Determinants for Successful Boothmanship & Booth Design: A Book Review of Exhibiting Marketing and Trade Show Intelligence

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**Abstract**

The book provides a deep insight into the successful organisation, management and marketing of booths at trade shows. By giving practical examples and explanations, Solberg Søilen aims at examining previous research and exploring factors and aspects which can lead, if properly applied, to successful boothmanship. Findings were, that the book is written rather as a guidebook for inexperienced readers in the field of marketing and trade show intelligence. Whereas the exhibiting of marketing is discussed in detail, the topic of “trade show intelligence” is not covered in depth and, thus, the title is rather misleading.

Overall, the book is easy to read and follow due to the provided examples, tables and graphs, which enhance the reader’s understanding.

**Keywords:** Book review, trade show, boothmanship, exhibit marketing, trade show intelligence, booth design

**1 Introduction**

The book “Exhibit Marketing and Trade Show Intelligence: Successful Boothmanship and Booth Design” by Klaus Solberg Søilen (2013) provides an overview of various activities associated with exhibit marketing. According to Solberg Søilen (2013), a major part of a company’s budget is spent on trade shows annually. Even though, trade shows are a multimillion-dollar industry, there is lack of literature done how to optimize visitor experience and thus enhance company performance (Solberg Søilen, 2013). Furthermore, as the author
underlines the relevance and need of the book by referring to Dallmeyer (1998), who found that only approximately 29% of firms that participate at trade shows set specific objectives for the event, and only half of those actually follow their set objectives. The book gives insights into how to plan, execute and follow-up trade show event participation by explaining the importance and effects of both soft and hard factors. Soft factors such as differentiation among visitors, attendees, staff behaviour and hard factors such as booth design (location, design and construct, furniture) and marketing materials. Furthermore, it introduces the concept of Trade Show Intelligence that focuses on gathering beneficial information, that can help companies to forecast and identify factors that might influence their performance. The book aims at examining former research in the field of exhibit marketing, as well as identifying factors that can lead to successful boothmanship and booth design. Examples are adopted from various countries and the book addresses readers worldwide.

The purpose of this review is to give not only an overview about the content but point out the strengths and weaknesses of the book. In the first part, a short summary is included on the chapters of the book, which is followed by analysis of the book’s strengths and weaknesses in terms of content, structure, language, visuals and layout.

2 Book Summary

The book starts by pointing out that an exhibition marketing plan or trade show plan can be considered as part of a company’s marketing strategy. Furthermore, the trade show itself may function as a marketing research laboratory if the trade show takes place a certain time before a new product gets launched. The author illustrates the four most substantial planning documents, namely the marketing plan, the exhibition marketing plan, the exhibition schedule and the exhibitor manual (p. 4-8). Furthermore, the author classifies trade shows as part of “event marketing”.

The most extensive chapter of the book is focusing on booth staff behaviour. Different roles of employees at trade shows are identified such as in-booth and out-booth roles. Furthermore, the importance of differentiation among event attendees is emphasized and how each type of attendee requires a different kind of approach. Key aspects to consider regarding booth staff behaviour are described such as how to manage visitors, how to cover and divide booth area among employees, how staff should communicate among themselves, how to treat visitors from different cultures and how to manage dead times. The author underlines the last aspect, managing dead time, that it can be potentially used for employees to explore other booths and gather information, thus improve their knowledge management abilities. The sub-chapter also has a “special topic” on how to market conferences and conventions.
When talking about booth staff, one must consider relationships and management of exhibitor-appointed contractors (EACs), with whom there is a limited cooperation and whose activities are directly connected to a company’s trade show performance (e.g. booth furniture suppliers) and exhibition-related services outsourced (e.g. travel agencies). The commitment of these actors, especially EACs’, can be crucial in emergency situations when support is instantly needed. Co-exhibitors are also worth investigating, who might be direct-, indirect or non-competitors. Conducting a SWOT analysis on other exhibitors can identify opportunities for future trade shows. Visitors are categorized into three groups: buyers, potential buyers and people of influence. In this part, the author emphasizes that push marketing is no longer effective and successful boothmanship is highly dependent on how well an exhibitor listens, cares about its visitors. The author gives advices on how to build trust with these visitors by using eye-contact and body language, being knowledgeable, applying the AID model (Attention, Interest and Desire), showing respect and being welcoming. Furthermore, practical examples and guides are included for a better execution for the mentioned tactics. Lastly, organizers, show management, show owners, show promoters, general service contractors (GSCs), trade show and trade show unions are discussed and the importance of good relationship with these parties are underlined.

