

Analysis of Influence of Trade Fair Exhibitors' Experiences on Their Decision to Re-Enter the Fair – Research Project

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Abstract

Trade fairs are a very popular form of companies' communication with a market and a source of valuable information. However, a growing number of organized trade fairs makes choosing a location presentation more and more difficult. At the same time, technological progress and the development of marketing industry cause that during participation in the trade fairs, companies have more opportunities to impact on their stakeholders. Wider choice is a very beneficial phenomenon, but trade fairs policy decisions become more complex and riskier. That's why entrepreneurs need tools to support them in the decision-making process in this area. Very profitable would be to determine what parameters describing the participation of enterprises in fairs affect a review of the event and future decisions to participate in subsequent editions of the event. The article describes the results of the research (from 2018-2019) of participants of the fairs organised by Targi w Krakowie (TwK) about their trade fairs activities and the future decisions in the area of their trade fairs policy. Described research is a pilot study. It will be the starting point for the creation of a model of exhibitors decision making about participating in fairs on the Polish market (with the models presented in the cited papers) . This model would take into account the specificity of the Polish fairs and companies participating in them. The analysis of the collected results will extract the factors with the most significant importance for exhibitors during the process of making decision about participation in fairs. The results of these studies will also be an indication for the fairs organisers and operators how to develop existing events.

Keywords: trade fairs, trade shows, trade shows' objectives e decisions, exhibitors.

JEL classification: L82, M30, M39.

1. Introduction

Trade fairs are a very popular method of modern company's communication with the environment and a source of industry information (Bettis-Outland, Johnston, & Wilson, 2012; Luo & Zhong, 2016; Zhong & Luo, 2018). Nowadays an increasing number of trade fairs makes choosing the place of exhibition more difficult. At the same time, thanks to technological advances and the development of the marketing industry, companies are getting more and more opportunities to influence their stakeholders during the fair. A greater choice is a very beneficial phenomenon, but decisions regarding trade fair policy are becoming more complex and involve greater risks (Kirchgeorg, Springer, & Kästner, 2009). Therefore, exhibitors [Of course, the visitor is also an interesting research area, but this is not the subject of this article] need tools that support them in the decision-making process in this scope. The analysis of the exhibitors' behaviours and their relations with the organizers (Jin, Weber, & Bauer, 2012) in comparison with opinions about the event itself and their later decisions on participation in subsequent editions of the event constitutes an interesting research area.

The aim of the article is to analyse the selected parameters describing the participation of exhibitors in a given fair event and their impact on the readiness to re-enter the fair. The article describes the results of the questionnaire conducted among trade fair participants organized by a Targi in Krakow (TwK) regarding their activity during trade fairs and later decisions concerning the trade fair policy of the exhibitors. The research is of a pilot nature and will ultimately form the basis for the construction of a model of market behaviours of exhibitors participating in trade fairs on the Polish market. The analysis of the results obtained will allow for identifying the most important factors for exhibitors when making

decisions to participate in the fair. Achieved results will help trade fair organizers and operators develop the existing events also predict and moderate the decisions of trade fair exhibitors.

2. Evolution of the fair activity of exhibitors

In its traditional formula, the fair was a place where sales-related elements were dominant (Herbig, O'Hara, & Palumbo, 1998; Rosson & Seringhaus, 1995). (Extensive) shopping was an integral element of trade fairs in the past. Purchases were made both on the account of enterprises and individual recipients. The next stage in the development of trade fairs was the separation of sales and non-sales trade fair goals. Today, the sales-related trade fair function has been marginalized (Ahola, 2012). Contemporary trade fair participants use their participation to improve relations with other market players on different levels (Kalafsky & Gress, 2013; Santos & Mendonça, 2014): exhibitor - visitor, visitor - visitor, and exhibitor - exhibitor. Thanks to the development of communication techniques, in the era of marketing 4.0 (Kotler, Kartayaja, & Setiawan, 2017), this process extends to the post trade fair period and, during the event, to other indirect communication channels (Sarmiento & Farhangmehr, 2016). Direct trade fair contact is immediately verified thanks to other communication channels (internet, telephone and direct contact) and wide sources of information, both those possessed by the enterprise and those that can be obtained in a relatively short time from other sources. Thanks to the development of technology, exhibitors maintain contacts and can constantly develop selected relations both before and after the event (Huang, 2016). It is only important to do it in a very professional way. Today's customer is aware of the existence of automatic marketing and does not want to be treated as a number on a long mailing list, expects an individual approach and a customized offer (Jha, Balaji, Ranjan, & Sharma, 2019).

