"IT'S MORE THAN SALES!" RE-EXAMINING EXHIBITOR MOTIVATIONS: INSIGHTS FROM THE CONFERENCE/CONVENTION SECTOR

Abstract:

Conference exhibitors are important stakeholders in the business events sector. Yet industry professionals such as conference organisers, convention bureaux and convention centres have limited understanding of the needs and motivations of exhibitors at conferences. Research on exhibitor motivations in the business events sector has largely focused on exhibitions and trade shows and neglected motivations for exhibiting at conferences. The purpose of this study was therefore to address this gap: to determine the motivations of conference exhibitors. The paper presents findings from semi-structured interviews with 26 exhibitors from four conferences held in Sydney, Australia, representing four industry sectors—medical, engineering, technology, and community services. Surprisingly, sales were not a primary motivation for conference exhibitors. Conference exhibitors are motivated to contribute to their respective industry sectors through sharing knowledge and information, building relationships, and building brand reputation within the industry space.

Keywords: exhibitors, motivations, conferences, networking

1. INTRODUCTION

Exhibitors are key stakeholders in the business events sector. The sector is typically characterised by its connections to business, trade, and tourism and is comprised of conferences, conventions, incentives, seminars, public or trade shows, exhibitions, and corporate meetings (Business Events Council of Australia, 2011; Foley, Schlenker, Edwards, & Lewis-Smith, 2013). It has been among the fastest growing sectors of the tourism industry over recent decades (Lin & Lin, 2013), however the sector was disrupted during the COVID-19 pandemic, with events postponed and cancelled due to health restrictions and border closures. The latest data shows an upswing in global demand for business events (Events Industry Council, 2022), and that a number of innovations have emerged from the disruption such as hybrid modes of delivery (OECD, 2021).

Whilst the sector has a good understanding of the motivations of trade show exhibitors (Sarmento & Simões, 2018; Lee et al., 2012; Menon & Edward, 2014), more insights are needed on exhibitor motivations in the context of conferences. Convention bureaux have traditionally viewed conference exhibitors to be key contributors in realising business and trade outcomes at conferences, yet very little information is available to confirm this. As conference organisers strategically manage the return of events and hybrid modes of attendance, a key consideration is to ensure the ongoing and effective participation of exhibitors. Understanding exhibitor motivations is crucial to supporting their success and their ongoing participation in conferences.

Over the past two decades, academic research into business events has focused primarily on exhibitions, also known as trade shows or trade fairs (Sarmento & Simões,

2018; Shereni, Ncube & Mazhande, 2021). Defined as "organized events where companies exhibit and show their (latest) offers (products, services, etc.) and establish contacts with relevant stakeholders" (Sarmento, Farhangmehr, & Simões, 2015a, p. 273-274), the literature has explored trade shows as places for direct selling, information exchange, and relationship marketing, as well as a means for cost-effective communication strategies (Han & Verma, 2014; Sarmento, Farhangmehr, & Simões, 2015b; Silva, Vale & Moutinho, 2021). Much of the research has focused on the exhibitor's perspective (Sarmento & Simões, 2018; Tafesse & Skallerud, 2017), and in particular the range of reasons why firms exhibit, which have traditionally been categorised into selling and non-selling purposes (Bonoma, 1983; Kerin & Cron, 1987). Selling functions include introducing new products/services, servicing current customers, or identifying new customers (Lee, Seo & Yeung, 2012; Shereni et al., 2021), while non-selling functions relate to image enhancement, accessing networking opportunities, building relationships, and gaining visibility (Kang & Schrier, 2011; Menon & Edward, 2017; Rai & Nayak, 2020; Sarmento et al., 2015b).

Exhibitors are often treated as a singular sample, and few studies have attempted to differentiate exhibitor motivations based on the event type (Lee & Kang, 2014). As a result, existing research on exhibitor motivations tends to be highly contextual. An understanding of exhibitors' motivations for exhibiting at conferences, often used synonymously with conventions (Draper & Neal, 2018), is currently lacking. Conferences are defined as "a formal meeting in which many people gather in order to talk about ideas or problems related to a particular topic, academic discipline or industry area" and include "a mix of academics (including postgraduate students) and industry

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professionals, with occasional community involvement" (Edwards, Foley, & Malone, 2017, p. 7). Conferences aim to facilitate discussion, the exchange of information, problem solving, and consultation (Events Industry Council, 2021). Many conferences also have some form of secondary exhibition attached (Fenich, 2012), and thus present a ripe context for the study of exhibitors outside of the dominant trade show setting.

Not only is this a gap in the research literature but it is also an important area of investigation for the business events sector. In particular, the sector is interested in knowing whether organisations are motivated to exhibit at conferences in order to realise sales and business deals. In this regard, the authors were approached by Business Events Sydney—the leading organisation responsible for promoting New South Wales as a business events destination, and for attracting domestic and global meetings to Sydney and other destinations in New South Wales (Business Events Sydney, 2018)—to investigate this issue. Previous conference research has found that delegates benefit from new knowledge, technologies and techniques that they pick up from conference exhibitors and take back to their workplaces to improve practice (Foley, Schlenker, Edwards & Hayllar, 2010; Edwards, Foley & Schlenker, 2011; Foley, Edwards & Weber, 2021). However, the motivations of the exhibitors themselves are not addressed in this literature. Aside from a scoping study investigating the motivations of exhibitors at a medical conference (Schlenker, Foley & Edwards, 2012), empirical studies on this particular topic are lacking. Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore exhibitors' motivations in the context of conferences, and to determine whether these motivations differ by industry sector.