The author divides booth design into three categories: standard, budget and custom, but focuses solely on providing a comprehensive analysis of custom booth designs and marketing materials. The chapter underlines the importance of research before designing a booth as many companies focus on the latest trends and neglect analysing the nearby companies at a trade show. In such cases, even though a company’s booth might have the latest design, it will not stand out as neighbouring booths might have similar looks. The book also emphasizes that “[t]he golden rules of booth design are uniqueness, uniformity, and simplicity” that are supported by examples (p. 81). The chapter on the topic also gives a short introduction to both external and internal constraints. Rules and regulations (size, depth, height, music, etc.) set by the trade show can be considered external constraints, while budget and specific user requirements are internal constraints for a company attending a trade show.

Solberg Søilen (2013) also argues for the importance of pre-show planning. Budget planning, pre-planning of sales promotion and public relations as well as stuff is of core importance. Budget planning can be helpful if estimated and actual costs are separated and compared, thus contributing to the accuracy of future budget planning. Answering the needs of different audiences also requires pre-planning. Promotion materials have to be prepared for visitors, as well as a press kit for journalists. Lastly, knowledgeable staff should be carefully selected to represent the company at trade shows. Selected employees should prioritize the preparation and attendance for a trade show as in many cases, it can be considered as the biggest marketing event for a company.
Although, the paper is focusing mainly on the pre-event preparations, post-show activities have also value for firms. By doing follow-up and cold calls to leads, new business opportunities can be leveraged. The book provides guides for a good sales call as well as emphasizes the value of gathering feedback from attendees.

The last chapter of the book introduces the concept of trade show intelligence. Gathering diverse information has a great value for a firm and can help forecasting future trends, therefore, Solberg Søilen encourages firms to conduct surveys during trade shows. By combining qualitative and quantitative questions in questionnaires, companies can gather valuable information that can contribute to future planning.

3 Book critic

This chapter analyses the book from various aspects and aims at identifying its main strengths and weaknesses. The primary focus of this part is on content analysis, which is followed by comments on structure, language, visuals and layout.

3.1. Content

“The aim of this book is twofold: to survey the research literature in the field, and to show how successful boothmanship and booth design is achieved at trade shows.” (p. vii).

While the purpose of this paper was “to survey the research literature in the field” (p. vii), the outcome was rather focused on giving advices instead of giving a deeper understanding of existing research. Although, the author did include literature on the topic, it was rather limited to call it as a survey of research literature in the field of exhibit marketing and trade show intelligence as well as his explanations are sometimes rather on a surface level than in depth. Furthermore, there is only little reference to the existing literature. In the preface of the book, the authors highlights that the book is a “do’s-and-don’ts book” as he argues that exhibition marketing is a practical activity and checklists are unavoidable (p. viii). However, the amount of checklists and guidance questions are still rather high.

The second aim of the book was “to show how successful boothmanship and booth design is achieved at trade shows.” (p. vii), which was in the book successfully illustrated and explained. The author provides simple yet relevant information on the topic and explained aspect without using complex cases.

The introduction is relatively extensive and it could be even considered as a single chapter. Nevertheless, it enhances the reader’s comprehension of the topic due to the fact that it
provides definitions on the relevant yet confusing terminology in the field such as “booth”, “fair”, etc. Without clarifying these terms at an early part of the book, readers would potentially have troubles distinguishing between the jargon of trade shows. Nonetheless, the content is partly out of scope and not expedient for the following explanations and illustrations of the author.

Due to the book’s writing style and its detailed descriptions, it can be considered as a helpful guide for emerging companies without experiences in organising and managing booths. With explanations and recommendations about preferred designs of a booth, readers can gain a comprehensive understanding how to construct them in order to benefit the most. As the author provides comparisons to situations which the reader can easily relate to, he generates the reader’s understanding of the unknown field of trade shows. One example is “[i]n a theatre there is only one stage; at a trade show there are multiple stages, each requiring the playing of a specific role.” (p. 15). The reader can easily relate to the imagination of the theatre situation but may not be able to relate to the trade show due to lack of experiences and knowledge. Thus, the author makes it easier for the reader to imagine the situation and to draw a comparison to a situation which is already known.

Solberg Søilen illustrates the complexity of a booth and stresses the effort a company has to put into managing it. Thus, the author raises the reader’s awareness of degree of exertion that has to be invested in running a successful booth. Furthermore, Solberg Søilen uses helpful examples, tables and graphs in order to make his explanations more comprehensive for the readers.

