

The Challenge Of Virtualizing Trade Shows And Exhibit Halls

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The article selected for review is Donny Tormohlen's 2021 PCMA article, "The Challenge of Virtualizing Trade Shows and Exhibit Halls." Written during the COVID-19 disruption of face-to-face events, it examines why conferences adapted to online delivery more easily than trade shows, where exhibitors depend on product discovery, informal conversation, lead generation, demonstrations, and commercial relationships. The original review correctly emphasizes that a virtual exhibit hall should not be a digital copy of rows of physical booths. It also identifies demos, education theaters, chat, global reach, lower travel requirements, and the need for creative engagement. Five years later, these observations remain relevant, but the industry has changed. In-person exhibitions have returned strongly, while virtual and hybrid tools now operate as parts of a broader event program. The central challenge is no longer choosing permanently between physical and digital formats. It is designing each format around the value it can provide, connecting pre-event discovery, on-site interaction, remote participation, data capture, and post-event follow-up without creating two unequal audiences or expenses that exceed measurable return. (Tormohlen, n.d.)

Article Summary

Tormohlen's article draws on event-industry professionals to explain the commercial difficulty of replacing an exhibit floor with an online platform. An educational session can be streamed to a large audience with familiar video tools. A trade show depends on movement, chance encounters, visual attraction, physical products, sales conversations, and the concentration of buyers and sellers in one place. During the pandemic, associations lost revenue from booth sales and sponsorships, while exhibitors struggled to reproduce lead generation and deal-making online. The article therefore argues that virtual trade shows need formats designed for digital behavior rather than three-dimensional booth metaphors placed on a screen.

The Article's Historical Context

The piece was published in February 2021, when health restrictions and travel uncertainty made virtual events necessary for many organizations. Its language reflects an emergency period in which event professionals were testing platforms rapidly and trying to protect communities, revenue, and member relationships. An updated review should not judge those experiments as though organizers had years of mature practice. The article captured an industry learning that access to video technology was not the same as the ability to create commercial engagement.

Why Conferences and Trade Shows Differ

A conference often has a clear content product: presentations, workshops, panels, and discussion. These can be scheduled and delivered remotely. A trade show's product is more distributed. Value emerges from exhibitors, attendees, demonstrations, appointments, sensory experience, networking, and the possibility of discovering something unexpected. The platform cannot generate that value merely by displaying logos. Virtualization requires organizers to identify the actual jobs participants are trying to complete: compare products, meet decision-makers, learn about a market, qualify leads, negotiate, build trust, or maintain professional visibility.

The Failure of the Digital Booth Metaphor

Early virtual platforms frequently recreated a convention center with clickable entrances, halls, and booths. The design looked familiar but often added steps between the attendee and useful information. A person online does not need to walk through a decorative lobby before searching by product, problem, company, or appointment availability. The article's recommendation to avoid simple replication is one of its strongest points. Digital experience should use search, recommendation, short video, live interaction, saved resources, scheduling, and accessible navigation rather than simulate physical distance.

Engagement Is Not Attendance

Registration and login counts do not establish that participants received value. Online attendees can open an event in one browser tab and disengage within seconds. Tormohlen's sources correctly noted that users are always one click away from leaving. Meaningful engagement should be defined through behaviors connected with the event's purpose: attending a complete demonstration, joining a relevant conversation, requesting information, arranging a meeting, viewing a product comparison, asking a question, or returning after the event. Time on platform can be informative, but passive duration alone is not a commercial outcome.

Exhibitor Value

Exhibitors participate because they expect access to relevant audiences, brand visibility, market information, relationships, and sales opportunities. A virtual package that offers a logo and downloadable brochure may not justify the price of a physical booth. Organizers should define deliverables clearly: qualified meeting opportunities, thought-leadership participation, searchable content, targeted promotion, product demonstration, analytics, and follow-up access consistent with privacy rules. The exhibitor should understand what data will be available and what attendees have consented to share.

Conversation Beyond the Sales Pitch

PCMA later emphasized that sponsors and exhibitors often gain stronger engagement when they contribute expertise to vendor-neutral conversation rather than deliver uninterrupted product promotion. This supports the article's recommendation for education theaters and interactive content. A cybersecurity provider, for example, may participate in a panel about emerging risk and then offer a technical demonstration. The educational contribution builds credibility, while the commercial interaction remains transparent. Organizers must protect program integrity so that sponsorship does not determine conclusions.

