



THE FUTURE OF TRADESHOWS

a special report by Lew Hoff and Tim Patterson

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Predicting the Future of Tradeshows *a special report by Lew Hoff and Tim Patterson*

As John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid tell us, “The way forward is paradoxically to look not ahead, but to look around.”

Tradeshows have undergone more changes during the past five years than in the preceding 100. The changes are due mainly to a fast-growing array of new technologies and tools--but also to changes in expectations and how people find information.

Event planners have the daunting task of staying current on new and emerging trends and always shifting strategies to meet customer preferences. Looking into our crystal ball we spoke with industry veterans Lew Hoff and Tim Patterson. Here we've compiled some of their predictions for technology, mobile, social media, and new and emerging trends.

What will the future hold for trade shows in terms of social media networks and mobile internet access? What about gamification, the data revolution, software automation, QR codes, and connecting attendees with the right tools to improve their experience? Here are Hoff and Patterson's take on what's next--and what's now.

Changing expectations of event participants

Event experiences for attendees, exhibitors, and speakers will have to become more personalized and customized. Event organizers will seek to delight these important event stakeholders. And so the organizers will harness

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the marketing power of the good experience. Only a truly good experience will turn event participants into advocates--and repeat customers.

Making connections easier

Connectivity will be more important than ever. And we don't just mean fixing spotty Wi-Fi and offering ample and clearly marked charging stations. We also mean connecting event participants with the right tools they need to have a terrific experience. Tools that can provide a hassle-free registration and check in process, tools to organize crowds (think Disney!), relevant information notices from event apps (“the keynote is starting in five minutes, there is no line at the East entrance”).

Data revolution

What can gathering event data provide event participants? Collecting data and making sense of it can allow organizers to better predict what attendees, exhibitors, sponsors, and speakers want.

What about QR Codes? They are not going away. Lew Hoff sees the popularity of QR codes continuing to grow as a quick way to exchange contact information. He says, “Especially since [Apple is silently telling us to stop asking for near-field communication](#). With AirDrop, Apple has duplicated the most useful feature of near-field communication -- sending files all without bumping.”

We will see an end to gimmicky uses of QR codes on everything from cocktail napkins, cookies and signage. Exhibitors and event organizers will learn to use QR codes in better, more effective ways to boost engagement, cut down on printing costs, facilitate surveys, improve ticketing, and encourage information exchange.

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Social media becomes more valuable

The power of face-to-face interactions will continue to have great impact beyond the event and within social media channels. According to Tim Patterson, "Social media seems to have been designed with events and tradeshows in mind. It's a limited, chaotic time and social media is good at spreading information and moving people around. Whether tweet-ups, contests, or just plain old-fashioned publicity, social media helps because it is immediate and you're able to respond in real-time."

According to Edison research, [56 percent of Americans have a profile on a social networking site](#). This is up from 52 percent just last year, and 48 percent in 2010. How high can this climb? Certainly, there are sizable chunks of the populace that will never join a social networking site, but **it's amazing to consider that significantly more Americans (12 years old and up) have a social networking profile than do not.**

All event participants will use social media as a way of connecting with potential consumers. Extra Tip: Social network to be on the look out for: Instagram

How can event planners improve social media use at events?

Since many attending events are part of a larger community of liked minded individuals (think Car lovers, Cat lovers, Comic book fans, etc.) event planners should *consider ways to facilitate camaraderie*, such as creating an instant "meetup" or "swarm" at an event location.

Make it easy for people to become fans at your event: include your follow buttons on your event homepage. Ideally on the upper-right-hand side of your homepage and within the footer pages. This is where people expect to see them. Make sure they are "above the fold" so visitors won't have to scroll to

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find them. Lew Hoff suggests, "Event planners should send out a dedicated email to both attendees and exhibitors to let them know the event hashtag and that the folks who tweet the most will be acknowledged by the event twitter page via thank-you tweets, and during the closing session of the event."

"Steering people toward specific platforms, such as Twitter, to get people to get involved. Other platforms such as Instagram or YouTube can also bring more engagement by offering content that is (here it comes again) immediate and shared in real-time," said Tim Patterson.

What's next for social media? Patterson says, "Some new company with a new idea always throws a wrench into things. What was the world like before Twitter, Facebook, YouTube? Who are the next companies that will force companies to adjust to a new reality?"

Gamification will be a "game-changer"

App-based games will increase participation amongst attendees and enhance their show-going experience. Here are five ways Lew Hoff, Bartizan's president, suggests adding gaming into your event:

1. Participants earn achievement "badges" for scanning a certain amount of QR Codes at the events. This also encourages more visits to booths, something show managers and exhibitors would love.
2. Tiers of badges could be created; high level badges can be earned by doing extra--filling out exhibitor surveys, keeping a prearranged appointment or sitting in on a demo.
3. Bonus points would be awarded for winners of some sort of competitive challenge, or treasure hunts--like the bingo-card-carrying attendees getting stamps for visits, but digitized.

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4. In your event's app there could be a leader board that would also encourage usage and an attendee progress/status bar.
5. Sponsorship opportunities exist with a "lottery" where even just one scan enters attendees into a drawing sponsored by an exhibitor or event organizer.

What will help attendees and exhibitors do business with each other?

Exhibitors will have to keep trying new strategies to stay competitive and grow. The best way to grow your business is through partnerships. When two companies can work together at an event they double their outreach, get introduced to a new audience and both share the results. Lew Hoff loves the idea. "Exhibitors can stretch their promotional dollar by co-sponsoring a promo piece, an event or even the tote bag."

Tim Patterson agrees, "I can imagine there is much to be gained by finding worthwhile partnerships with fellow exhibitors to drive traffic around a tradeshow floor. These would likely be colleagues who are not direct competitors, but those that would benefit from sharing audience."

Applications are now closed,
but the conversation is just getting started.



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What future developments should we look forward to?

Wearable tech like Google Glass presents many possibilities for improving connections at events. Imagine looking at attendees and learning their names and job titles without looking at their badge. With advances in facial recognition technology that's emerging on Facebook and Google, we can imagine this would be extremely helpful; How about Joe from Sheboygan that you spent a crazy night with at last year's event and now you forgot his name? Simply access your CRM and the memories will come flooding back, or match him up with a Google or Facebook image search.

"I'd imagine tech like this can help attendees navigate the show floor better," Hoff said.



But Patterson gets the final word: "Now I have to be a soothsayer, too? Sheesh! If you explore futuristic writings, you find things like nanotechnology, holographic TV, incredibly efficient solar power and even texting by thinking in the wings. I can see that a number of these will be well-positioned to have a great effect on the event industry. [Holo TV](#), for instance, would be a big draw, in my opinion."

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Contributors



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Lew Hoff, president at Bartizan, has spent the last 40-plus years focused on bringing buyers and sellers together, face-to-face, at tradeshows. Follow [@lewhoff](#) on Twitter.

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