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# Expos, Conferences and Conventions

## In this chapter you will cover:

- Expos, conferences and conventions
- The development and growth of the conference industry
- The uk conference and convention industry
- Conference and event budgeting

This chapter discusses the concept of expos, conferences and conventions. The expos, conferences and conventions market is multi-layered and fragmented, with many different business stakeholders: event managers, conference venues and centres, museums, hotels, destination management companies, travel agents, events planners, exhibitions and convention organisers, etc. The expos, conferences and conventions industry generates income for stakeholders and develops long-term strategic economic advantages for cities and regions. Expos, conferences, and conventions promote the destination and attract international meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions that can help expand economic development, jobs and knowledge creation in the host country. The case studies in this chapter explore the expos, conferences and conventions market and the positive contribution that these exhibitions, conventions and meetings play in developing major regions around the world.

## Expos, conferences and conventions

The terms expos, conferences and conventions are sometimes used interchangeably in the events industry, but there is a difference in their meaning depending on the purpose, reach and industry focus.

*Expositions*, or expos for short, are global events whose purpose is to educate the public, promote progress, share innovation and enable cooperation between people. Expos allow people to network with business owners and decision-makers on specific topics by way of seminars or round table meetings to learn and debate on specific areas and how they can be improved. Expos combine the professional development of a conference and the social aspects of a convention.

*Conferences* are esoteric formal meetings where people gather to talk about ideas or problems on a specific topic, and can be held at any time of the year for up to several days. Normally they have a professional agenda and atmosphere as well as outlook from dress, to content and speakers. While the conference may allow networking sessions after the conference, the main purpose is to talk about specific issues that face an entire industry or profession. For example, in the event industry a topic for a conference might be 'How to develop the exhibition industry post Covid 19'. The topics at conferences should be of interest to everyone attending the conference and relevant to the industry, as they address underlying issues and problems that need to be overcome and identify solutions. Conferences normally start off with a keynote speaker whose main purpose is to invigorate the conference with an exciting address based around the overall topic of the conference. This will normally be followed by sessions with presentations by other guest speakers. Even though conferences may provide breakout sessions, they usually allow attendees to learn from speakers or through activities. The attendees learn from the experience of speakers and live activities being carried out by organisers.

A *convention*, on the other hand, is the meeting of a large group of people at an arranged place and time to discuss or engage in some common interest. It is typically an annual event where people with similar interests gather to discuss and network on issues related to a specific industry or topic. Conventions can be formal or informal and can be as diverse as the San Diego Comic-Con, which is one of the largest hobbies and special interest conventions in the USA, to the Democratic or Republican National Convention. The tone and formality of the political convention would of course be different from that of the Comic-Con convention but both will have the same general format.

The expos, conferences and conventions industry has grown rapidly over the last two decades and this upward trend continues in a number of countries around the world. Globally there are approximately 30,000 exhibitions each year consisting of 4.5 million exhibiting companies and attracting over 300 million visitors. It has been reported that exhibitors and visitors combined spend around 116 billion euros every year on exhibitions, making this a significant global industry (UFI, 2019). The global exhibition industry was growing very fast in the USA, EU and Asia Pacific. The growth of the exhibition and convention industry has been a major driver for the local economy in many regions around the world with local authorities encouraging development of convention centres in major cities. A *Global Exhibition Barometer* report states that the total output in business sales including direct, indirect and induced output is 275 billion euros (UFI, 2021).

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the exhibition and expo industry around the world has, however, been devastating. According to a *Global Exhibition Barometer* report (UFI 2021) between April and August 2020 more than half the conference and exhibition companies surveyed did not carry out any activities. On average globally, revenues for 2020 represented only 28% of the revenues produced for same period in the previous year. It is expected that revenues in the first half of 2021 will represent 34% of those in 2019 and for the whole of 2021 only 58% compared to 2019. In terms of profits, 52% of companies faced a loss, and 30%

a reduction of their profit by more than 50% (UFI, 2021). However, in all regions, the majority of companies expected both local and national exhibitions to open again by the end of June 2021 at the latest. This was not expected for international exhibitions until the second half of 2021.

In the decade prior to the pandemic, the expos, conferences and conventions industry helped businesses and local economies to grow. As local communities look for new ways to enhance their economic strength, the industry plays a vital role in developing and supporting local economies through employment, entertainment, hospitality and increased local tourism.