The author justifies the book by stating that there is a need for further research in the field of trade shows as many influencing factors (such as technology) have shown a great level of development in the past decade. Furthermore, he states that previous books and studies were conducted by consultants, interest groups and trade associations, however, there have been lack of research done by academics (p. viii). Solberg Søilen with his book targets students and budding professionals as stated in the preface. Independently from the fact, who he considered as the principal audience of the book, it is written rather as a guidebook for beginners in that field, than a scientific book. While content at parts of the book is backed up with scientific data and research, other parts are more informal and provide practical advices and recommendations that are in some cases subjective to the author’s personal experiences and opinion. Some chapters, such as planning the budget, the sale call or the post-show evaluation, provide questions which can be rather seen as checklists of a guidebook. These guiding questions may be of support if the reader is not experienced and wants to create a successful booth. It can be said that the target audience is the book, students and budding professionals, are well addressed.
Solberg Søilen also explains little details which may seem obvious for the reader, however, by providing a comprehensive explanation supported by real-life examples he underlines that many trade show participants tend to ignore these little yet highly influential factors. By drawing attention to these matters, the book raises the readers’ awareness and enhances, therefore, their understanding of the overall concept of booths and trade shows.

Since the explanation style of the book is rather guiding than scientific, the title does not properly fit the content. The title “Exhibit Marketing and Trade Show Intelligence: Successful Boothmanship and Booth Design” gives an impression for the reader that by studying the book, a profound understanding can be gained in both marketing of trade shows in general as well as in trade show intelligence. However, the latter, trade show intelligence, is covered in chapter 6 for only ten pages (p. 127-137). This may confuse the reader as he/she might expect this topic to be described more in depth as it is mentioned in the main title itself.

When analysing the title, the wording of “successful boothmanship”, in comparison to the main title, suggests that potential guiding aspects might be included in certain parts of the book.

Although, the author states himself that “[s]ome readers may wonder about the title “trade show intelligence”. That is an aspect of exhibiting marketing which focuses on information gathering and analysis. It is a consequence, we might say, of the Information Age and the realization that trade shows, to be truly effective and profitable today, need to take full advantage of the information opportunity which a trade show is.” (p. vii), he points attention to the wording and explain it but the weakness is still the aspect that in the table of content the wording “trade show intelligence” gets the same “attention” as other chapters such as “Pre-show Planning” or “Post-show Follow up” which are not mentioned in the title. Furthermore, the other parts of the title are integrated in chapters which are connected to other aspects, whereas the chapter about “Trade Show Intelligence” is named without another connection in the chapter title. Therefore, the authors of this book review recommend to adjust the title.

The author states that he wrote the book without any specific national view and it targets an international audience by giving examples from trade shows worldwide. Although, he tries to aim at the mentioned, arguments, that are used, in some cases are not reliable, as the author neglect to give context to the data mentioned. One example is that he states that a tie-in as a marketing tool normally costs at least about 8-10 Euro/10-13 Dollar (p. 2) but he does not refer to different continents, economic conditions. Due to the fact that he gives specific amount of money as an orientation, it would be more reliable if the author would provide validation via different supportive sources.
Examples given by the author are not only relevant because of their content supporting manner, but also as they provide at times an insight into different cultural characteristics. One example is on p. 12 where the author talks about meeting planners: “[h]aving a meeting planner can be of particular help when one is dealing with a different culture, as for instance in the case of a Western company in China. Many Chinese companies will not meet you at first, simply because they do not know you. This is basically a question of trust and culture.”. By presenting this example, Solberg Søilen creates awareness of different cultural attitudes which may influence the course of trade show occurrences.

Additionally, the text includes several case studies which shall underline the theoretical train of thoughts of the author. These case studies are of value for the reader as they provide practical implications of the theory described in the relevant chapters, thus make them understand how big impact certain factors can have. However, some cases do not always fit contentwise into a chapter. As an example, in chapter 2.2 ”The Exhibitor”, Solberg Søilen includes the case study of the American company Case DirecTV (p. 47). The chapter is focusing on booth staff behaviour and while the case study of the company does describe staff behaviour at a trade show, it also goes into detail in other areas that are irrelevant to the chapter that it belongs to. In the case of Case DirecTV, the focus of the case description shifts from staff behaviour to booth design. The author criticizes the company for selecting the white as the theme colour which might cause misperception for customer what industry the company belongs to, as well as he mentions that the selection of white colour for carpets is a bad choice as they get quickly dirty (p. 47). Although, his explanations are reasonable and are relevant to the company, the mentioned extra details shift the focus of the case study from behaviour to outward design, which is rather relevant to the third chapter “Booth Design and Marketing Materials”. This mixing of content of different chapters hinders the reader in his/her reading flow.