The necessity of making continuous choices both within the scope of the recipients of activities and the implementation of the process itself is a characteristic feature of the process of shaping trade fair relations (Brown, Mohan, & Boyd, 2017). That is why, the management of the trade fair information, the ability to acquire it and its practically instant verification become more and more important (Bettis-Outland, Cromartie, Johnston, & Borders, 2010). In this area today's exhibitors expect more and more support from organizers, in the hardware, spatial and organizational dimension (Gilliam, 2015). The exhibitor needs additional space outside their stand to present the unique nature of their offer (shows, seminars, press conferences and special events), but also to be able to comfortably talk with the event participants (individual presentation of the offer for key customers, selected stages of trade negotiations) (Rodríguez, Reina, & Rufin, 2015). It not only relates to the space rented from the organizer and on the trade fair venue, but also outside the exhibition centre and as part of the base owned by other entities (Proszowska, 2015a). In addition to the possibility of renting space, the exhibitor will also expect additional services to help them achieve their goals (apart from standard accommodation or cleaning service it will also include the processing of printed materials, photo service, or organization of additional events) and wide service (technical staff, translators, etc.).

Another area of the exhibitors' activity is the search for information about the directions of the industry development (Measson & Campbell-Hunt, 2015) and the possibilities of implementing observed trends in their own activities (Luo & Zhong, 2016; Muskat & Deery, 2017). The information about the technology itself, which is the basis for the activity of a given enterprise, becomes especially valuable. But other success factors, resulting even from different organization of supply of materials, employment structures or directions of searching for business partners, will be equally important. All these areas of functioning of a given industry can be compared during trade fairs (Leszczyński & Zieliński, 2011; Zhong & Luo, 2018). This is even more so because sometimes the informal atmosphere of meetings makes it possible to learn more about them than during everyday business contacts (Bathelt, Golfetto, & Rinaldo, 2014; Rinaldo, Bathelt, & Golfetto, 2016).

3. The process of making decisions about participation in the fair

In the past, exhibitors decided to participate in the fair based on the habits of the company and as part of being present in a given industry. It was also connected with the reluctance to define clear trade goals. Most trade fair presentations were a usual continuation of activities from previous years, carried out in a standard manner, in accordance with the adopted schemes (Proszowska, 2015b). And, for example, within the framework of at least partially closed Polish market, this system was considered to be quite efficient and not requiring improvement.

An increase in the number of trade fairs and the increased mobility of enterprises around the world as a result of technological and communication development made the decision to participate in the fair more complex and requiring a deeper analysis (Hansen, 1999; Hansen, 2004; Seringhaus & Rosson, 2004). The development in the area of marketing communication (Kitchen & Proctor, 2015; Matovic, Knezevic, & Papić Brankov, 2015; Turner, 2017) - the increase in the number of communication tools and channels - also contributed to the fact that entrepreneurs began to think about the alternative to the participation in the fair (Sarmiento & Simões, 2018). Hence, there is more and more emphasis on defining trade fair goals, attempts to assess their implementation and a more thoughtful selection of exhibition venues (Gottlieb, Brown, & Ferrier, 2014).

These changes are obviously the evidence of market development, but they have also brought many difficulties related to the creation of procedures for the implementation of these activities and the identification of independent criteria that make them possible in the first place and then allow for their optimization (Yi, Fu, Jin, & Okumus, 2018).

One of the natural factors determining any market choice are certainly the costs associated with them. It was the same in the case with the decision to participate in the fair. There appeared various indicators of trade fair performance evaluation, such as the cost of a single contact, general exhibition costs [The costs incurred in connection with the participation in the fair measured in relation to the total turnout at the fair as a whole], indirect exhibition costs [The costs incurred for the organization of the fair divided by the number of people visiting the stand], or direct exhibition costs [The costs measured in relation to the number of acquired, qualified, new customers] (Drab, 1995). However, as the importance of non-sales trade-fair goals increased, the evaluation indicators based on fair costs became insufficient and began to require additional data. The evaluation of the implementation of goals related to forming a relationship or seeking market information is, however, impossible to implement in a short time frame. For example, the relationships formed (after trade fairs contacts) or data gained become valuable for the company only if it can discount them as part of its operations, which is difficult to assess at the time of making the decision to participate in the event, which takes place annually, and whose preparation process lasts at least a couple of months (Proszowska, 2018). The results of participation in the fair will also depend on the position of the company on the market and changes taking place in a given industry or in the economy (Brown et al., 2017).

Therefore, it was noticed that exhibitors are looking for evaluation criteria other than the level of implementation of their fair goals. Clear, unambiguous and relatively easy to generate criteria were needed so that the decision to participate in the fair can seem objective [The necessity to demonstrate the rationality of the decision taken before supervisors who do not participate in the fair and do not know their specifics and, at the same time, are the final decision makers in the area of marketing expenditures] and be taken relatively quickly after the event (Sridhar, Voorhees, & Gopalakrishna, 2015).

