personal or professional use,” says Theresa Davis, MPI director of strategic communications. “There’s no question [hybrid events are] a trend. The bigger question is when they will stop being a trend and start becoming an expected standard in the future of meetings. Today, it’s an absolute must-have for any large-scale event unless you want to seem antiquated.”

## HOSTED BUYER AND PROPRIETARY EVENTS >>>>>

It’s not enough anymore for shows to just fill their exhibition halls with throngs of attendees. To be successful in this demanding business climate, shows must go the extra mile to make their exhibitors happy, and that means giving them the most value possible for their trade-show spend. To help create a more targeted buying and selling environment, more events are adopting hosted buyer pro-

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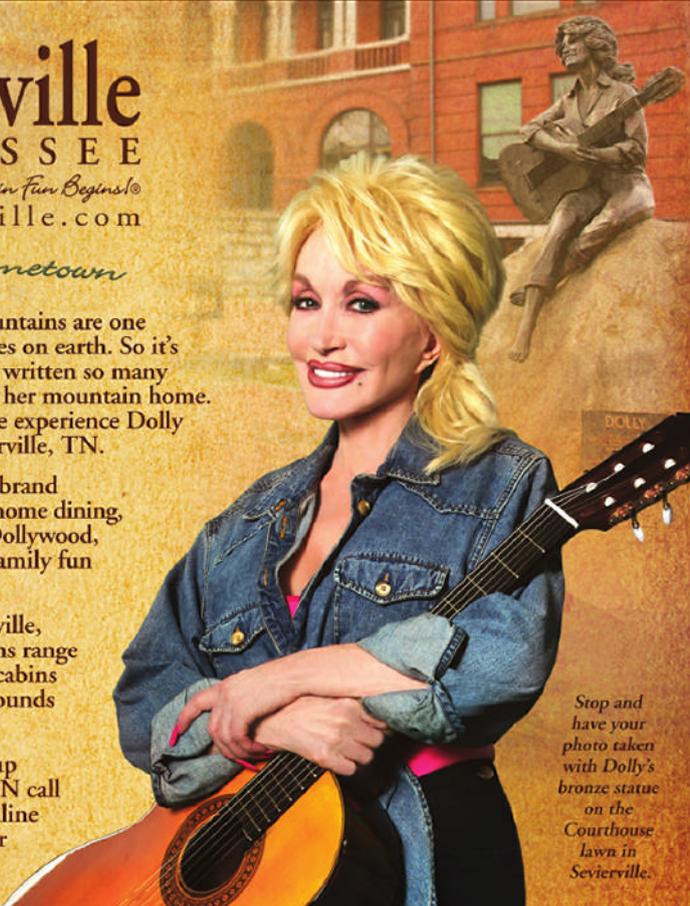
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grams, a decade-old European model that shows signs of being an emerging trend in the U.S.

With their flights and accommodations paid for by the show, buyers are matched with suppliers and are expected to attend a required number of pre-set, private appointments with exhibiting companies. While some programs are conducted during a trade show, others are held as independent events, such as TSEA's Face-to-Face Connections, launched earlier this year by the Trade Show Exhibitors Association. According to David Brull, TSEA vice president of marketing and membership, hosted buyer programs are another great value-added supplement to face-to-face events. "For

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**Chris Meyer, Las Vegas CVA**

certain kinds of buyers, they are a great main staple for sorting new products and services," he says.

As some events and associations, such as TSEA, experiment with smaller-scale hosted buyer programs, others are taking this format to another level. As a new international exhibition and conference for the incentive travel, meetings and events industry, IMEX America will bring one of the first major hosted buyer programs to the U.S., boasting 2,000 participants. Set to launch at the Sands Expo Convention Center and Venetian/Palazzo in Las Vegas, Oct. 11-13, 2011, the event is intended to be a U.S. version of IMEX Group's IMEX Frankfurt, with its robust, tried-and-true 4,000-person hosted buyer program.