3.2. Structure

The book is well structured and it is easy to follow the flow. Chapters of the book have a logical order: first the reader gets a general overview of the industry, which is followed by booth staff behaviour and booth design and marketing materials. After that the author provides important actions that should be taken pre-, and after-show. Lastly, the concept of trade show intelligence is presented.

Even though, the structure of the paper follows a logical flow, is has also certain weaknesses. Chapter introductions are often too long and provide in depth information, whereas in some cases sub-chapters are rather short and are lacking depth of a certain aspect. An example might be the chapter of “Booth Design and Marketing Materials”. The chapter introduction is
extensive (8 pages) and gives already many explanations, while sub-chapters’ lengths are rather short (1-9 pages).
Lastly, the book often includes iterative information which unnecessarily extends its length (as it can be observed also in chapters and sub-chapters).

3.3 Language
The language used is simple which enhances the understanding and comprehension. Nevertheless, there are some grammar mistakes such as on p. 44 “with any one group of visitors”. The language is sometimes rather subjective even judging than objective which can be considered as a weakness, therefore, the reliability of the book declines. One example for subjectiveness is the expression on page 1: “Unfortunately, we do not live in an ideal world where everything goes according to plan (...)'”. With including words such as “unfortunately” or “fantastic” (both p. 1), the author adds a personal touch which is subjective instead of remaining objective.
The author considers students and budding professionals as the book’s target audience, which might reason the simplified language style observed by readers. However, at times this simplified writing style becomes even colloquial, that weakens the overall impression of the book in the reader. As example can be found on page 2: “[t]hat is why we need to go to business school to get it right”.

3.4 Visuals
The author uses graphs to present statistical data used in the theory. In general, it can be said that the usage of graphs and the visualisation of quantitative data makes understanding easier. Nevertheless, it must be said that the comprehensibility of quantitative data is easier when using common graph types such as bar charts and pie charts. However, in cases the author uses less common charts such as on page 82, when he uses a bubble chart to present quantitative data. The usage of bubble chart makes it difficult to compare statistical data, therefore, the visual does not fulfil its primary purpose.
It is also important to mention, that there is no consistency in the design of graphs (p. xxxi; p. 82). As the author uses other authors’ graphs, the layout differs. Nonetheless, the usage of others’ graphs does not exclude adopting them to a consistent design. A consistent layout would have improved the overall look of the book.
3.5 Layout

The text layout is sometimes rather inappropriate than supporting the reader’s understanding. For example, one sentence starts on the bottom of p. 75 but as a table follows on p. 76, the sentence continues in the mid of p. 77. This hinders the reader’s comprehension of the content as such breaks are too long to keep the reader’s attention. Another example, which may be mentioned, can be found on page 4 and 5, where the author mentions four planning documents. A bullet point list is in the text to present the different kinds of documents needed, however, a table is inserted within the list, which includes the four documents listed in the bullet points. This illustration is rather hindering than enhancing the understanding of the content.

4 Conclusion

Based on the analysis of the book “Exhibit Marketing and Trade Show Intelligence: Successful Boothmanship and Booth Design” by Klaus Solberg Søilen (2013), it it can be concluded that the twofold purpose of the book was just partially fulfilled. While the author provides relevant and versatile information on how one can reach successful boothmanship and booth design; the authors of this review question whether Solberg Søilen managed to survey the research literature in the industry successfully. While parts of the book are based upon or supported by former research done in the field, other parts are lacking references.

It can be said that the book presents useful advices in order to manage a booth successfully, thus improving business performance. Thereby, the book is suitable for students and budding professionals as Solberg Søilen points out, which can be also confirmed by the authors of this review.

The book provides the reader with a comprehensive overview of exhibit marketing by analysing various factors of both booth staff behaviour, booth design and construction, pre-, and post-show activities. Moreover, certain chapters include guiding questions and checklists that can be of great value for those inexperienced in exhibit marketing.

Even though, Solberg Søilen targets inexperienced people, it must be said that the book at times might be a bit too basic, as he explains aspects which are rather obvious than in need of extensive explanation. Regarding content, main critic can be the misleading title that includes “Trade Intelligence”. The amount of explanation and literature provided on the topic does not justify the term’s presence in the title, it should be rather included in the subtitle or not at all in the title.

The language used is easy to understand and enhances the comprehensibility of the reader. Furthermore, the author gives practical examples and presents mini case studies, which help the better understanding of the reader. Even though, some weaknesses can be pointed out in
the structure, language, visuals and layout of the book, it can be said that they do not burden the reader in understanding the content of the book.

5 References
