5 Tech Innovations Driving the Fastest-Growing Trade Shows

How the Fastest-Growing Trade Shows Increase Attendance and Decrease Costs by Double Digits

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For many trade shows, growth is linked to technology innovation. While some shows luck out for a time by landing in industries that continue to grow whether organizers innovate or not, those that take technology seriously are often rewarded with growth.

Event technology can help increase event attendance 20%, increase productivity 27%, and decrease costs 20-30%.

For those [event organizers] using mobile apps, the benefits present a compelling early case study. Findings include:

- Attendance engagement increases by 33 percent
- Sponsorship sales increase by 13 percent
- Printing costs decrease by 7 percent

Technology innovation in the exhibition industry is largely understood as process and workflow automation, i.e. using software-based solutions (and sometimes their hardware counterparts) to accelerate, scale, streamline, and economize tasks, and in some cases, deliver insights, efficiencies, and improved decision-making.

The adoption of technology has become a common theme in the trade show industry. In many cases, technology has lowered costs. Not even five years ago, printed directories were a mainstay at every exhibition. Today, the numbers of printed catalogs are dwindling, digital versions delivered via mobile apps are ascending, and cost savings (that enable investment elsewhere in the show) is mounting.

The Fastest-Growing Trade Shows share some common traits. While the list is diverse—it includes shows from the “hot” industries like consumer electronics

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1 http://blog.eventfarm.com/blog/35-statistics-that-every-event-marketer-should-know
and solar power alongside the recession survivors of home building and roofing—members of the 50 Fastest-growing Shows in the U.S. have all posted increased attendance between 9% and 36% or increased net square footage between 7% and 37%.³

Among the fastest-growing shows, innovation is a strong influence. “The growth rate of each show has so many different factors. Sometimes, it is the overall industry that is going through a growth spurt. Other times, it’s really effective attendee-marketing and exhibitor-marketing programs. There are also shows that have branched into new sectors. Innovation always plays a key role in continued growth, even for shows that have well-honed marketing programs,” explains Rachel Wimberly, president and editor-in-chief, Trade Show News Network, publisher of the Top 50 Fastest-Growing Shows in the United States list.

What happens to trade shows that don’t innovate with technology? Horse-drawn carriages, print newspapers, encyclopedias, and video stores provide some clues. But the reality is that stakeholder expectations have changed. Attendees want personalization and easy-to-navigate experiences. Exhibitors want audience penetration and return on investment—62% of exhibitors use ROI metrics to evaluate their trade show participation.⁴ Sponsors want exposure.

Technology innovation can give stakeholders what they want. Many of the trade show organizers that find themselves in the group of fastest-growing shows adopt strategies that include the continuous testing, refining, and evaluating of technology. Here are five organizations deeply committed to technology innovation and how they are using it to grow, change, and analyze their events.

**SEPARATING THE SIGNAL FROM THE NOISE OF BEACON TECHNOLOGY**

Two shows from The National Retail Federation (NRF) have made TSNN’s list of The Top 50 Fastest-growing Shows: Retail’s BIG Show 2015 and Shop.org Digital Summit 2015. Over the past year, show organizers have deployed Bluetooth-beacon technology at several events. As they continue testing different configurations (mobile apps vs. wearables), they are learning about the potential of beacon technology to understand

³TSNN ranks the top 25 fastest-growing shows in attendance and top 25 in net square footage based on a compound annual growth rate from 2013-2015.

attendee behavior and impact exhibitor lead retrieval and the attendee experience.

In a mobile-app use case, which is how NRF has used the technology up to the present, beacons transmit signals to an attendee’s smartphone. When a user comes into proximity of a beacon, as long as he has downloaded the mobile app to his smartphone and turned on Bluetooth, the app recognizes the beacon signal and enables some specific capabilities. The app can deliver content (coupons, video, audio, PDF brochures) to the device, provide users with turn-by-turn navigation, and collect attendee behavioral data (date, time, location, and duration of each visit to a beacon-enabled area) for show management.

So far, NRF has purposely avoided creating an environment where attendees are inundated with messages from exhibitors. Instead, it has opted to use the content-delivery capabilities (via push notifications) of its beacon-enabled mobile app to provide information about show management areas throughout the building and prompt attendees to complete conference-session evaluations. Show managers have also focused on gaining attendee behavioral insights by observing their movements across the events.