We adopted an informed grounded theory framework (Flick, 2018) for this exploratory study. This framework allowed us to draw conceptually from past literature, for example, on exhibitor motivations at trade shows, while remaining open to new ideas presented by the empirical data on motivations of exhibitors at conferences. A grounded theory approach is useful for research into phenomenon where there has been little or no previous research and allows for new theory to emerge from the data (Charmaz, 2014).

The paper proceeds with a review of the literature in relation to tradeshows and exhibitor motivations. The methodology used in this study will then be discussed. Results from four case studies will be presented, followed by a discussion of the implications for both theory and practice. The paper will conclude with suggestions for future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review serves to overview the theoretical and empirical literature in the area of event exhibitor motivations. The purpose of this literature review is to contextualise the current study. It will also allow us to compare and generalise our findings.

Firstly, trade shows have been the focus of the majority of research on exhibitors and events, and the literature indicates that there are many reasons why firms choose to exhibit at trade shows: selling activities and direct customer engagement; brand promotion and reputation building; knowledge and information exchange; competitor comparison; and networking (Andreae, Hsu, & Norcliffe, 2013; AUMA, 2014; Han &

Verma, 2014; Hultsman, 2001; Whitfield & Webber, 2011). Each motivation is discussed in detail below.

2.1. Selling activities and Direct Customer Engagement

Overall, the literature suggests that selling and sales remain common points of interest in motivating exhibitors to engage in trade shows. Exhibitors motivated by selling are interested in the following factors: finding new prospects, selling products, sales and transactional selling, direct customer engagement, and lead-generation activities (Blythe, 2002; Han & Verma, 2014; Kang & Schrier, 2011; Nayak, 2019; Wang, Lee & Huh, 2017). At its most basic level, a trade show serves to bring potential customers direct to the company (Rai & Nayak, 2020; Sarmento & Simões, 2018). This provides opportunities for establishing new contacts and creating customers (Nayak, 2019), but also for maintaining contact with current customers (Han & Verma, 2014). These on-site activities can serve to generate leads for future sales, but as Huang (2016) notes, trade shows can also be a site for receiving orders or direct on-site sales. This is supported by Lee and Kang's (2014) empirical research, which found that exhibition and trade show visitors were more likely to be buyers. In this sense, trade shows are typically seen as selling-oriented environments.

2.2. Brand Promotion and Reputation Building

Brand promotion and reputation building are commonly cited objectives for exhibiting. Authors frequently note the integral relationship between participation at a trade fair and the establishment and perpetuation of a brand and corporate image (Bonoma, 1983; Han & Verma, 2014; Kang & Schrier, 2011; Menon & Edward, 2017). Andreae, Hsu, and Norcliffe (2013) noted that the brand typically supersedes the firm or

industry at a trade fair: Exhibitors aim for "brand recognition, with their name and logo prominently displayed" (p. 194). Kang and Schrier (2011) suggest exhibiting is about achieving company awareness, and Hultsman (2001) refers to the importance of visibility at a trade show. Similarly to Sarmento et al. (2015a), this visibility is explained as the exhibiting organisation being seen to have a presence, which is useful for reputation building. Smith, Hama and Smith (2003) also note the role that exhibiting plays in developing goodwill for future interactions between the exhibiting organisation and its potential buyers.

2.3. Knowledge, Information, and Competitor Comparison

The literature suggests that the desire for knowledge and information drives exhibitor participation in trade shows (Huang, 2016; Kozak, 2005; Silva et al., 2021). Key to the exchange of knowledge and information, the trade show environment brings together multiple stakeholders, which allows exhibitors to gain information from a variety of sources including competitors, suppliers, partners, customers and industry experts (Huang 2016; Silva et al., 2021). While the desire for knowledge manifests in a variety of forms, Silva, Vale and Moutinho (2021) suggest there are three main types of information to be gained: customer intelligence, market condition intelligence and product intelligence. The literature suggests that this desire for knowledge and information is linked to the pursuit of competitive advantage. For example, exhibitors are motivated by a desire for information that can give the firm currency in their particular field. This might be information regarding current or upcoming trends relevant to their field, or specific market information such as competitor performance and upcoming product releases (Nayak, 2019; Shereni et al., 2021; Whitfield & Webber, 2011). Trade

show participation also offers a potential competitive advantage where exhibitors can glean enough information for the firm to maintain an innovative business structure and develop future strategies (Rai & Nayak, 2020; Yuksel & Voola, 2010). Exhibitors are also motivated by the possibility of finding new ideas, testing new products, or scanning for market opportunities during trade shows (Tafesse & Korneliussen, 2011). Sarmento et al. (2015b) suggest that it is not only about finding new ideas, but particularly, to see who in the field is innovating. This is reflective of a greater trend among exhibitors to perceive the trade show as a place with the potential to offer innovative, current, and competitive information drawn from various sources (Silva et al., 2021).