Product Demonstrations

Demonstrations are among the easiest trade-show functions to translate online when products can be shown through video, screen sharing, simulation, or remote control. Digital demos can be recorded, captioned, indexed, and revisited. They can also reach people who could not stand near a crowded booth. Limitations remain for products requiring touch, scale, taste, movement, or direct physical testing. Hybrid design can use streamed demonstrations for remote audiences and hands-on stations for attendees in the venue.

Networking

Physical trade shows create informal contact through shared lines, meals, entrances, and movement between sessions. Online networking must be designed more intentionally. Matchmaking algorithms can recommend people based on stated interests, but recommendations are only as good as profiles and data. Scheduled small groups, hosted buyer meetings, themed tables, moderated chats, and short appointments can reduce uncertainty. Participants also need unstructured space and permission to continue relationships after the event. Endless random video pairings may create activity without relevance.

The Role of the Moderator and Community Manager

A physical room contains social cues that encourage conversation. Digital sessions often need a moderator who welcomes participants, summarizes questions, connects people, enforces standards, and prevents silence from becoming abandonment. Community management should begin before the event and continue afterward. Discussion prompts, exhibitor previews, participant introductions, and office hours can create familiarity so that the event is not a cold start on opening day.

Global Reach

The original review argues that online formats can reach a much larger audience. This is a genuine advantage, but potential reach is not actual participation. Time zones, language, payment systems, internet quality, accessibility, local marketing, and relevance affect who joins. A global program may require repeated live sessions, interpretation, subtitles, asynchronous content, and regional discussion groups. Online delivery removes travel but does not remove every barrier.

Accessibility

Virtual participation can improve access for people with mobility limitations, caregiving duties, health risks, limited travel budgets, or visa constraints. It can also create barriers when platforms are incompatible with screen readers, captions are inaccurate, interfaces require fine motor control, or broadband is unavailable. Accessibility should be built into procurement and production: keyboard navigation, captioning, transcripts, readable contrast, alternative text, clear instructions, and technical support. Physical events require their own accessibility planning, so hybrid programs should not assume one mode solves every need.

Costs of Virtual Events

The original essay says virtual exhibitions require significantly fewer resources. Some costs decline: venue rental, catering, freight, travel, accommodation, physical booth construction, and local staffing. Other costs increase or appear for the first time: platform licenses, video production, streaming infrastructure, integration, cybersecurity, captioning, technical support, content editing, remote studios, and data management. A professional virtual event is not free. The correct comparison is total cost per objective achieved, not whether one format lacks a convention center.

Revenue Challenges

Associations historically depended on exhibit and sponsorship revenue tied to scarce physical space and visible foot traffic. Digital space is not scarce in the same way, and attendees may resist prices based on the old booth model. Organizers need products linked to outcome and attention: sponsored research, curated meetings, content series, targeted promotion, demonstration slots, community access, and year-round visibility. These opportunities should remain clearly labeled and should not compromise attendee privacy or editorial independence.

Pricing

Virtual registration is often expected to cost less because participants do not receive meals, venues, or travel experiences. Lower price can broaden access but may reduce perceived commitment and increase no-shows. Tiered pricing can distinguish live access, on-demand libraries, hosted meetings, certification, or premium workshops. Exhibitor pricing should reflect audience fit, deliverables, service, and data rather than the visual size of a digital booth. Transparent pricing reduces disappointment.

Hybrid Events

A hybrid event includes connected in-person and remote experiences, but the term covers many designs. A livestream with no remote interaction is different from a program in which remote participants ask questions, meet exhibitors, and join networking. Hybrid can extend reach and resilience, yet it may require two production teams and two participant journeys. The common mistake is treating remote attendees as observers of the “real” event. A good hybrid design decides which moments should be shared and which should be designed separately.

The Return of In-Person Exhibitions

The article anticipated a hybrid future, but it did not predict the complete disappearance of physical exhibitions. Current industry practice confirms the continuing value of face-to-face commerce, product experience, and trust. Freeman’s 2025 research places commerce among the leading reasons people attend conferences and trade shows, while PCMA programs emphasize immersive exhibit design and measurable engagement. The post-pandemic lesson is not that virtual replaces physical. It is that digital tools extend discovery and follow-up around high-value live interaction. (Freeman, 2025)

Pre-Event Digital Engagement

The event should begin before the venue opens. Attendees can identify exhibitors, save products, watch short introductions, schedule meetings, and join topical communities. Exhibitors can learn about audience interests without receiving excessive personal data. Pre-event preparation makes the physical floor more efficient because participants arrive with priorities. PCMA’s reporting on event-engagement research indicates that meaningful lead interactions occur before and after the show as well as during it. (PCMA, 2024)

Post-Event Value

After the event, recordings, Q&A summaries, product resources, and contact tools can extend value. Follow-up should be timely and specific. A generic email sent to every scanned badge does not represent a qualified relationship. Research discussed by PCMA in 2024 found that some lead-generating interactions occur after events, while many exhibitors fail to download or act on final reports promptly. Organizers can provide training and timelines so data becomes useful action.