*Retail’s BIG Show* in 2016 provided the best representation of the performance of beacon-enabled mobile app technology across multiple shows:

- 3,500 attendees (approximately 10%) used the beacon capabilities of the mobile app, although not being able to determine the identity of the users made it a challenge to gain deep attendee insights, show managers say.

- The beacon-enabled app contributed to a higher rate of return on evaluations than in previous years (a charitable incentive was also used to encourage completion of evaluations through the app).

- Usage of the app was high enough to generate heat maps, which the NRF team used to observe attendee traffic flow patterns.

NRF remains committed to evolving beacon technology within its events. In 2017, show management will implement wearable beacons, which are small transmitters...
adhered to attendee badge holders (providing near 100% adoption). With wearables, each badge is associated with the individual’s registration data during check-in. Receivers, placed in booths and conference areas, capture the beacon signal as the wearer moves throughout the event. While content delivery to attendees isn’t an option with wearable beacons alone, wearables can potentially deliver better behavioral data from more attendees than beacon-enabled mobile apps.

“I believe wearable beacons have tremendous potential for show management to understand attendees at a deep level and offer huge possibilities from an exhibitor’s standpoint to learn who is spending time in the booth that they may or may not have captured using lead retrieval devices. We are three to six months away from being able to personalize a show for attendees as they experience it, but also being able to better plan future shows based on what attendees are investing their time in and learning about,” says Mark Bogdansky, vice president, exhibit operations, National Retail Federation.

Also on the list of fastest-growing shows, due to its surge in 2015 attendance, is Expo! Expo!, the annual trade show and conference produced by the International Association for Exhibitions and Events (IAEE). The association implemented a hosted buyer program to pair exhibitors with pre-qualified attendees based on their mutual profiles. Matchmaking software made it easier for organizers to manage the program, but it also helped IAEE place face-to-face interaction under a microscope.

IAEE offered free conference registration to attendees who met very specific criteria: decision-makers (planning to go out for RFPs over the next three years), buyers absent from the show for three years, or new members. Hosted buyers were given access to a purpose-built matchmaking application that provided them with suggestions based on a cross-referencing of their buying profiles with exhibitor product listings. It also allowed participants to view exhibitor schedules and set appointments. Exhibitors could report “no shows” as well.

“Matchmaking software simplified the introduction and re-introduction of qualified buyers to our show.”
Scott Craighead, vice-president, exhibitions & events at IAEE

FACILITATING ROI FOR EXHIBITORS WITH HOSTED-BUYER MATCHMAKING SOFTWARE

Wearable beacons, placed on an attendee badge, transmit radio signals to beacon readers placed in exhibitor booths and conference rooms. The readers send information about the location, time, and date of the signal to the cloud where it is processed by software that issues reports accessible to attendees and event organizers.

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Hosted buyer matchmaking technology delivered more value to the show than simply guaranteed engagement. It helped to drive new attendees to the show floor and disperse them to all parts of the trade show—a bonus for new-to-market and small companies without the resources for large-scale, pre-show marketing campaigns. It also provided show management with critical data on a cross section of the attendee population—information IAEE intends to use in a post-show survey of participants in an attempt to piece together a more accurate picture of attendee and exhibitor return on investment.

“The software’s capabilities meant a lot to our show and our organization. It represented the first time we’ve been able to offer exhibitors a tool for attendee outreach. It also simplified the introduction and re-introduction of qualified buyers to our show. While exhibitors have certainly done their own research and scheduled appointments before and during the show in the past, this technology gave us complete visibility into the process and its effectiveness,” says Scott Craighead, vice-president, exhibitions & events at IAEE.

Technology performs the tasks, but data tells the story. Reports from the matchmaking platform that IAEE used delivered the following results:

- Hosted buyer participants: 66
- Total hosted buyer appointments: 673
- Average hosted buyer appointments per supplier: 9

VALIDATING EXHIBITOR OPPORTUNITIES USING HEAT MAPPING

The Healthcare Information and Management Systems Society (HIMSS) is consistently listed in the top 100 trade shows in North America as well as top 50 fastest-growing trade shows annually in the U.S. HIMSS15, the group’s annual trade show and conference, appeared on the latter list again this year, and although it is known for its use of a wide variety of technologies, it selected heat mapping for its 2016 event to give show managers an understanding of attendee traffic flow and validate decisions it has made on show-floor layout and exhibitor pricing.