In 2017 the global MICE (meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibition) industry size was 805 billion US dollars and was projected to reach 1,439.3 billion US dollars in 2025. The meeting segment dominated the global MICE industry, accounting for 505.8 billion US dollars. This was attributed to positive economic trends, improving infrastructure and growth in tourism along with globalisation of business. The segment was also predicted to achieve a healthy growth rate in the future. This was attributed to the number of international business travellers, increasing government initiatives for the development of the MICE segment and SME sector combined with ongoing MICE industry growth trends – organising hybrid meetings and using social media and meeting apps (Research and Markets, 2019). The increased use of social media, tailor-made experiences, the move towards virtual and augmented elements and the demand for non-traditional event spaces have given rise to the global MICE industry. Asia Pacific, in particular, is expected to witness the highest growth rate of 8.6% during the forecast period of 2018 to 2025, driven by the emerging economies including China, Singapore and India (Research and Markets, 2019).

A survey of convention and meetings industry professionals from the United States in 2019 found that 34% of the delegates reported that their largest meeting contributed a value of between 1 and 4.9 million US dollars to the economy of the meeting's host destination (Gutmann, 2021).

In the Middle East, the tourism sector accounted for 11.5% of the GDP in the United Arab Emirates. More than 2.3 million visitors mentioned business as their main purpose of travel to Dubai in 2019, making a 2% increase compared to 2018. Therefore, the UAE MICE industry was among the global leaders before the Covid-19 pandemic. As a result of Covid-19, most destinations around the world introduced travel restrictions. In the UAE, as in many other countries, the pandemic has affected every industry and especially the MICE industry (Aburumman, 2020).

One such event which was affected by Covid-19 in the Middle East was Dubai Expo 2020. It had to be postponed from 2020 to 2021. When it finally opened, Dubai Expo 2020 (the date was kept as 2020 even though it was held in 2021) was the largest cross-cultural gathering in the world, set on a full kilometre site next to the Al Maktoum International Airport in Dubai South. Over 192 countries took part and entertained over six months attracting 25 million visitors from all over the world until March 2022. Each country had its own pavilion within three themed areas.

Dubai Expo 2020 was the first world expo of this kind to take place in the MESA (Middle East, Africa and South Asia) region. Celebrating the 50th anniversary of the founding of the United Arab Emirates, the expo showcased the theme “Connecting Minds, Creating the Future.”

With 60 daily events, visitors could expect to see and experience thousands of events based around the three themed areas inspiring visitors to preserve and protect the planet. The sustainability district housing the Brazil pavilion provided an Amazon basin experience with sights and sounds allowing visitors to engage with nature for a sustainable future. Uzbekistan’s pavilion displayed its technological developments in its theme of Mapping the Future Pathways.

In line with the future theme, UAE Space Agency organised Space Week at the Expo 2020 giving an insight into the benefits and challenges of what is beyond the Earth’s orbit. Visitors could also experience and learn how smart cities are created through AI, big data, machine learning, and autonomous transport.

There were also performances from world-class artists including pop culture, Senegalese ballet, Mario song and dance and K-pop, and performances by the all-female Firdaus Orchestra and the Al Wasl Opera.

The UAE’s handling of Covid-19 has been impressive, with strict measures which allowed Dubai to be reopened for tourists in July 2020. The same strict measures were applied to the Expo 2020, to make sure that it was a safe place to visit. For instance, only allowing visitors, staff volunteers over the age of 18 who had Covid-19 vaccination, or a negative PCR test carried out 72 hours prior to arriving at the Expo; face masks were compulsory, social distancing was in place and sanitisation stations were to be found everywhere. One of the biggest concerns of the Expo 2020 was to keep visitors and staff safe during the pandemic.

When the doors for the expo 2020 close in March 2022 the site will be converted to District 2020 and will include 87 new permanent buildings which were built to stay – a global community which will become a smart city of the future.

Convention and exhibition centres generally do not generate profits for a city. The main reason that local governments build convention and exhibition centres is for the benefits to the local community. They support a variety of industries within the tourism sector, which helps local hotels, restaurants, transportation, retail and other stakeholders. Local governments measure such benefits by the number of visitors to convention and exhibition centres. This commonly used, simple method provides an approximation of convention centre related spending.

Convention and exhibition centres are large buildings designed to host a convention, exhibition or trade show, as well as other events. These venues are able to host large indoor events and to attract organisers who are looking for core venue services, such as exhibit hall and room rental on a daily basis and for longer periods, as well as expanded hospitality services. In recent years expo, conference and convention organisers have also been looking for a technology infrastructure and services that can provide a fast, reliable Wi-Fi network 24/7 during the event. Case study 17.1 below looks at the Harrogate Convention Centre. .