2.4. Networking

Networking, understood as a process of engaging with attendees, visitors, and other exhibitors, is recognised as one of the primary motivations for exhibiting at a trade show (de Klerk, Kruger, & Saayman, 2014; Kitchen, 2017; Lee et al., 2012; Wang, Lee & Huh, 2017). For some, networking may be a way of establishing relationships and building contacts (Hultsman, 2001; Lee et al., 2012). Others might engage in networking in the trade show context in order to "enliven business relationships" (Sarmento et al., 2015a, p. 284) and to develop trust (Sarmento et al., 2015b). De Klerk, Kruger and Saayman (2014) argue that networking can lead to real business benefits by exposing exhibitors to a diverse range of networks, thus expanding their access to not only information, products and technologies, but also potential partners and collaborators. Furthermore, networks are considered crucial to innovation and act as catalysts for thriving industries (Foley et al., 2021). Mitchell, Schlegelmilch, and Mone (2016) suggested that in addition to professional networking, which translates into business

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benefits, there are also opportunities for personal networking, fostering social relationships with actual or potential partners and collaborators—the value of which is realised by knowing the person or persons with whom you might end up doing business.

The above discussion serves to demonstrate that much has been published on exhibitors' motivations with specific reference to trade events (Sarmento & Simões, 2018; Shereni et al., 2021; Tafesse & Skallerud, 2017). Indeed, a number of authors have acknowledged that future research on exhibitor motivations should explore other markets and contexts (Lee et al., 2012; Sarmento et al., 2015b; Tafesse & Korneliussen, 2011). Lee and Kang (2014) asserted that future research needs to "focus on market segmentation comparison to better explain the relationships between exhibitors' motives and the type of event they attend" (p. 191). To this end, and representing a growing body of literature on exhibitors outside the trade show context, a small number of recent studies have begun to investigate festival exhibitors. This follows Mosely and Mowatt's (2011) proposal of a research agenda for investigating exhibitors in the context of festivals. The authors noted specifically that as empirical data on exhibitors in the festival context doesn't exist, the motivations of festival exhibitors should be a priority focus. Since then, and aimed at addressing the gap in the literature pertaining to exhibitors at festivals, there have been studies that investigated exhibitors in the context of both food festivals (Janiszewska, & Ossowska, 2021; Kwiatkowski, Hjalager, Ossowska, Janiszewska, Kurdyś-Kujawska, 2021) and traditional (cultural) festivals (Tanković, Kapeš, & Bašan, 2019). These studies draw on the body of literature on trade show exhibitor motivations, and use this as the basis to explore the motivations of exhibitors (also referred to as vendors) in the festival context.

Finally, our literature review confirms that little work has been undertaken to examine motivations to exhibit at conferences, despite the recognition that conferences bring together professional members of an industry and provide substantial opportunities for collaboration and information exchange. To our knowledge, there has been one study which has investigated exhibitor motivations in the context of a conference. Schlenker, Foley and Edwards (2012) conducted on-site interviews with exhibitors at a medical conference, with the findings clearly suggesting that exhibitor attendance at this conference was not related to sales or financial investment. Exhibitors saw themselves as active participants in developing and advancing the sector – through sharing knowledge and information from their own research, building relationships with researchers and practitioners in other countries, and building brand reputation about their product within the industry space. This initial scoping study provides the justification for a larger study focusing on exhibitor motivations in the conference setting to contribute to the literature on conference exhibitors as distinct from trade show exhibitors. This scoping study, focused on a medical conference, also highlighted the need for a study involving a greater cross section of industry sectors and conference types. Thus, the current study aims to address this gap by providing further insights into exhibitor motivations to exhibit at conferences and conventions, and whether these motivations differ by industry sector.

3. METHODOLOGY

In line with our grounded theory framework and exploratory approach, the study employed a case study method to explore the motivations of exhibitors in the context of conferences and conventions. Case study investigations can involve single or multiple

cases (Veal, 2011), and although there is no "required" number of cases, consideration was given to the research context and the available resources. The cases selected for inclusion in this study were chosen in consultation with Business Events Sydney from their list of bid wins. Two criteria guided the selection of conferences. First, the conference had to have an associated exhibition. Here, exhibitors generally comprise only a small portion of the overall attendees, which is distinctly different from an exhibition or trade show. The second criterion was that the selected conferences represent a range of industry sectors from which to draw a breadth of exhibitor perspectives—both from science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields as well as the social sciences. On the basis of these criteria, and considering available resources, four conferences were chosen for this study, as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Event Case Studies

Event Name	Date held	Industry	Delegate Attendance	Exhibitor Booths	Exhibitors interviewed
Asia Pacific Vitreo-Retina Society Congress (APVRS)	31 Jul–2 Aug 2015	Medical	~2,000	26	7
International Symposium on Rock Fragmentation by	24–26 Aug 2015	Engineering	292	21	6

Blasting (FRAGBLAST)					
World Hydrogen Technologies Convention (WHTC)	11–14 Oct 2015	Technology	~1,000	12	6
International Foster Care Organisation World Conference (IFCO)	8–11 Nov 2015	Community Services	~960	15	7

The four cases, representing four industry sectors of medical, engineering, technology, and community services, provide an opportunity to compare and contrast different conference types and industry sectors. This allows for an examination of differences of each case while still investigating the overall trends in exhibitor motivations in the conference context.

