



Migrating to a New Venue

by Angela D. Harris

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Distribution Technology Trade Fair Launches Trend

Most everybody has walked though your run-of-the-mill tradeshow. The Distribution Virtual Tech Fair™, sponsored by the Brown Smith Wallace Consulting Group, was not your run-of-the-mill tradeshow.

It was a free, two-day event that offered more than a Website tour to its attendees. Once registered, participants were given access to the show's main hall. The computer-generated hall contained advertisements, directions, stairs, and multiple links to different features of the trade show.

The Software Floor showcased distribution industry software and technology providers. Companies such as Activant Solutions, Intuit Eclipse, Integrated Systems Technology Inc., and Sage Software, among others, each had their logo attached to a miniature display booth. The Resource Floor was set up identically, but this floor's exhibitors were primarily trade associations, industry publications, and technology departments.

Complementing the two main floors, and mimicking a real life trade show, the event included a Prize Pavilion, Education Center, and a Virtual Lounge. The Prize Pavilion made a complete list of the prizes attendees could win from visiting the different booths. It kept track of personal prize points, and gave the rules and instructions of how to win a prize.

The Education Center offered more than 14 interactive presentations from industry experts, including topics such as vendor managed inventory; computer system selection and implementation; and operational excellence and profitable growth. Just across the way, the Virtual Lounge was a place to network, trade business cards, and have conversations with other show attendees.



BUT DOES IT COMPARE?

The venue's surroundings were bright, flashing, and somewhat overwhelming. At the virtual trade show, almost everything on the screen was a link. There were animated advertisements and scrolling banner ads throughout the event. There was even ambient crowd noise and information kiosks that would answer specific questions via live chat.

The exhibitor booths were highly interactive. In the middle of each, they contained a Jumbotron screen. Some would automatically begin to play a video or message when the viewer clicked on the vendor.

Shortly after beginning a booth visit, a button would pop up bringing a subtle bell-like noise greeting the new booth visitor with a welcome and hello. This wasn't any ordinary preprogrammed greeting, however, it was an actual representative from the company inviting the attendee to chat, ask questions, exchange virtual business cards, and make a valid industry connection. One vendor greeted a visitor with the traditional, "Can I help you out with anything?" But then added, "This is so strange."

The booths also contained large amounts of information and direct links to the companies' Websites. Some exhibitors offered prizes and invited each visitor to enter. There was no need to fill out a form, though; the attendee was able to just click a button and all the contest information was automatically filled out.

At the end of the event, winners of prizes, such as iPods, walkie-talkies, a DVD player, gift certificates, and the show giveaway, a Dell Latitude Laptop, were notified via e-mail.

The show even provided a virtual briefcase for participants to collect brochures and literature from each booth.



TOTAL TECH UNDERSTANDING

Taking a break from educational sessions, and the hubbub of the trade fair floor, participants were able to attend a keynote address given by Adam Fein, Ph.D., a fellow of the Distribution Research and Education Foundation, and founder and president of Pembroke Consulting Inc. His lecture, "Embracing Changing Technology," highlighted the importance of distribution technology and its impact on the economic market. He discussed the current state of technology usage at wholesaler distributors today, and provided a forecasted outlook for 2012.

"Wholesale distribution is emerging as one of the most technology-intensive industries in the U.S. economy," said Fein.

"Technology investments by wholesaler-distributors represent opportunities to solve genuine problems for customers while driving continuous improvement in the business."

ADD IT UP

Still not sure why learning and using this new technology is beneficial to the local distributor?

Imagine Joe Distributor who can't find the time to go to trade shows, or can't afford all the travel. This virtual trade show was 100 percent online and virtual, offering free registration and free attendance.

It featured live interaction and live broadcasts. After the show, records of each personal booth visit, business card exchanged, and educational session attended were sent directly to the participants via e-mail. The company also offered full statistical reports and complete transcripts of every chat conducted with booth representatives.



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"The huge difference for clients that are used to putting on physical events is, let's say, they can reach 10,000 people," said Malcolm Lotzof, CEO of InXpo, a virtual trade show producer.

"They look at their market and say, 'That's only 10,000 people out of 500,000 people in my association, or 1 million people in my industry.' [With a physical trade show] they can't serve their whole market."

Virtual trade shows are cheaper, extend greater reach, and provide multiple valued experiences. What more could a distributor ask for from a trade show? You miss the exotic trip? Order Thai food, toss on your Bermuda shorts, and grab a heat lamp.

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