

# THE BOTTOM LINE ON VIRTUAL TRADESHOWS

By J. Michael Applegate

Conferences and tradeshow are critical to the mission and the bottom line of most associations. However, association executives and meeting planners have a growing cause for concern about the future of their physical venues. Members and suppliers, as well as the association, are facing a skyrocketing escalation in costs and security-driven inconvenience that are shrinking both budgets and attendance. Suppliers continually clamor for more “face time” with their potential customers. However, since there are many more avenues today for information sharing, members tend to be using less and less of their suppliers’ available “face time”.

For all its challenges, members and exhibitors still consider the annual tradeshow to be a valuable investment, and to the association it remains an indispensable part of its mission.

## WHAT IS A VIRTUAL TRADESHOW?

Many associations have mistakenly viewed their web presence as an enhancement to their print collateral portfolio. Its expected contribution to the business plan is limited to static image marketing. The same can be said for many virtual tradeshow. However, website visitors have notoriously short attention spans. And invariably they are visiting a website with the expectation of accomplishing a purpose – not remembering a product or brand.

A “virtual” tradeshow should, therefore, contain features and functions that virtually duplicate or enhance the outcomes provided by the physical tradeshow experience.

Physical tradeshow have traditionally been the prime venue designed for two audiences: association members and suppliers. Members obtain valuable professional development and networking opportunities from their association. Suppliers, on the other hand, exhibit at physical tradeshow to sell products, assess their viability, evaluate competition and refine target markets. Each of these important functions can be enhanced with a virtual tradeshow.

The benefits derived by the participants in a physical tradeshow can be greatly extended and expanded by adding a virtual tradeshow that both precedes and follows the physical venue dates. Instead of the typical three days of interaction, members and suppliers can extend their interaction to six months or even a year.

A virtual tradeshow can also be implemented to offer new professional and networking opportunities where time and cost constraints make a physical venue impractical. Since form follows function, the form taken by the virtual tradeshow design should not be planned out as a collection of online brochures, or as an online supplier directory. In fact, for exhibitors it should not be considered at all as first and foremost a marketing vehicle. Instead it is more helpful to position it as an interactive, online sales channel that is available 24/7 to qualify, provide information, answer objections and even, if appropriate, to ask for and take orders.

A custom virtual tradeshow will be successful to the extent its provider understands three major association business issues: its business process, members’ needs and financial objectives.

## TECHNOLOGY OPPORTUNITIES AND LIMITATIONS

Technology always moves faster than people (and bandwidth limits and browser technology) can absorb it. The technological scrap heap is littered with bones of products that were not adopted by the majority of browser makers in favor of some other more usable product that came along later.

### **Technologies to embrace**

1. Webpages that interact with visitors (e.g. pre-populating forms, self-managed membership directories, instant polls, etc.)
2. Adobe Acrobat (PDF)
3. Adobe Flash (limited usage where appropriate)
4. Downloadable audio clips (e.g. MP3)

### **Technologies to use with care**

5. Background audio
6. Rotating graphics or target banners
7. Interactivity that requires downloaded program components (e.g. ActiveX controls)
8. Video clips

### **Technologies to avoid (at least for now)**

9. Any technology requiring the download of a browser plug-in (except Adobe Acrobat and Flash)
10. High-bandwidth, streaming video presentations
11. Interactive video

Also keep in mind that, as security concerns continue to grow, more and more “neat features” will be blocked by users due to concerns that they may carry with them unwanted spyware or viruses.

## IS A VIRTUAL TRADESHOW RIGHT FOR YOUR ASSOCIATION?

Before attempting to answer this question, think of a custom virtual tradeshow not just within the narrow context of tradeshows. Rather, imagine its possibilities as an online tool that can be used to create or enhance any physical venue that may be of value to your members.

Your mission or membership may not lend itself to the functionality of a virtual tradeshow. However, an experienced provider can help you determine how the technology might best be used within your association.

## QUESTIONS TO ASK A PROSPECTIVE VIRTUAL TRADESHOW PARTNER

1. What level of business expertise exists within your design/implementation team?
2. What does your company know about the association business?
3. How do you see my association’s objectives being accomplished using your virtual tradeshow product?
4. What have you done in the virtual tradeshow area for other clients?
5. What is the extent of customization that is included with your offering?

6. Does your solution include the following, if so, how much:
  - Phased implementation plan with milestones
  - Product customization
  - Updates
  - Hosting
  - Seamless integrations with our website and our business processes?
7. Can you offer initial policy recommendations for terms of use, privacy and advertisers?
8. Do you offer front-end services:
  - Collateral design (e.g. rate card, insertion order, etc.)
  - Ad formats (e.g. booth, resource directory, add-ons, up-sells, etc.)
  - Design and management of the order and renewal processes?
9. Do you offer back-end services:
  - Lead collection and dissemination
  - Performance reports
  - Order processing for booth-generated orders
  - Email and/or telephone technical support for staff, visitors and exhibitors?
10. What responsibilities will both you, the vendor, and us, the client, assume?
11. What level and how many internal staff resources will we be expected to devote?

The answers to these questions will enable you to determine not just the investment required to implement and promote a virtual tradeshow. It will also enable you to establish reasonable expectations for ongoing additional revenue and increased member service levels objectives.

## CONCLUSION

A well-conceived and professionally implemented virtual tradeshow can be an integral part of your association's business plan. It can certainly help your organization meet three of its ongoing major challenges: increasing non-dues revenue, reducing operating expenses and enhancing member services.

Okay, you've done your homework. You've found what you believe to be the right solution and the right technology partner. As a final sanity check ask yourself one last question: "Will the selection of this solution and this partner minimize the impact on our current staff resources and permit us to keep our staff focused on meeting the business needs of our association – serving our members?"

If the answer to this question is "Yes", a virtual tradeshow can deliver more than you may be hoping for today. It can become a vital source of additional revenue and the true differentiator between your association and the alternate offerings that continually assault your member base.

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