While named in different ways (e.g., congress vs. symposium), the four event case studies selected are representative of a range of international conferences that had associated exhibitions. Programs for the four events were predominantly based around research and/or industry presentations, with a small number of exhibitions as an auxiliary element of the conference. A fifth conference – the 2nd Asia-Oceania Conference on Neutron Scattering – was selected for the purposes of undertaking a

pilot study. This conference was used solely to test the exhibitor interview guide and approach, and the results will not be reported in this paper.

Data for the case studies were collected on-site through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews at each of the four events held in Sydney. Each of the conference organisers were contacted in advance to arrange access, allowing the research team to be on-site during the conference in order to conduct interviews with exhibitors. Each conference program was examined and it was agreed to only approach exhibitors during their 'down-time', when conference delegates were in presentation sessions or other programmed activities.

Interviews were conducted on-site over two full days at each conference. Each on-site exhibitor booth was approached and the representative of the exhibiting organisation was invited to participate in the research. An information sheet was provided and consent gained prior to the interview, which included permission to audio record. This approach resulted in a total of 26 exhibitors interviewed across the four events and represents a self-selected sample (Lavrakas, 2008). The sample was self-selected based on whether the exhibitors chose to participate in an interview or not. Those who agree to be interviewed select themselves to be part of the sample, and those who choose not to participate in an interview effectively select themselves out of the sample. Table 2 profiles the interviewees by gender and position held within their organisation.

Table 2: Profile of Interview Respondents

Position	Number

Director/Managing Director	9
Business Development Manager	4
Marketing/Sales Manager	4
Chief Executive Officer	1
Chief Operating Officer	1
Other/not specified	7
Total	*26*
Gender	**Number**
Male	15
Female	11
Total	*26*

A semi-structured interview guide served to align the content of the interviews. The opening questions focused on gaining the necessary background information on the exhibiting company, and the company's representative. Then, a series of open-ended questions were used to understand the motivations for and perceived outcomes of exhibiting. These questions were based on the previous literature review of exhibitor motivations in a trade show context and focused on selling activities, brand promotion and reputation building, knowledge and information exchange, competitor comparison and networking (Andreae, Hsu, & Norcliffe, 2013; Han & Verma, 2014; Whitfield & Webber, 2011). In addition, the semi-structured style of interview and conversational tone allowed for interviewers to probe for greater details where appropriate, and to

explore other ideas and perspectives on the topic, as introduced by the participants (Lavrakas, 2008). The interviews were conducted on-site, at the exhibitor booth, and were audio-recorded. They ranged from 8 to 20 minutes in duration.

Due to time and financial resource limitations, coupled with the ease of access to exhibitors during the conferences, the decision was made to conduct interviews on-site. However, we acknowledge the associated limitations of background noise and on-site distractions. In order to minimise these, interviews were only conducted during the quiet times for exhibitors – when delegates were in session – which meant we were not intruding on the times when they were engaging with delegates, but instead approached them when they were largely unoccupied. Mosely and Mowatt (2011) also recognized the difficulties in accessing exhibitors in the festival context. They acknowledged that researchers must choose between on-site interviews, or face the challenges associated with gaining access to exhibitors off-site, including privacy issues and the difficulty of accessing exhibitor contact lists for follow-up.

Due to the large number of interviews, and the presence of background noise adding to the complexity of transcription, the interview recordings were transcribed verbatim by a specialist (human) academic transcription service. The research team implemented a number of measures to ensure accuracy of the transcription (McMullin, 2021), including having the interviews transcribed immediately after each conference, undertaking proofreading of transcripts to ensure their accuracy, and checking statements categorised by the transcriber as "inaudible" against the original interview recording.

An inductive approach to coding was adopted, characterised by "a desire to prevent existing theoretical concepts from over-defining the analysis and obscuring the possibility of identifying and developing new concepts and theories" (Silver & Lewins, 2014, p. 162). NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software package was used, and the coding process began with reading each transcript and open coding the text (Silver & Lewins, 2014), assigning initial codes to relevant words, sentences or paragraphs. The second step was axial coding (Silver & Lewins, 2014), which involved the redefining and rearrangement of the initial open codes, often splitting codes into subcategories, combining similar codes, and identifying relationships between codes. Each piece of text was then explored through its coding, identifying recurring themes pertaining to motivations for exhibiting at conferences which were drawn on in subsequent discussion and analysis.

Additionally, secondary data from the conference website, program, and any available event and industry sector reports were used to establish the contextual background for each of the events in the study, including conference history and purpose, program and design, and profile in terms of number of delegates, sponsors and exhibitors.

Data were collated case by case and then we applied case study analytical techniques including "pattern matching" (Yin, 2018, p. 175) and "explanation building" (Yin, 2018, p. 179). Pattern matching involved comparing the case study empirical data with rival predictions (i.e., from the literature) as well as comparisons across the case studies themselves. Explanation building involved analysing the case study data by

building an explanation about the case. Data from each case was then compared to the explanation and the explanation was revised throughout the process (Yin, 2018).

4. FINDINGS

This section presents the study findings for each of the four event case studies and draws on representative comments from participants. The case study findings are then cross-analysed in the discussion section.