To create heat maps, HIMSS placed receivers (small, 6” x 3” boxes) approximately every 60 feet throughout the show floor and in some meeting rooms where target audience exhibits were being staged. The receivers tracked the cellular signals emitted by attendees’ mobile devices over the three-day event. Reports backed out the signals from exhibitor devices, and show managers took into consideration
that 20 percent of their attendee population carries multiple cellular devices. The maps were able to depict where attendees entered the show floor, how long they remained in each zone, and how they flowed from place to place throughout the exhibit and meeting space.

HIMSS’ planners weren’t as interested this year in who the attendees being observed were, but rather how traffic in general flowed, how many people exhibited similar behaviors and for how long. Their intent was to determine the optimal floor plan layout and to gather data that supported tiered pricing for exhibit space and the mandated locations for anchor exhibitors. By using heat-mapping technology, HIMSS was able to have clear, transparent discussions with their key exhibitors about why some locations were more costly to occupy than others and why some decisions

“...heat maps will transform the way we lay out our show floor and where we locate our educational sessions, make our attendees more productive, help us to maximize our square footage, and impact our tiered-pricing model.”

Elli Riley, senior director, exhibits and meeting services, HIMSS

Heat maps are visualizations of attendee behavior—where and when they move across a trade show floor or within a meeting space—that help event organizers understand and contextualize attendee traffic flow.
about location made sense from an attendee-traffic perspective.

Using heat maps, the HIMSS team received answers to the questions it endeavored to ask: How many people are actually on the show floor at any given time during the day? How long did any individual stay on the show floor? How long did the majority of attendees being monitored stay on the show floor? Which direction did individuals walk after they left a specific location? Which entrances were the most highly trafficked? Which areas of the show floor were the most poorly trafficked? How does a specific floor plan in a specific venue perform?

“We are a healthcare technology association. Our goal is not only to highlight the technology our vendors bring to the industry, but also to provide our vendors and attendees with data from cutting-edge technology. What we learned through heat maps will transform the way we lay out our show floor and where we locate our specialty pavilions/anchor exhibitors, make our attendees more productive, help us to maximize our square footage, and impact our tiered-pricing model. By sharing the key data with some of our Fortune 500 customers, we are able to help them determine their ROI. When they have the best return on investment, we have the best return on investment," explains Elli Riley, senior director, exhibits and meeting services, HIMSS.

CHANGING THE WORLD WITH PARTNERING SOFTWARE

Among trade show organizers, there are few that can associate—even if it’s only anecdotally—the use of event technology with major scientific breakthroughs in healthcare. The Biotechnology Innovation Organization (BIO) can make that connection. It also has, coincidentally, one of the fastest-growing audiences at its BIO International Convention. The association’s custom-built partnering software, which matches biotechnology researchers and developers with companies that can take their ideas to market, is the main driver of the event’s growth.

In the field of biotechnology, researchers, many of whom work for small biotech firms, do the difficult work of searching for scientific breakthroughs. Established companies in healthcare, agriculture, chemicals, and manufacturing strike deals with these firms to license their research and take it through the rigorous process of testing and approval to market. BIO’s international conference is a forum for bringing biotech firms and established companies face to face. They do so within the traditional environment of a trade show and also through the event’s Business Forum—scheduled meetings in assigned meeting spaces away from the show floor.

BIO has built what it refers to as a “partnering” software platform to maximize the number of meetings (between companies, not individuals) and minimize the distance between the meetings. The platform manages the time and place of the meeting (each meeting location is uniquely identified), the schedules and availability
of participants, meeting requests, descriptions of biotech offerings, searches by established companies for biotech offerings, priorities (whether it's more important for the participant to attend a meeting, pre-scheduled programming, or a personal event), messages between participants, incoming and outgoing meeting histories, cancellations, and options in the event of a meeting cancellation.

The partnering platform, which also works on mobile devices, is built on a customer relationship management (CRM) system so that established companies can view the biotech offerings prior to the convention and determine which of the company's representatives are best suited to attend the meeting during BIO. It also allows them to determine in advance if any of the research offered by a biotech that has requested a meeting is of interest. The CRM-based platform tracks documents, emails, and communications that have been exchanged between firms and can be used to manage deals related to BIO events (at no charge) or deals outside of BIO events (for a fee).

