



HEALTHCARE EXHIBITORS FOCUS GROUP REPORT

MOVING FORWARD POST COVID-19

OVERVIEW



"We need to know the value of participation as an exhibitor!"

Healthcare exhibitors want to exhibit and they are asking associations to help them provide the information that is necessary for their companies to demonstrate both safety and value. This is what we heard from the participants of Poretta & Orr's recent focus group. It is not breaking news but healthcare conventions have been impacted greatly as a result of this global pandemic known as COVID-19. There is a great deal at stake. Face-to-face convention marketing and live events generate billions in revenue and millions of jobs.

The global pandemic caused by COVID-19 has changed the healthcare events and exhibitions industry. Whether these significant changes continue for the short-term or permanently change our industry is yet to be determined, however, those involved with face-to-face marketing at conventions continue to explore new engagement tactics to further the value of face-to-face marketing.

With an ever-growing list of conferences, tradeshows and exhibitions canceled or postponed, Poretta & Orr assembled a group of healthcare exhibitors to gather insights and forward discussion on what a successful convention marketing program needs from the associations.

A clear distinction between mass gatherings like sporting events and conventions was brought up throughout the discussion group, advocating that not all types of events are equal. Healthcare exhibitors noted that they can safely exhibit at conventions by implementing safety measures and associations can implement measures that control the flow and design of conventions which further that distinction. Understanding that exhibitions are part of an organized event and that safety measures can be effectively implemented is an important concept to communicate to all parties moving forward.

So how will the healthcare convention and exhibition industry adapt to changes and successfully continue beyond COVID-19?

Well, our focus group noted that they are ready to go, with responsible safety measures in place!

Read on for insights from an experience group of healthcare exhibitors.



INTRODUCTION

"What will associations offer exhibitors to demonstrate ROI?" 

"Exhibitors need associations to develop new tools and resources."

Covid-19 has created a global pandemic and changed overnight the healthcare event and exhibition industry. If inventory is taken, virtually all of the second quarter conferences, tradeshow and exhibitions have been cancelled or postponed, leaving us with many questions and uncertainties about how best to move forward. The live events industry was one of the first to be affected and will likely be dealing with the aftermath for the foreseeable future.

Poretta & Orr has worked in the healthcare sector for over 35 years and watching the impact on the industry prompted action. We conducted focus groups of those directly impacted. In this paper we have outlined the findings of healthcare exhibitors discussing the value of face-to-face engagement at conventions now and post COVID-19.

The focus group discussion also centered around potential new strategies and resources to help ensure their success moving forward. The use of alternative platforms such as virtual meetings, and their perceived value, both short and long-term, were discussed and as expected, they are viewed as enhancements to conventions, not a replacement.

In addition to this focus group, Poretta & Orr also facilitated a similarly formatted focus group with healthcare associations. The findings from both focus groups were shared with one another.

The importance of sharing information amongst peers was noted strongly by the exhibitors participating, especially during a global pandemic with implications that could be far-reaching and long-lasting.

The healthcare exhibitors that participated, are as follows:

Joanne Bara, Ziemer USA
Kimberly Foley, Philips (formerly)
Laurie Hodge, ACG Biologics
Kim Mascaro, LabCorp
Joanna McNamara, Abiomed
Colleen McQuone, UCB
Layla Van Simaey, Xeris Pharmaceuticals

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GOALS

As noted, Poretta & Orr invited a small but targeted group of healthcare exhibitors together to discuss the demonstrated value of face-to-face engagement at conventions for healthcare exhibitors. This discussion included topics pertaining to the current and post-COVID-19 environment and highlighted creative strategies to help these exhibitors continue to reap the benefits of face-to-face interaction.

The healthcare exhibitors that were chosen to participate represented different sized companies, various industry sectors, and program sizes. In addition, each of the participating companies has demonstrated:



A desire for innovative and out-of-the-box ideas for creating engagement opportunities for their exhibit program and meetings;



An interest and willingness to share and learn from peers and;



An interest in receiving the insights from the healthcare association focus group running parallel to this focus group on the same topic.

Three overarching goals were identified prior to the focus group meeting and were the key discussion drivers:

To develop communications that exhibitors can utilize that demonstrate the continued value of face-to-face engagements while acknowledging and communicating the form and function of the face-to-face interaction will be structured differently.

To further discussions and find new ways to demonstrate the value of face-to-face interactions as an integral part of successful conventions for all parties involved; associations, exhibitors, attendees. Brainstorm and establish ways to accomplish this safely in a post COVID-19 world and the near future.

