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## What Trade Shows and Conferences Will Look Like in Five Years

By Michelle Bruno

Even the savviest experts are loath to make precise five-year forecasts for the exhibition and conference industry. During a time when economic, environmental and technological forces have converged simultaneously to force the industry to do business differently, exhibition organizers and suppliers are scrambling to make sense of the rapid changes and regroup for the future without the historic or predictive tools of the past. Although the devices, platforms and systems will evolve, some high level themes are emerging that will guide organizations toward success over the next five years.

### Brevity

As the result of emerging social media practices, the proliferation of information and the time deficiency suffered by most business professionals, face-to-face conference sessions of the future will be shorter in length and serve up high-level ideas that will be further developed during extended networking sessions. At BlogWorld 2009, for example, "lighting round" sessions of 30 minutes each were held. During the annual TED Conference, speakers are limited to 18 minutes per presentation. Small groups gather monthly around the world on "Pecha Kucha" Nights to hear presentations that are exactly 6 minutes and 40 seconds in length.

### Convergence

Access to information will converge as the result of collaboration across shared platforms. For example, registration, housing, lead retrieval, social networking, lead follow-up, customer relationship management

(CRM) and completion of the sale will be available through a single online portal. Exhibitors will be able to access all show services with a single password and event managers will receive up to the minute information such as registrations, room pick-up, booth sales and financial forecasts through customizable executive dashboards.

### Frequency

Exhibition organizers will transition their roles from marketers to educators. In that context, they will be compelled to deliver information year round. "Increasingly electronic mechanisms will connect us between shows and we will be going to electronic shows in between physical shows," says RD Whitney, CEO of Tarsus Online Media (USA) at London-based Tarsus Group plc. As a result of the increase in frequency, conferences and exhibitions will decrease in attendance and size, as smaller, more frequent face-to-face meetings coupled with virtual information delivery systems and networking platforms become the norm.

Bob Roan, a social media community manager and founder of Knowledge Flows, elaborates on the importance of frequent, smaller meetings. "Face-to-face encounters excel in the field of tacit, as opposed to explicit, knowledge and that's the area in which I see them concentrating. We'll learn a lot from the Internet and exchange ideas and thoughts in our online communities, but when we put it all together we'll accomplish more in person.

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## ORLANDO: BUILDING FOR THE FUTURE

Hotel companies, attractions and entrepreneurs all continue opening new projects in Orlando's Convention Center district:

- 1,400-room Hilton Orlando near the Orange County Convention Center opened last month. It connects to the Convention Center via covered walkway.
- New dining comes to the Pointe Orlando complex, within walking distance of the Center: Cuba Libre Restaurant & Rum Bar, Cuban cuisine.
- Coming soon: Peabody Orlando 750-room expansion, connecting to the Convention Center via covered walkway.

Also, the "Wizarding World of Harry Potter" is scheduled to open at Universal Orlando's Islands of Adventure in Spring, 2010. For more information on this attraction visit [www.universalorlando.com](http://www.universalorlando.com).

For other information, contact the Orlando CVB at (800) 662-2825 or the Orange County Convention Center at (800) 345-9845.





**1. Test Drive the products.** Regardless of whether it's a two-ton machine or a new candy bar, trade shows are the best place for customers to touch, taste and see all the latest new products and technologies. Where else can they "test-drive" and experience so many different new products in one place and at one time? When was the last time you tasted a new flavor or felt the fan power of a new air conditioner online?

**2. Meet the team – the entire team.** Where else can you meet all the key members of a prospect's buying team, from top management and product managers to the purchasing agents? Likewise, where else can your customers meet your entire team – from the CEO to your sales rep? This is a unique opportunity to ask the tough questions face-to-face with all the key team members. When was the last time you were able to get your key buyers and influencers together at one time in one place, and what do you think your chances are of getting them all together to sit through an online presentation. Ironically, now that budgets are tight and fewer customers can come to the show, the quality of decision makers has increased significantly.

**3. Network in person with colleagues around the world.** Where else can you network and compare notes with such a vast array of your colleagues from around the globe? Trade shows are the perfect place to discuss problems, opportunities and solutions with customers and colleagues you'd normally never see together in one place, certainly not online.

**4. Discover the latest trends at conference sessions.** In this same vein, where else can you and your customers learn about all the latest trends and technologies from the industry's leading authorities? Online conferences don't offer the depth and breadth of speakers featured at most trade show conferences. Plus with online conferences, it's impossible to pull the speaker aside for a private question during the coffee break, or ask your neighbor from Germany to clarify a point. Most trade show conferences offer an unparalleled combination of technical sessions, management conferences, and accredited training opportunities.

**5. Read your customer's body language and arrange one-on-one meetings.** Where else can you judge the firmness of a person's handshake or the sincerity to do business? Equally important, where else can you get a key prospect or supplier alone for a drink or dinner for quality face-to face time? It's amazing what you can learn from prospects and suppliers in social situations. Try splitting a bottle of wine with an online customer.

**6. Online technology is your friend, not your enemy.** Online technology can enhance and extend trade shows' reach. Now that I've made all the online people angry with my first five points, let me go on record as saying that online outlets such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube should be used by most trade shows during the months when their events aren't being held. Imagine how powerful it can be to combine both online and traditional trade shows to keep customers updated about new products and developments year-round. As more show management people realize the benefits of integrating social media with their other marketing efforts, the more valuable it will make traditional trade shows.

**7. Trade shows provide the best value.** After all is said and done, the main reason trade shows will once again prosper after some necessary repositioning is because they are the most cost effective method of marketing products to qualified prospects. Where else can you bring thousands of prospective buyers together all in one place at one time to shop, network and buy? Imagine what it would cost your exhibitors to make one-on-one sales calls to as many people as they see during a single trade show. Or how many full page ads they would have to run in several publications to generate a fraction of the qualified leads they get at one trade show. Or how many online events you would have to conduct to reach a fraction of the qualified people you reach at a show.

So the next time you read a doom and gloom article about the trade show industry, or the next time your boss asks you why the company is participating in an event, just give them a copy of these "Magnificent Seven Reasons."

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