4.1. Case Study 1: Asia Pacific Vitreo-Retina Society Congress (APVRS)

The APVRS congress featured local and international keynote speakers and delegates and aimed to provide a platform for fruitful scientific exchange, the presentation of high-quality scientific studies and research, and knowledge sharing for general ophthalmologists and retinal specialists.

Most exhibitors at APVRS were sales representatives for medical technology companies and, as such, almost universally identified sales as the key motivator for exhibiting at the conference. Although they discussed the importance of sales, it should be noted that most exhibitors did not necessarily expect sales "on the day" of the conference. Exhibitors were generally realistic about on-site selling, mentioning the importance of follow-up and long-term relationship building to foster sales of their products. Exhibitors stressed that the ability to "touch and play" with the equipment allowed them to educate medical professionals about the benefits of their particular technology or service. This was seen as having distinct benefits for long-term sales success, with one exhibitor describing the conference as an opportunity for "awareness" and "planting the seed" in terms of their product range.

All of the exhibitors stressed the specific advantage that the conference provided them in allowing them the opportunity to speak face to face with potential customers. As one exhibitor explained, conferences are "the perfect place . . . where [doctors] have the availability and they've got time to chat." Another exhibitor noted that the conference allowed her to connect with regional customers (doctors and technicians) who ordinarily were more difficult to meet. The exhibitor stressed that the face-to-face contact at the conference was more meaningful than telephone or email contact because the customer could ask questions and try out the equipment. Once an initial relationship had been established with a customer, and they had been exposed to the product range, the exhibitor was in a better position to follow up with phone calls and drive sales following the conference. Thus, face-to-face contact at a conference was seen as an important precursor to long-term sales outcomes.

Exhibiting at a professional medical conference was also seen as helping to legitimise a firm's products and expertise. For example, one exhibitor also sponsored several doctors who attended and presented papers at the conference, which were based on interventions that utilised their products. The exhibitor indicated that this was seen to improve their profile as a professional organization in the industry. One exhibitor explained his motivation as simply having a "presence" at the conference so that they could maintain their profile in the industry: "We're just here because we're always here."

Networking was also regarded as an important motivator for exhibiting at the conference. While networking with potential customers had obvious benefits for future sales, exhibitors were also quick to identify the benefits of networking with other exhibitors. In particular, exhibitors highlighted the advantage of competitor analysis,

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including finding out about and understanding competitor technologies. Importantly, it was noted that in many cases, other exhibitors were not in direct competition but rather provided opportunities for collaboration on projects in the future. The conference therefore allowed firms to see what other organizations were doing and to identify potential areas for collaboration.

In summary, APVRS exhibitors consistently mentioned sales as a primary motivation; however, this was rarely seen as simply generating sales on the same day. Often, sales were linked to lead generation, providing evidence pertaining to the product or technology, and raising brand awareness for future sales. Additionally, networking was seen as a key incentive to attend the conference. Exhibitors discussed a desire to get to know both their customers and competitors, which in some cases ended up being collaborators. They discussed the utility of being able to speak face to face and determine current and future requirements. The conference was universally noted as an important space where traditional barriers—such as accessing regional consumers, busy surgeons, or suppliers—could be overcome and where exhibitors could communicate directly with interested and relevant stakeholders.

4.2. Case Study 2: International Symposium on Rock Fragmentation by Blasting (FRAGBLAST)

FRAGBLAST brought together mining and blasting professionals to engage in scientific and technical debate on aspects of rock blasting and explosives engineering. Over the years, the FRAGBLAST symposium has offered a forum to share expertise, resulting in a number of scientific advances and practical applications.

The most common motivation for exhibiting at FRAGBLAST was to network with professionals, researchers, and competitors. By bringing together a range of professionals and companies that operate within the industry, but across a range of different specialty areas, the conference was seen as a space for networking and collaboration. Exhibitors described the conference as an opportunity to develop stakeholder relationships that could lead to collaboration on future projects. One exhibitor indicated that his main motivation for networking and collaboration was to meet with competitors in the industry. Through networking at the conference, exhibitors were able to connect with other professionals in the field, leading to potential partnerships for the future. Exhibitors were also motivated by information sharing at the conference, and its role in the future development of products and technology.

In addition to networking and collaboration, exhibitors were motivated by the opportunity to raise brand and product awareness. One exhibitor described the conference as an opportunity to communicate directly with potential customers about the benefits of their products and services. He explained a key motivation as "disseminating the ideas and innovations of the company" to the broader industry and potential customers. Another exhibitor stated that promotion, education, and discussion were his key objectives. By introducing consumers to their products, exhibiting increases brand and product awareness, thus creating the potential to kick-start research and inquiry, which may lead to future sales. Sales were discussed by FRAGBLAST exhibitors as a secondary motivation in comparison to a general ability to raise brand and product awareness.

Competitor analysis was also mentioned as a motivator for exhibiting at the conference. One exhibitor noted the comparative marketing element of conferences, stating he could "check up on the marketing strategies of the competition" in order to "keep up." Similarly, another exhibitor discussed the main objective of exhibiting as engaging with the market to "examine [the] extant technologies and competitors."