"I've always felt that there was a need in the U.S. market for a show with a major hosted buyer program, which guarantees the quantity and quality of attendees," says Ray Bloom, IMEX chairman. "Here we have a major program that's also encompassing all sectors of the market, not just the corporate sector but also the association sector. IMEX America will deliver the largest-scale hosted-buyer



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While shows are introducing these kinds of programs to attract and retain exhibitors, exhibiting companies are also finding value in hosting proprietary events to entertain clients and create a fo-

proprietary events, while lessening their presence at trade shows. And although this choice may only be appropriate for some companies, does this shift signal the beginning of the end for exhibitor trade show participation?

“For certain organizations and for certain kinds of product mixes, proprietary events are very suc-

I believe that more and more companies are using proprietary events in their mix...and certainly they're contenders for their marketing dollars.”

## GREENER AND GREENER >>>>>

As an increasing number of shows and companies adopt and integrate environmental practices into their events, greening is transitioning from unique to mainstream. Although show organizers are tending to shy away from green practices that cost more green, the environmental movement continues to progress across the industry, especially in areas of cost-savings such as energy efficiency and waste reduction during events. Besides using green practices to save dollars, carbon awareness and reduction appears to be a growing area of focus, according to Shawna McKinley, director of sustainability for MeetGreen.

“Our clients are becoming more and more interested in the potential for carbon and emissions regulation, so right now they're at the point of starting to understand how that affects their meetings,” she says. “Events themselves may not be growing, but the interest in greening and being able to understand and measure it is. I think the big thing that's driving it is this focus on measurement and ROI, specifically the cost elements. People are seeing more and more that there are cost-savings opportunities.”

And shortly, more people will be able to get aboard the green movement with the guidance of a comprehensive industry standard that will help define and establish best practices for green events. The long-awaited APEX Green Meetings and Event Standard is the result of a two-year joint partnership between the Convention Industry Council's Accepted Practices Exchange commission, the Green Meetings Industry Council, the United States Environmental Protection Agency and the American Society for Testing and Materials, as well as hundreds of industry professionals. Due to be released to the industry this month, the voluntary standard will cover nine areas of the meetings and events planning process, including accommodations; audio visual and production; communications and marketing; destinations; exhibits; food and beverage; meeting venues; on-site offices; and transportation.

## LOOKING AHEAD >>>>>

Like a phoenix rising from the ashes, the trade-show industry is emerging from economic turmoil more focused, strategic and innovative. Although shows may still have to work just as hard to attract audiences going forward, with exhibitors and attendees likely to remain cost-conscious, discerning and ROI-obsessed well into the future, the face-to-face event industry has proved once again that it is resilient and willing to do what it takes to survive. As value-added innovations, trends and movements become more entrenched in the customer-

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ocused buying environment independent of a trade show. Although these kinds of activities are nothing new, companies such as Cisco have found it more productive and cost-effective to host more targeted

cessful,” says Jeff Quade, executive vice president and chief sales officer of exhibitions for GES. “Do I believe there's a land rush on proprietary events at the expense of traditional trade shows? No, but

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GES pod chair set-up at a medical industry conference.

centric business climate, shows and companies that embrace and adapt to these changes will only be better prepared for success as they move forward into an age of economic recovery.

“Clearly, the economic turmoil of the past two years has focused greater attention on the value and ROI of participating in trade shows and events,” says Chet Burchett, president of Reed Exhibitions Americas. “This has been a good thing for organizers who are customer-focused and who have been willing to invest in customer value even in a recessionary environment. Put another way, many of the tendencies or behavioral shifts that were observed broadly during the downturn—tighter travel budgets, decreased attendance numbers, shorter decision cycles—have been or can be offset by increased value and compelling reasons for participation.” 

*Lisa Plummer is a business, pet and travel writer based in Las Vegas. She frequently writes about the meetings and convention industry.*



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