The meetings are the event at BIO. Here's why: drug researchers have between a one-in-5,000 and one-in-10,000 chance to get through the testing and regulatory process required to get a drug to market and it can cost over a billion dollars. Pharmaceutical companies, one of the main licensees of biotech research, don't have the in-house research staff to maintain a full product pipeline. They and others rely heavily on partnering conferences. BIO's partnering platform helps ensure that the optimal number of partnering meetings can be held during its convention—a critical capability since convention managers estimate that only one out of 150 meetings make it to the deal stage.

BIO managers follow multiple metrics to determine the effectiveness of the partnering platform, such as number of meetings in the Business Forum vs. exhibit floor, average number of meetings per person, average number of meetings per company, average length of time for back-to-back meetings, number of back-to-back meetings held in the same location, and length of time it takes for an individual to transfer from one location to the next. In 2016, the platform facilitated nearly 36,000 meetings, up from the approximately 29,000 that took place in 2014 and 2015. About 6,500 attendees and 1,500 non-attendees had access to the platform, which also managed 7,500 meetings on the trade show floor.

“We know that partnering deals come from partnering conferences. One industry source found that 35% of deals come from partnering conferences, and 50% of successful deals come from partnering conferences. The BIO convention is the largest partnering conference. The reason our system works so well is that there is no other conference where the number of formal, scheduled, private, face-to-face
meetings is as high. Because of that, BIO grew its active partnering attendance nearly 20% between 2015 and 2016," says Sougato Das, director, partnering & business development at Biotechnology Industry Organization.

GETTING MORE ATTENDEE DATA MORE EASILY USING NEAR-FIELD COMMUNICATION

NFC is a short-range radio-frequency technology. An NFC chip is embedded in the attendee’s badge and associated with his identity during onsite check-in. As the attendee moves through the trade show or conference, he taps a reader (an Android phone or tablet or another NFC-enabled device) that records his contact information. Compared to badge scanners, NFC is a much faster way for attendees to share their data. Using one technology at all of the attendee touch points during the event gives organizers a holistic view of the attendee journey. Post-show reports provide attendees with a snapshot of their participation.

“We’ve spent a great deal of time and money consolidating all of the information about our members. It’s a very robust process putting all of the information together and it is very important to us to understand how a person is engaged with NACS.” --Matt Morris, director, computer & network operations, NACS

While overall attendance at BIO has steadily increased (some 20% between 2015 and 2016), the number of attendees using the partnering program (there is an additional fee for participation) has increased approximately 48% between 2010 and 2014.
The National Association of Convenience Stores’ 2015 NACS Show is on the list of the 50 fastest-growing trade shows because of its growth in attendance. Show managers use near-field communication (NFC) technology to provide attendees with a consistent, simple way to track their actions throughout the event; share their contact information with exhibitors (a capability used in 2015); check into educational sessions (planned for the 2016 show); and, potentially (in 2017), request information from exhibitors in the “Cool New Products” area (a tradeshow within a tradeshow). They are betting on NFC to help them enhance the attendee experience and gather more attendee data.

Making it as easy as possible for attendees to provide information and increasing the speed with which information can be delivered (with a swipe or a tap versus a scanner) means that NACS organizers can collect more relevant business intelligence. The information they will be reviewing (for example, which presentations and topics were more popular, which sessions attendees signed up for but didn’t attend, which presentations participants attended but didn’t sign up for) will help them make decisions about programming, marketing, room capacities, and product sales.

“The only way we can grow the event is by increasing the number of buyers at the show. With the use of NFC at the NACS Show, we’ll be able to get more data across more platforms without a lot of effort from the customer and use it to segment marketing and personalize experiences.”

--Amy Ashley-Burke, director, meetings & convention services, NACS

The NACS team looks at a number of metrics to evaluate NFC technology. On the exhibits side, there has been no appreciable change in the average number of lead scans received per exhibitor (around 95) in 2012, 2013, and in 2015 (the only year that NFC has been used for that purpose) or in the number of exhibitors renting lead-scanning equipment. However, what they have learned from using NFC for lead retrieval is that the reduced amount of time (a few seconds) will likely make a big difference when it’s used to check people into a conference session and move through a special area of focus related to the show.

CONCLUSION

Not every technology performs perfectly from the beginning. Often, trade show organizers have to mold it into shape or decide that the technology they’re using isn’t meeting the objectives they’ve set and move on. Technology innovation can be a difficult, time-consuming, and often costly pursuit in the short term in order to achieve growth in the long run. The most telling characteristic of the fastest-growing trade show organizers is that they are committed and consistent in their pursuit of innovation in all its forms and in technology when and where it demonstrates potential.