In summary, a key motivation identified by nearly all of FRAGBLAST exhibitors was networking. They discussed how exhibiting at the conference enabled face-to-face contact with potential customers and researchers. Additionally, many exhibitors noted the potential of this contact for information sharing and establishing relationships that could lead to collaboration in the future, particularly in terms of technological developments in engineering. Some exhibitors also discussed how the conference provided them with opportunities for competitor analysis. They were able to scrutinise the competition in the field, including identifying the technology competitors had developed that offered alternatives to their own products. The opportunity to raise brand and product awareness was also seen as important and may lead to future sales.

4.3. Case Study 3: World Hydrogen Technologies Convention (WHTC)

WHTC was a leading technical and commercial event for the global hydrogen energy and fuel cell community where delegates and exhibitors had an opportunity to learn about innovative applications for hydrogen and fuel cell technologies; explore cutting-edge products; and reach out to a wide audience of prospective suppliers, clients, and partners.

Participants almost universally stated that their key motivation to exhibit at the conference was to network with a range of professionals in the industry. They saw the

conference as an opportunity to create and/or maintain an industry presence and mix with other professionals working in the field. One exhibitor explained that the conference provided him with the opportunity to "mix with other academics to swap ideas" and make their firm available to other organizations for discussion.

Networking with other researchers was seen as important in terms of generating collaborative discussion around their particular technology. This could mean finding "potential partners to work with on technology as well as seeking feedback" from the industry. Exhibitors also identified the advantage of "sharing their technology" and networking to achieve future funding and development. Thus, it was the collaborative aspects that came from networking that served as motivation to exhibit at the conference.

A number of exhibitors described the ability to showcase new technology as a motivator for exhibiting. This was linked to showcasing their products to the range of experts brought together by the conference. Presenting to these experts established the company as a legitimate and significant contributor to the hydrogen development field. One exhibitor explained his major motivation as being the drive to communicate to the hydrogen industry that they "wanted to establish a presence in the space." Several other exhibitors supported this, explaining that presenting technology at an industry conference enabled them to legitimise their developments as well as raise "brand awareness" for their organization for the purposes of collaboration, sales, and future product development.

In summary, WHTC exhibitors stressed that the conference was as an opportunity to bring researchers and industry professionals together to showcase

technology and identify opportunities for collaboration. The exhibitors identified their key motivations as networking with other professionals in the industry to gain feedback and share ideas, as well as raising brand awareness for their products and technologies. Exhibiting at the conference was also seen as a way to legitimise technology within a professional industry.

4.4. Case Study 4: International Foster Care Organisation World Conference (IFCO)

IFCO brought together foster, kinship, and other carers from around the world to celebrate their work in caring for vulnerable children and young people in the care system, and importantly, to empower carers to continue with this work.

There was a general agreement among exhibitors that their primary motivation for attending the conference was to engage in information exchange. As such, their aim was to provide information to carers about support services and resources available and to share knowledge with other organizations about best practices. Several exhibitors indicated that the international audience at the conference meant that they could "compare notes" about what was happening overseas, which they believed could be used to develop services in Australia.

Networking was also discussed as a motivation for exhibiting, with the conference seen as a space where carers, care agencies, funding bodies, and other professionals could come together in one place. Through showcasing research and "sharing stories and experiences" exhibitors were able to identify industry issues and gaps. Networking at the conference with other agencies was used to identify opportunities for future collaborative projects and programs where expertise and

resources could be combined and utilised effectively to address these gaps. The emphasis was clearly on other exhibitors as collaborators rather than competitors.

Exhibitors also explained that a major motivation for attending the conference was to raise brand awareness about their services. They wanted to raise their profile in the industry and target current and potential carers. One exhibitor explained how the conference allowed her to "spread the word about what we offer and our support." While she did note that there was an opportunity to recruit carers to their organization, this was identified as secondary to information exchange and networking. In fact, even where brand awareness was a motivator for exhibiting, firms spoke about the "united front" where all exhibitors were there to ensure that carers were receiving information that could support them in their carer roles. Thus, the conference was seen on the whole as an opportunity for all exhibitors to raise sector awareness.

Finally, as part of supporting carers, several exhibitors explained their motivations as wanting to provide their carers with some respite. For example, one exhibitor had provided financial support for a number of carers to attend the conference as this gave them the opportunity for some respite as well as the chance to exchange information and experiences with other carers. Similarly, another exhibitor who paid for their carers to attend, stated that she saw the conference as a way of showing how valued the carers were to them: "This is our opportunity to say thank you to carers—to care for our carers."

In summary, IFCO exhibitors were motivated by the opportunities for information/knowledge sharing and networking. Importantly, exhibitors did not identify other exhibitors as competitors but rather as collaborators in the industry. All of the

exhibitors saw their role as providing the best outcomes for the children by providing support to carers. This support was given in terms of knowledge and awareness but also by simply providing some respite and acknowledgment of carers' roles.

The themes arising from the four case studies presented above are summarised in Table 3. The table overviews the motivations identified in each of the case studies.

Table 3: Summary of Cross-Case Themes

	Relevant Cases			
Motivations	APVRS	FRAGBLAST	WHTC	IFCO
Networking	x	x	x	x
Collaboration	x	x	x	x
Brand awareness	x	x	x	x
Future sales	x	x	x	
Face to face contact	x	x		
Having a presence/legitimizing the business	x		x	
Competitor analysis	x	x		
Information sharing		x		x
Customer support				x

Note: APVRS = Asia Pacific Vitreo-Retina Society Congress; FRAGBLAST = International Symposium on Rock Fragmentation by Blasting; WHTC = World Hydrogen Technologies Convention; IFCO = International Foster Care Organisation World Conference.