Determine what association tools and resources are currently available or should be created to keep face-to-face marketing now, and going forward, an important part of any exhibitor's successful marketing program, including enhancing the face-to-face experience with virtual offerings.

Poretta & Orr felt it was important to facilitate a discussion that centered around opportunities and furthered a solution-driven conversation. Many of the obstacles healthcare exhibitors are facing are intertwined with how the associations are moving forward and whether they are providing timely and clear communications. However, while these challenges were noted, the focus group shared insights on some of the resources and tools they need to be successful now and post-COVID-19, at both live and virtual events.

SOLUTIONS FOR CHALLENGES

Right out of the gate, the discussion hinted that there were no shortages of challenges. The good news is that there were also potential solutions for each challenge that came up.

It was also clear from the feedback the focus group provided that once safety measures and travel requirements were sufficiently met, they were ready to get back to face-to-face marketing in an exhibit hall setting.

All exhibitors felt that virtual events will play a complementary role in meetings and conventions going forward. How big a role was not agreed upon when discussing the long term, but short term, virtual events were viewed extremely necessary. All exhibitors expected to see decreased attendance at meetings in 2020, and discussed how smaller, regional meetings could offer an alternative forum to continue engagement opportunities for exhibitors with HCPs.

The following are the discussion topics covered and the key points highlighted.

How Has COVID-19 Impacted Convention Planning?

An over-arching theme was the obvious challenge of planning to exhibit at a future convention when there was such uncertainty. Exhibitors noted the following key considerations as those that would significantly affect planning:

- When will corporate travel be allowed?
- Will attendees in particular specialties attend a live meeting?
- Will the association hold a live meeting or a virtual meeting?
- If proceeding with a virtual meeting will the association provide the appropriate amount of lead time for exhibitors to prepare and get approvals from compliance?
- If a virtual event is planned, what platform did the association choose and what options are available?
- What is the ROI or value of participation?

Participants noted that these top considerations were out of their control, however, they were key to moving forward successfully, now and in a post COVID-19 environment. All noted that safety for both attendees and exhibitors was paramount.

The key topics and discussion points from the focus group follow.

- A top consideration was to monitor local, state and government regulations for gatherings and to understand any impact this may have and how to plan within those new parameters.
- Participation in virtual events still requires compliance approval of marketing materials. Providing enough lead time to get materials approved can determine if an exhibitor will participate in a virtual meeting.

- Communication is key. All parties should be communicating and working together to explore solutions that work for all stakeholders. Focus group participants encourage the association to discuss options that would make exhibiting valuable for their company.
- Exhibitors were interested in out-of-the-box ideas such as the potential of offering regional meetings as an adjunct to larger meeting each year. This might be a solution that HCPs may be more comfortable with short-term, as it would not require travel by air.
- Determining how to best plan for an event when the number of attendees is such an unknown was discussed. Opening online registration as early as possible was strongly suggested.
- Exhibitors felt that surveying the members/HCPs/attendees regarding their expectations for attending both a live or virtual event and sharing that information with exhibitors is critical. Reaching that audience is why they participate so knowing what they want to achieve when attending a live or virtual event is extremely valuable. An attendee survey was suggested.
- Associations should make it a priority to understand the needs of both the attendees and exhibitors. Allowing opportunities for feedback, communication and providing metrics demonstrating value is important to the exhibitors.



- If a virtual component is part of the meeting, utilize a platform that is as interactive as possible and that offers flexibility and customization options. Exhibitors mentioned that if a platform only allows for documents to be uploaded and links added, the value isn't there. They can do this using their website.
- Exhibitors discussed various ways they felt an association should be flexible. For instance, how they process refunds for exhibitors regarding canceled events was a key topic. There were several options outlined and no matter the solution adopted by the association, communicating the requirements to exhibitors was important.

"Virtual meetings are a complement to a convention, not a replacement."



VIRTUAL OR HYBRID EVENT

Exhibitors felt that if associations with meetings scheduled for the last quarter of the year were moving forward with their plans for a live event, virtual event or a hybrid event, they needed the following to consider participation.

Enough lead time to plan effectively, especially regarding items that need approval by compliance. A minimum of a 6-week lead-time is needed. Not having adequate time to get compliance approval determines whether an exhibitor participates in a meeting.