Metrics

Metrics should match objectives. Awareness may use reach, content views, and recall. Engagement may use questions, completed meetings, demonstrations, resource saves, or return visits. Commercial outcomes may include qualified leads, pipeline, sales, or retention. Community outcomes may include new connections and continued participation. Counting clicks without defining value creates impressive dashboards but weak decisions. Exhibitors should agree on measurement before purchasing a package.

Data Quality and Privacy

Virtual platforms collect detailed behavioral data, including sessions viewed, searches, messages, clicks, and meetings. This can improve personalization and reporting, but participants should know what is collected and shared. Consent should not be hidden inside a long registration agreement. Organizers need retention limits, vendor review, security controls, access rules, and a process for correcting inaccurate profile data. More data is not automatically better when it damages trust.

Technology Integration

Registration, event applications, streaming, exhibitor portals, customer-relationship systems, badge scanning, and analytics often come from different vendors. Poor integration creates duplicate profiles and incomplete reports. Organizers should map the participant journey and data flow before selecting tools. Technology should reduce friction rather than require repeated logins. A simple, reliable platform aligned with the program may outperform a feature-rich system that participants cannot navigate.

Technical Resilience

Virtual and hybrid events need backup internet connections, redundant streaming, recorded alternatives, speaker rehearsals, and clear support. Presenters require microphones, lighting, camera

framing, and familiarity with interaction tools. Participants need a visible help route. Contingency planning should identify what happens if a platform, venue connection, speaker feed, or payment system fails. Resilience is part of event design, not an emergency document prepared after contracts are signed.

Digital Fatigue

Long online schedules copied from convention programs can exhaust participants. Shorter sessions, breaks, varied activity, asynchronous options, and clear navigation help. Not every presentation needs to be live. Recorded foundational content can be viewed in advance, reserving live time for discussion and demonstration. Organizers should respect time zones and avoid using constant notifications as a substitute for relevance.

Sustainability

Virtual participation can reduce travel, freight, temporary construction, and food waste, but digital systems also consume energy and equipment. In-person events can improve sustainability through reuse, local sourcing, transport planning, waste reduction, and measurement. Hybrid design may reduce some travel while duplicating production. Environmental claims should be based on actual boundaries and data rather than assuming online delivery has no footprint.

Personal Review of the Article

The article remains valuable because it identifies the fundamental difference between putting conference content online and creating a functioning digital marketplace. Its strongest insight is that technology alone cannot produce engagement. Organizers must understand why people attend and design interactions accordingly. The professional quotations give the article practical authority, although the emergency context makes some expectations—especially rapid revenue replacement—more optimistic than later experience justified.

How My View Has Developed

I agree with my original conclusion that event professionals should adopt technology rather than wait for all activity to return to an earlier form. I would now state the argument more carefully. Innovation does not require moving every exhibition online. In-person environments remain uniquely effective for sensory discovery, spontaneous conversation, and relationship building. Digital tools are most valuable when they expand access, prepare participants, support remote audiences, capture learning, and extend relationships beyond the event dates.

Recommendations for Organizers

Organizers should begin with stakeholder outcomes, not platform features. They should design separate but connected journeys for attendees, remote participants, exhibitors, sponsors, speakers, and staff. Exhibitors need training in content, meetings, lead qualification, and follow-up. The event needs accessibility, privacy, technical support, and contingency planning. Measurement should connect with awareness, learning, relationships, and commerce. Finally, the program should continue before and after the physical gathering so that value does not depend on a few exhibit-hall hours.

Conclusion

“The Challenge of Virtualizing Trade Shows and Exhibit Halls” accurately captured the central problem facing the exhibition industry in 2021: digital delivery could transmit content, but it struggled to recreate discovery, trust, conversation, and commercial return. The industry’s later development confirms that virtual and hybrid tools are useful but do not make in-person exhibitions obsolete. Effective event strategy now combines formats according to purpose. Online platforms can expand access, support demonstrations, organize appointments, and extend content. Physical events remain powerful for sensory experience, spontaneous interaction, and commerce. Hybrid formats can connect the two but require additional planning and resources. The most successful organizers will not ask how to reproduce a convention hall on a screen. They will ask what participants need to accomplish and design the simplest, most inclusive, measurable experience that allows them to do it. (Cvent, 2026)

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