5. DISCUSSION

In this section, the cases are cross analysed to highlight the main themes pertaining to motivations for exhibiting at conferences. We offer explanations of differences in how the same motivations can manifest differently across the four industry sectors.

While networking was acknowledged as a key motivation by all exhibitors, the expected outcomes of this networking varied depending on the conference and industry type. For exhibitors at the technology conference, the motivations for networking were around engaging in discussion, swapping of ideas and gaining feedback. At the engineering conference, networking was undertaken in the hope that it would lead to potential collaboration in technology development or research. Quite differently again, exhibitors at the medical conference saw networking as a way of developing relationships that could lead to future sales. Finally, in the community services conference, exhibitors saw networking as a way of bringing together industry experts and resources to identify and address sector wide challenges. In summary, networking, while a key motivation for all exhibitors, manifested quite differently in each industry setting.

Closely linked to networking, collaboration was an important motivation for exhibiting among all exhibitors. Exhibitors at the medical, engineering and technology conferences were interested in identifying collaborative opportunities to develop research partnerships and new products and technologies. Quite distinctly, for the community services conference, the focus was much more on developing collaborations

among agencies. Exhibitors considered themselves to be working as a united group offering broader support for the industry sector and those working within it.

Exhibitors from the medical and technology conferences saw exhibiting at conferences as a way of having a "presence". Exhibitors at the medical conference described having a presence at the conference as being important to maintaining their profile as a professional organisation in the industry. At the technology conference, exhibiting was linked to establishing a presence in the space, marking the firm's place as a "player" in the hydrogen industry. This presence was also seen as an important way of providing legitimacy to both the firm itself and their products/technologies on display.

For exhibitors at all of the conferences, brand awareness was a key motivation. In the case of the medical, engineering and technology conferences, exhibitors sought to raise awareness of their brand and their products/technologies. In contrast, brand awareness in the context of the community services conference was about ensuring carers had knowledge of and access to a range of organisations and agencies within the industry that could support them in their carer roles.

The medical, engineering, and technology conferences all reported sales as a motivator; however, this focus differed slightly among them. In the case of the medical conference, exhibitors had an explicit focus on sales. This was distinct from exhibitors at the engineering and technology conferences where sales were not a primary consideration, but rather were seen as a potential future outcome from raising brand and product awareness during the conference. It should be noted, however, that even for the medical conference, which was explicitly focused on sales, there was a very low

expectation of making sales at the conference. Rather, the conference provided exhibitors with an opportunity to showcase technology and build brand awareness that could be used to foster sales at a later time.

The findings from the medical and engineering conferences were in line with previous literature, which identified the drive to gain competitor information as a motivation for exhibiting (Silva et al., 2021). In both cases, exhibitors were focused on examining and keeping abreast of their competitors' technologies and products.

Similar to Lee and Kang (2014), face-to-face contact was viewed by medical and engineering exhibitors as necessary for establishing relationships. The engineering exhibitors were motivated to establish relationships with potential customers and collaborators in a face-to-face environment. Face-to-face contact with potential customers was also important for exhibitors at the medical conference. Establishing the trust and rapport that comes with face-to-face interactions was seen as an important precursor to building relationships with doctors and other stakeholders that could lead to future sales. This was particularly important in the case of potential customers who are otherwise hard to access, for example doctors from rural and remote areas.

Information sharing was a motivation for both the engineering and community services sectors. The engineering sector were motivated by information sharing to improve the development of future products and technology. They understood the importance of information sharing as a collaborative tool for aligning their development with the needs of the sector. The importance of sharing information for the community services exhibitors was expressly aimed at ensuring carers had crucial information about best practice in order to undertake their roles effectively.

Customer support was explicitly noted by the community services exhibitors as an important motivation for exhibiting. This speaks to the nature of the conference, part of the community services sector, which focused on empowering carers in their roles supporting vulnerable children in the care system. Exhibitors were motivated to exhibit at the conference as a way of actively demonstrating their support to carers. By financially supporting carers to attend the conference, exhibitors felt they played a role in ensuring the carers were supported, acknowledged, and provided with some respite. This motivation seems quite unique and distinct to the particular conference audience and industry sector. Indeed, what set the community services exhibitors apart, was a focus on the broader social impact to be realised beyond the conference. While most other exhibitors were primarily motivated to bring benefit to their own organisation, the community services exhibitors appeared to be motivated by the need to advance the sector for the benefit of the broader community.

Table 4 provides a summary of the motivation themes identified in the case studies and the different ways in which these motivations manifest across the four industry sectors.