For most, incorporating a virtual component to a convention is viewed as a nice complement to a live event, however, cost was discussed as a barrier. Exhibitors felt that providing data that demonstrates ROI is needed to justify the cost. With lower attendance, cost should be lowered significantly, unless there is data supporting ROI, and in turn the cost to participate.



Utilizing a virtual platform that providing options and flexibility was very important to the exhibitors. Some of the critical elements were:

- OnDemand feature allowing speakers who might need to record prior to the event and then the recorded session is played at a scheduled time. This is particularly good for compliance approvals.
- EPoster capabilities
- Exhibit hall (available on demand) manufacturer's booth to watch presentations about new products, read data and product specifications, and link out to the manufacturer's home page
- Chat rooms
- Appointment settings
- Ability for reps to take questions and interact

Exhibitors noted that associations should talk to the exhibitors and the attendees prior to committing to use a particular platform. Having their perspectives is vital to producing a meeting that will meet their objectives. Again, exhibitors stressed that having the options and the ability to customize certain aspects was very important to them.

The focus group members discussed utilizing virtual as an option for delivering conference content to HCPs, and this seemed to be a useful medium, but time and feedback will determine whether this option is best suited for their organization.

While the virtual component has not yet proven its effectiveness, in particular the virtual exhibit hall, exhibitors did acknowledge this could foster increased reach. However, an important caveat to this increased exposure is the quantity versus quality of the leads. Quantity was not usually important. The quality of the lead was key, as well as the metrics to demonstrate the value proven value of the lead. This once again makes finding the right virtual platform an important function of the association.


Metrics were key to all the exhibitors. Providing as much information as possible and giving exhibitors flexibility to choose the fields of information they required was highlighted as very important.

Technology will likely play a more elevated role at meetings and events going forward. However, many of us we are learning that while there are benefits to a virtual event, a new-found appreciation and understanding of the value of face-to-face marketing is bubbling to the surface. People miss the human connection. Most are computer and Zoom fatigued.

EXHIBITIONS: THE HUMAN TOUCH

Exhibitions are a powerful tool to create customer satisfaction and loyalty. By being a 'face-to-face' medium, they add the unique 'human element'.





In our evermore digital world, where technology plays an important role in our everyday lives and the way we do business, especially for young professionals, exhibitions are even more appreciated for their face-to-face engagements. **80% agree that a person would spend more money with people or companies they have met face-to-face than with people they have not met** (source www.facetime.org.uk).



THE 4 FACTORS TO CREATE MEMORABLE EXPERIENCES

Memorable experiences are a strong predictive factor for customer satisfaction, customer loyalty and brand differentiation. This means that if you can create memorable experiences for your customers, the probability increases that they will appreciate your offer, come back for more another time and remember your brand.

THE FACTORS


-  **The affective factor** - there was a positive atmosphere during the visit to an exhibition
-  **The sensory factor** - getting to use as many senses as possible during the exhibition
-  **The intellectual factor** - engaging in some type of intellectual challenge during the exhibition
-  **The behavioural factor** - being able to move their body during the exhibition

The higher you are able to deliver on these four factors when you meet your customers, the stronger their experience will be. In addition, the experience is even stronger if it shared - either during or after the event.

Exhibitions are an outstanding way to create strong experiences. At an exhibition, visitors move around (**behavioural factor**), look, listen, touch and sometimes taste and smell (**sensory factor**), feel the buzz of a large gathering of people (**affective factor**) and learn and take part in seminars and activities (**intellectual factor**). Many visitors **share their experience**, either with someone at the exhibition, talk about the event or share their experience on social media.

So for anyone who wants their customers to appreciate their offer, to come back for me and remember their brand - exhibitions are the way to go!

Research source: Brisau et al., Journal of Marketing 2009 (University of Rochester and Columbia University in the US in cooperation with Bocconi University in Italy)



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IMPLEMENTING SAFETY PROTOCOLS

All participants of the focus group felt strongly that the association should make a priority for the health, safety, and well-being of the attendees and exhibitors. While the structure and flow of the meeting were discussed, participants felt if communicated in advance a newly adopted structure that minimized disruption, incorporated necessary safety protocols and accommodated all parties in attendance within the space provided was a priority.

The exhibitors felt that many of the measures discussed and outlined in this paper would be familiar to most, if not all citizens, by the time they attend events and conventions. This presumably could make the implementation and learning curve of safety measures easier to manage.

