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One More Rough Quarterly Report

Square footage is weak; attendance flattens after two years of declines

By Marjorie Galas -- Tradeshow Week, 11/2/2009

The summer sun was replaced by chilly fall air as the third quarter came to a close. However, the turbulent economy continues to affect tradeshow, according to Tradeshow Week's latest Quarterly Report of Tradeshow Statistics.

Net square footage and the number of exhibiting firms took substantial hits in the third quarter, with drops of 17.4 percent and 12.1 percent, respectively. A year ago, net square footage was down 2.5 percent and the number of exhibiting firms fell 6.5 percent.

Still, there may be a beacon of hope: Attendance declines have leveled off for the first time in seven quarters. In fact, average attendance at third-quarter shows saw a slight increase of 0.6 percent, compared with a 3-percent dip in the third quarter last year. "Generally, corporations have been cutting costs dramatically across the board," said Michael Hughes, Tradeshow Week associate publisher and vice president of research and consulting, in response to recent downward trends.

"There have been mass layoffs, and marketing budgets have been cut by 20 percent," he added.

The reduction in exhibition size is a result of these cost-cutting measures, Hughes said. Minimizing net square footage and exhibitor space allows a tradeshow to sell out faster and retain a profit.

"I think we will begin to see exhibition space (sales) stabilize and increase because attendance quality will start to hold up," Hughes said. "The numbers are showing us that corporate travel hasn't been hit the same way many other budgets have."

Shows that experienced a growth in attendance increased for a number of reasons. Most involved introducing new content into the show's conference component, re-evaluating exhibitors and trying different marketing strategies.

"We reformatted our educational program to speak to specific issues and types of attendees," said Alan Sims, vice president and executive director of Randall-Reilly Events and manager of **The Great American Trucking Show**. "We also had a SuperSession kick-off program that covered meeting 2010 engine emissions standards. It wasn't a new topic, but we opened it to attendees at all levels in trucking. This was the first time that had happened at a tradeshow."

He attributed the show's attendance increase of 2,652 to the fact that attendees were hungry for content that helped them with their businesses. "I believe that when you're in a challenging environment and are still in business," Sims said, "you are looking for answers and for the opportunity to connect with peers and exhibitors that can help you with solutions."

Maria Del Valle, **Intl. Convention of Allied Sportfishing Trades** director, attributed marketing efforts and a centralized Florida show location for attendance hitting its highest mark in 10 years at her show.

“We focused our promotional efforts on ensuring that key industry players and entrepreneurs alike were at the show,” Del Valle said. “We substantially increased our online and e-mail promotional efforts, focusing on both exhibitors and attendees. We also enlisted our board of directors and other members to help ensure buyer attendance. As a result, there was a 58-percent increase in the number of retail buyers that attended the Orlando show.”

Education and demonstrations were the keys to success for the **Farm Science Review**, according to show manager Chuck Gamble. “We provide educational programming for farmers to discover what is new and innovative,” he said. “Our programming is provided by the Ohio State University Extension. Our farmer attendees know that when they attend an educational program at the Farm Science Review, they will receive unbiased information. Next year, we will have a major field drainage demonstration that will be conducted.”

Farm Science Review also expanded into social media to obtain greater recognition this past year. “Facebook, Twitter and Ning,” Gamble said. “Videos were produced and uploaded immediately during the show, which had a huge benefit to the media industry. This area will grow dramatically for us during the next 11 months.”

Karen Alexander, show manager for the **Knoxville Home Design & Remodeling Show**, noted two big changes that helped maintain the consumer show’s space and exhibitor count, as well as increase attendance.

The first was a change in show sponsorship. “This year, we did not re-sign with Home Depot as a presenting sponsor,” Alexander said. “By doing so, we got more small business owners to join the show, as they felt Home Depot was getting the spotlight. You must be creative in your financial situation of the exhibitor and listen to their needs as they are struggling but do want to do the shows. These companies have been, and always will be, the bread and butter of all shows, so we work with them. We were exhibitors for 30 years, so we know how the other side feels and take that into consideration when doing our shows.”

Marketing was the second factor that elevated the Home Design & Remodeling Show. “This year, we used another ad agency, who got us more use out of the media sponsorships,” Alexander said. “We had more giveaways from exhibiting companies with the radio and TV stations doing this. Our commercial this year was powerful, and so many of our exhibitors said it woke them up when they heard it. We have rebooked 150 booths already for the fall.”

Not all sectors experienced the fall growth spurt. Health care shows continued to experience an across-the-board downward trend in all indexes. “The medical show numbers illustrate that the impact of the economic recession hit them a little later,” Hughes said. “The medical shows have a little further to go before they will begin to experience any growth.”

While Las Vegas shows had declines in space and exhibitors, there was an increase in attendance of 6.4 percent. “The death of Vegas was announced prematurely,” Hughes said. “The shows that remain in Vegas are healthy.”

Largest Shows

Four third-quarter shows had more than 500,000 net square feet of exhibit space. Here are the shows, with their respective net square footage:

- **Farm Science Review**, 2,440,800
- **The Chicago Market Living and Giving**, 800,000
- **ASD Las Vegas**, 651,000
- **Print '09**, 548,634

Fastest-growing Shows

Of the 47 shows included in this report, seven grew more than 15 percent by at least one index, compared with the same period in 2008:

- **Modern Day Marine Expo** increased 20 percent in net square footage.
- **Fire-Rescue Intl.** increased 16.7 percent in net square footage, 16.6 percent in exhibiting companies and 62.1 percent in professional attendance.
- **Design Automation Conference** increased 25 percent in professional attendance.
- **Intl. Convention of Allied Sportfishing Trades** increased 23.5 percent in professional attendance.
- **ASD Las Vegas** increased 19.3 percent in professional attendance.
- **IncentiveWorks** increased 16.6 percent in professional attendance.
- **SuperZoo Trade Show** increased 15.4 percent in professional attendance.

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