Table 4: Motivations by Industry Sector

Motivation	Breakdown Of Motivation By Industry Sector			
	Medical sector (APVRS)	Engineering sector (FRAGBLAST)	Technology sector (WHTC)	Community Services sector (IFCO)

Networking	Building relationships to lead to sales	Potential collaborators in technology development or research	Discussion, swapping ideas and gaining feedback	Solving industry issues
Collaboration	Potential partners for future projects			Offering broader support for the industry
Brand awareness	Profiling their own brands, products or technologies			Profiling sector wide services or agencies
Future sales	Primary motivation	Secondary motivation, and by-product of raising brand awareness		N/A
Face to face contact	Access to customers who are usually hard to reach; Relationship building as a precursor to future sales	Establishing relationships with potential customers and collaborators	N/A	N/A

Having a presence / legitimising the business	Maintaining their profile within industry	N/A	Establishing themselves as a 'player' in the industry space	N/A
Competitor analysis	Gaining information on competitor technologies		N/A	N/A
Information sharing	N/A	Improving the development of future products and technology	N/A	Sharing best practice knowledge to improve industry practice
Customer support	N/A	N/A	N/A	Active demonstration of support for, and acknowledgment of carers

6. IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

While literature on conferences is beginning to proliferate (Chen, 2021; Crowther, et al., 2018; Edwards et al., 2022; Edwards et al., 2017; Foley, Edwards & Schlenker, 2014; Foley et al., 2021, Hansen et al., 2020; Mair et al. 2018, Wang, 2021), studies on exhibitors at conferences have been noticeably absent. Notably, the literature on

exhibitions has focused almost exclusively on trade shows and has excluded conference exhibitors. The purpose of this study was to explore the motivations of exhibitors in the context of conferences, and to determine whether these motivations differed across industry sectors. In doing so, this research has made a significant contribution to the academic literature on the motivations of conference exhibitors.

The findings of this study suggest that the top three motivations for exhibitors at conferences were networking, collaboration, and brand awareness. The exhibitors saw themselves as active participants in developing and advancing their respective sectors by sharing knowledge and information from their own research, building relationships with researchers and practitioners in other countries, and building brand reputation about their products within the industry space. These findings align with the existing literature on motivations for exhibitors at trade shows, which include an interest in non-selling functions such as image enhancement, networking opportunities, building relationships, and gaining visibility (Hultsman, 2001; Lee et al., 2012; Sarmento et al., 2015a).

Where our findings differ is in relation to the previously identified selling functions that motivate exhibitors at trade shows. Finding new prospects, selling products, sales and transactional selling, direct customer engagement, and lead generation activities are recognised as key motivators for trade show exhibitors (Huang, 2016; Lee & Kang, 2014; Nayak, 2019). In contrast, sales and related activities were not found to be frontline motivations for the majority of exhibitors at conferences. In one of the four conferences, exhibitors were interested in sales but did not expect on-site selling. Rather, they viewed the conference space as a place to connect with customers who

were typically difficult to access. For exhibitors at the other two conferences, sales was not a primary motivator; rather, sales was seen as a potential future outcome from raising brand and product awareness at the conference. Notably, for all of the conferences, the discussion of sales was always linked to non-selling activities such as the opportunity to showcase technology, establish relationships, and raise brand and product awareness. These findings contribute to the theoretical development of the literature, by providing a deeper understanding of how conference exhibitors differ from their counterparts in the trade show setting.

There are a number of ways in which this research can be advanced in future studies, not only to further theory in the area of conference exhibitor motivations, but to have practical use in conference planning and the management of exhibitors. A number of the motivations identified were found to be relevant only for one or two of the case studies. For example, exhibiting as a way of having a presence in the industry sector and to legitimise the business was only relevant to the medical and technology conferences, while the motivation related to customer support was only explicitly relevant to the community services conference. Thus, while a number of motivations have been uncovered in this study, more work is required to understand the full scope of motivations for exhibitors at conferences across different industry sectors. A broader understanding of conference exhibitors is likely to reveal unique objectives and motivations. Extending the comparison of exhibitors across a wider range of conferences may also have implications for different industry sectors. For instance, it is possible some sectors and conferences are leveraging better outcomes from their exhibitions than others. Future research in this area would benefit from incorporating the

perspectives of conference organizers. For example, it would be helpful to understand how organizers' actions and delegate motivations align with exhibitors' motivations and goals.

The study's findings that conference exhibitors may be making contributions to the industry sector and community as they network and collaborate to further their respective sector goals is an important insight, and an area that warrants further research. It seems that in relation to conferences, exhibitors are also focused on the non-economic benefits (Edwards et al., 2017; Foley et al., 2013). Thus, conference organizers should consider activities that can encourage non-economic opportunities—networking, collaboration, information sharing, and sector development in the conference space. Further, our findings indicate that exhibitors can make positive contributions to vulnerable groups in society, but more research is needed. There is a growing body of research on the positive contributions that conferences make to public good (Edwards et al., 2017; Foley et al., 2021) but none of this work has focused on exhibitor impacts.

Face-to-face contact was found to be an important motivation for the medical and engineering exhibitors. Post-COVID-19, the new normal for conferences is likely to include more virtual and hybrid options with implications for face to face interactions between exhibitors and delegates. New models of interaction that emerge will need to take account of exhibitor motivations, and further research is required to understand the implications of virtual attendance on exhibitor motivations and outcomes. Such research will be of interest to conference organizers, professional associations, convention

bureaux, and governments to better understand exhibitor contributions, including the best ways to leverage them to their full potential.

Additionally, now that a foundational understanding of exhibitor motivations in the conference setting has been established, future research can serve to not only extend this understanding, but also bring in examination of other related variables, such as factors affecting the decision to exhibit, exhibitor satisfaction, performance outcomes and future exhibiting intentions (Lee & Kang, 2014, Menon & Edward, 2017).

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