For this reason, exhibitors increasingly began to assess the quality of the event itself, using parameters, such as the number of exhibitors, the number of visitors, the exhibition space available, the size of the exhibition stands, the number of accompanying events, the number of guests from abroad. This allows for clear comparisons and making unambiguous decisions.

The second area that is an important element of the assessment is the quality of cooperation with organizers. It was observed that the satisfaction of exhibitors in cooperation with the organizer/market

operator increases the readiness to re-attend a given fair event (Lin, Kerstetter, & Hickerson, 2015). Of course, the contacts during the event itself are important in this respect, but what seems equally important is their quality as part of the preparation for the fair and after the event (Lin, Kerstetter, D., & Hickerson, 2016). Exhibitors pay attention to the quality of the information received and the efficiency of obtaining it. In this case, the multi-channel nature (internet, telephone and printed materials) and the speed of the information transfer are important. At the same time, they also expect support in the implementation of individual trade fair activities in the field of contacts with visitors and organizational activities related to the construction and/or liquidation of the stand.

4. Selected factors that increase the level of satisfaction of exhibitors with participation in fairs

The study of the level of satisfaction with the trade fair is quite often analysed by researchers (Smith, Hama, & Smith, 2003). However, they most often focus on the overall level of satisfaction of exhibitors and its assessment boils down to measuring this satisfaction in the previously assumed intensity scale (Gopalakrishna, Lilien, Williams, & Sequeira, 1995; Sridhar et al., 2015) and expressing with a single parameter. However, such an overall assessment is quite difficult to interpret and as the averaging of a series of trade fair impressions it does not show the real opinion about specific areas of market activity, and thus is not helpful in the process of creating detailed strategic implications for the organizers of trade fairs. Finally, the company's trade fairs pursue different objectives and therefore they have different expectations for the event, its organizers and other participants. It is not possible to describe these experiences with a single indicator.

Authors more involved in analysing the satisfaction of exhibitors from participation in fairs distinguish three main areas of the assessment (Lin et al., 2016): the exhibitors' own results achieved during (or under the influence of) the fair, the quality of fair visitors [Of course, the number of visitors is the most important here but one should also pay attention to their level of decision-making in the area of taking new decisions on cooperation and readiness to make purchases or establish cooperation] and cooperation with organizers. In the area of self-performance of exhibitors, the following categories of satisfaction assessment were distinguished: sales, information gathering, relationship building, image building and motivation. The assessment of cooperation with the organizer is carried out in the following categories: interaction, environment and outcome. However, the assessment of the relationship with trade fair guests comes down to their evaluation in the following categories: job level, job function, purchasing authority and communication. The listed elements are the components of the overall satisfaction of the exhibitor (Lin, Kerstetter, & Hickerson, 2015). Only such a form of activities, serving to examine the satisfaction of exhibitors from participation in fairs, gives the opportunity to distinguish individual areas of activity, within which there is the opportunity to improve the results of trade fairs, and thus the final level of satisfaction of exhibitors.

5. The research method and characteristics of the sample studied

Described pilot research was carried out in cooperation with company Targi w Krakowie sp. z o. o. in December 2018. An e-mail with a link to the research questionnaire was sent to all exhibitors participating in the fairs organized by the company in 2018. The request to fill out the questionnaire reached a large group of potential respondents. However, only 68 representatives of these enterprises completed the questionnaire. A very small return of completed questionnaires hindered the statistical analysis of the results obtained and made it impossible at this point to show the relationship between the parameters describing the participation of exhibitors at a given fair event and their impact on the willingness to re-enter the fair. In addition, analytical difficulties were deepened even further by the use of the Likert scale in collecting answers. This made the answers even more divided in individual categories. It was also noticed that the impact on the subsequent analysis and interpretation of results was due to the fact that some data had a very uneven distribution - for example, there were no explicitly negative opinions about both the event itself and the market activity of the exhibitors [Very good

information from the organizer's point of view, but making it impossible to analyse certain relationships as part of the conducted research]. The distribution of results was oblique, the mean and median values clearly shifted towards higher values (more positive opinions).

The proper research project will include modifications to the original version so as to minimize the mentioned difficulties (transfers will be made as part of the categorisation of the response, methods to encourage the filling the questionnaire will be used and the survey will be extended to other organisers). This is also why the distribution of questionnaires will be more direct (e.g. during trade fairs) and with the use of the paper version of this tool so as to increase the level of returns of a given questionnaire. The form itself will contain fewer answers within individual closed questions, and their intensity and emotional attitude will not be symmetrically distributed (there will be a different number of positive and negative answers) to make the exhibitors more evenly divided from the point of view of their attitude towards the relation with the trade fair organizer and operator and the course of the trade fair event itself.