Some of the areas that exhibitors would like included well in advance of the meeting are:

- Layout of exhibit hall, meeting rooms, and product theaters
- How food functions would be accommodated
- Sanitization practices utilized throughout the convention hall and meeting spaces
- Provide clear directions using floor decals and signage
- Requirements the association may require of the exhibitors should be clearly outlined



Exhibitors discussed that communicating expectations for how a live event will change in layout and protocols was important for planning and to set expectations. Provide clear verbal and written communications outlining changes. All also noted that they too will be experiencing these changes for the first time so allowing for feedback and flexibility is going to be important. If something isn't working, allow for a change.

A spirit of working together to find the right solutions is going to be needed to move forward successfully for all parties including the association, attendees, and the exhibitors.

FOOD & BEVERAGE

When it comes to F&B at events, self-service buffets likely won't be a viable option for a while. All felt that at the current time, buffets were not an appropriate option for serving meals. Pre-packed meals, boxed lunch or dinner options seemed more appropriate.

One option discussed was to have attendees pick up lunches from refrigerators strategically placed in the venue or have boxed meals already preset at seats.

Seated dining was an alternative option, and educating staff members so they have an understanding of proper sanitation and food-handling measures is important. Utilizing vendors that can demonstrate their knowledge of safe food handling was also a key consideration.

Staggering food stations and serving food in individually wrapped units, and offering individual water bottles were attractive solutions.

Avoid serving foods where multiple hands will touch the food, like bowls of chips.

Provide serving utensils if needed, or arrange for food to be served by staff who are trained in safe food handling.

CLEAR, TIMELY AND INFORMATIVE COMMUNICATION IS NECESSARY

Communication was deemed very critical during this time. It was essential to all the focus group participants to convey the following to exhibitors:

- Communications regarding safety measures must reflect that the association has implemented safety measures and has the safety and health of its attendees as its number one objective.
- Communication with exhibitors and sponsors must reflect a spirit of partnership and flexibility.
- Refund policies clearly outlined regarding:
 - Sponsorships
 - Exhibit space
 - Registration
- Communications with exhibitors must provide specific details that will assist them in understanding what to expect in regards to all aspects of the meeting:
 - Registrations area
 - Product theaters
 - Exhibit hall
 - Transportation
 - City/hotel ordinances
- Communication and metrics demonstrating the ROI of participation
- Identify all deadlines

A RENEWED IMPORTANCE FOR EXHIBITOR ADVISORY COUNCIL (EAC)

Exhibitors noted previously in this report the importance of collaboration. An EAC is an important component to providing quality services that meet the needs of exhibitors. Continually seeking advice and guidance from industry professionals and creating an environment conducive to collaboration, listening, and responsiveness, is as important as ever.

The purpose of an EAC is to provide input and feedback, and helps the association develop exhibit-focused tools, resources and regulations, and also provides a forum to discuss how industry issues helps the association better understand the challenges exhibitors and their companies face.

CREATIVE SPONSORSHIP AND INNOVATIVE IDEAS

Implementing new and creative solutions was brought up numerous times. Exhibitors stressed that a virtual event or hybrid event cannot be static links and uploaded documents on a website, especially if associations are not drastically cutting their price of admission.

Exhibitors discussed that providing data or information that substantiates cost or changes to the meeting are needed for them to take back to their companies. Clearly crafted communication, preferably with data points, will help them get approvals to participate.

Creative solutions that show that the virtual event is more than an internet connection are needed. Make the virtual event compelling with interactivity, demonstrations, and innovative engagements. And while exhibitors noted it is their responsibility to create these opportunities, associations need to provide the platform that allows for this type of engagement.

Creative sponsorships were also discussed. Ask exhibitor what they want and price the opportunities fairly. An important consideration is that compliance is still a vital part of whether a company can sponsor a particular item or event, so associations need to continue to be cognizant of this.

REGIONAL MEETINGS / PRIVATE EVENTS / MOBILE MARKETING

Exhibitors talked about the importance of smaller or more regional meetings, at least in the short-term. These types of meeting offer many benefits during a time of uncertainty. Some of the benefits discussed:

- Regional meetings allow HCPs to drive, eliminating the need in many cases to quarantine after the meeting, thus increasing the likelihood they may attend.
- Many states continue to have limits on the size meetings they allow to take place. Many small meetings fit within these parameters.
- These meetings appeal to many exhibitors because they likely can staff them within a given territory.
- The familiarity with state and local rules, laws, and regulations.

Private events also offer an opportunity to have a controlled, safe environment that can be configured to meet marketing objectives:

- Conduct product demonstration(s) allowing for hands-on interactivity
- Set up an exhibit(s) within a ballroom setting aligning with your marketing goals
- Bring local staff in for face-to-face HCP engagement opportunities



Mobile marketing opportunities were also discussed as an attractive alternative to reaching your target audience. Exhibitors mentioned associations might want to consider mobile marketing to further their reach during this time. It could be used as a tool to further the objectives of the association and the association would have the ability to align the mobile vehicle with unique sponsorship opportunities to offer interested exhibitor companies.

Some of the unique features or benefits of mobile marketing:

- Offers an environment that can be controlled and customized to your company's specifications
- Adaptable and portable so the roadshow can happen anywhere, complementing other marketing activities
- Mobile marketing can help reach targeted audiences in the healthcare sector, providing the ability to segment by specialty
- Allows flexibility for unlimited use due to flexible configuration based on target audience identified
- Easy to implement safety measures



VENDOR PARTNERS

Exhibitors felt that associations should work with vendor partners that were willing to discuss creative pricing structures. During this time, value and transparency is needed by all players. Associations that are willing to aggressively advocate for working on creative solutions and pricing structures that are fair to all parties is needed.

Associations that can do this successfully should convey this to their exhibitors to demonstrate their successful advocacy efforts for their exhibitors. Association should let exhibitors know they are appreciated and valued.

Some of the vendors specifically mentioned were:



General Contractors



Convention Centers



Hotels



Restaurants

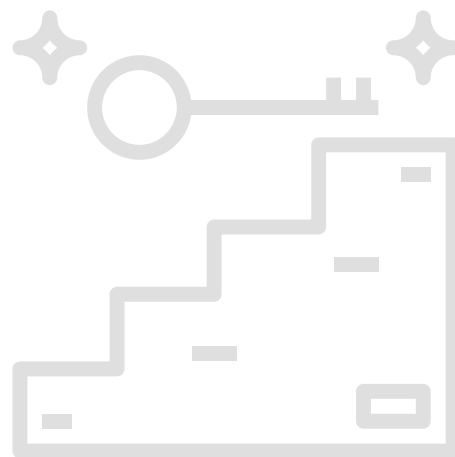
We know and have seen that contracts will be tightened, and cancellation terms restructured. All parties will be trying not to lose revenue, or not pay for things at an event that may not take place. It is a unique time, one in which there is just as much interest in what happens if an event is cancelled as there is regarding being a successful exhibitor.

It is important to keep the exhibitors in mind when working out these details.

SO WHAT DO EXHIBITORS NEED TO SUCCEED?

All of the focus group participants agreed that exhibitors and associations need to treat their relationship as a true partnership. The exhibitors were very pleased to learn that the meeting planners from the association focus group wanted to know, “What do exhibitors need or want?”

In short, to partner with an association that uses timely, clear, transparent communication and continuously seeks the input of exhibitors to create mutually beneficial and metrics-driven, innovative, face-to-face marketing solutions.



CONCLUSION

Associations and exhibitors are forever intertwined. Both groups need each other. However, maybe now more than ever, they will need to work collaboratively, creatively, and intelligently. They will need to take calculated chances and yet strive for boldness. They will need to be flexible. And like in all successful partnerships, they will need to listen.

Acknowledging there are many unknowns and challenges moving forward, this focus group shared insights that addressed the short-term impact of disruption and focused on how to pivot their face-to-face marketing efforts by adapting to the new structure and parameters set by associations. The insights shared in this paper not only demonstrate that exhibitors find value in convention marketing but they are also excited and ready to move forward safely as it relates to planning future conventions.

The exhibitors in this focus group were cautiously optimistic and looking to the future. All participants were ready to implement or consider new marketing solutions to ensure their programs are successful. It was noted there was not a one-size-fits-all solution and all acknowledged that conventions will look very different going forward. However, it is important to note that this challenging time was viewed as time to evolve and improve engagement opportunities.

Exhibitors acknowledged there are often times more questions than answers. Time will tell if virtual meetings are even effective and if a hybrid approach is new normal? The live events and convention marketing industry is resilient and industrious, a sentiment that was repeatedly shared and felt by the exhibitors. The need for human interaction and face-to-face engagement will not go away. Rather, the question was one of timing. When will live events come back full-throttle and how has COVID-19 changed things?

And while our industry may be evolving, as all industries do, there is no shortage of data to support that there is no marketing channel more effective with HCPs than face-to-face convention marketing.

CONTACT US

Please feel free to reach out to us with any questions, comments, or to discuss.

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