The exhibitors who participated in the survey are mainly small and micro enterprises, representing broadly understood industries, since this is also the profile of trade fair events (the vast majority) organized as part of EXPO Krakow (only the autumn Book Fair, whose participants were not subjects under this research project, is of a consumer nature; the remaining events are B2B fairs). And the legal form dominating among the exhibitors is a limited liability company.

6. Trade-fair experiences of exhibitors and decisions about their re-participation in the fair - analysis of pilot studies results, conclusions and research assumptions for future studies

The study conducted was of a pilot nature - a group of 68 companies that participated in the study does not allow for drawing unambiguous conclusions, but enables more precise planning of proper research, within which it will be possible to determine which of the separated variables will be the most important for exhibitors participating in the fair when making decisions about re-participation in the fair.

The starting point for defining the behaviours of the exhibitors examined is the description of the trade fair goals that they set for themselves as part of this event.

Table 1. Trade fair goals of responders

Trade fair goal	Declarations of respondents (percentage of indications)		
	<u>one of the main trade fair goals</u>	<u>one of the supplementary trade fair goals</u>	<u>this is not our trade fair goal</u>
presentation of the company's offer	87.5	12.5	0.0
improving the company's image on the market after the fair	30.8	30.8	38.5
increase in sales during or after the fair	68.8	25.0	6.3
improving relations with market participants	48.3	34.5	17.2
collecting information about customers' expectations	40.6	53.1	6.3
seeking intermediaries and gathering information about the possibilities of cooperation	13.8	51.7	34.5
collecting information about the current market/industry situation	17.2	69.0	13.8
improving brand awareness after the fair	66.7	26.7	6.7

Source: own research.

The respondents declared (tab. 1) that their main goal is to present the offer and increase sales during or after the fair and improve brand awareness after the fair. Interestingly, exhibitors consider gathering information about the market, customer expectations or new cooperation opportunities to be less important trade fair goals. This would indicate a fairly reactive approach to the functioning on the market and a lack of plans for own activity in the area of searching for new customers and modifying

own offer. This is probably the result of less intensive marketing communication activities in the B2B sector and the assumption that the customer is to place an order and the process of shaping the relationship with them begins only after this happens. Taking into account the costs and organizational aspect of participation in the fair, it should be assumed that enterprises cannot limit themselves only to the presentation of the offer. It is also necessary to think about the possibility of implementing additional goals during the fair. In times of information society and knowledge-based economy, searching for up-to-date information about own industry should be a priority. And the trade fair seems to be the perfect meeting place for its most significant representatives.

Table 2. Assessment of achievement of trade fair goals

Trade fair goal	Declared level of achievement of trade fair goals (percentage of responses)				
	The goal has not been achieved	The goal has been minimally achieved	Average level of goal achievement	The goal has been achieved in a significant level	The goal has been fully achieved
comprehensive assessment of the level of the implementation of a given goal	15.4	11.5	30.8	38.5	3.8
presentation of the company's offer	0.0	16.1	12.9	<u>51.6</u>	<u>19.4</u>
improving the company's image on the market after the fair	3.7	11.1	<u>44.4</u>	37.0	3.7
increase in sales during or after the fair	19.4	22.6	32.3	22.6	3.2
improving relations with market participants	0.0	7.1	<u>57.1</u>	25.0	10.7
collecting information about customers' expectations	0.0	13.8	31.0	<u>41.4</u>	<u>13.8</u>
seeking intermediaries and gathering information about the possibilities of cooperation	17.9	<u>42.9</u>	28.6	10.7	0.0
collecting information about the current market/industry situation	6.9	13.8	34.5	34.5	10.3
improving brand awareness after the fair	0.0	23.3	23.3	<u>40.0</u>	<u>13.3</u>

Source: own research.

The surveyed exhibitors also declared (tab. 2) the level of achievement of the assumed fair goals. One can notice that they only partly succeed in achieving what they planned as part of their participation in the fair. One can assume that many are satisfied with the presentation of the company's offer. However, they have less spectacular achievements in the area of increasing the level of sales during or after the fair. Over half of the respondents also observe an average level of the improvement of the relationship with market participants.

Table 3. Assessment of cooperation with the trade fair organizer

Areas of assessment of the cooperation of respondents and the trade fair organizer	Declared assessments of cooperation with the trade fair organizer (percentage of indications)				
	1 (entirely bad)	2	3	4	5 (very good)
quality of information about the organized event (website and other sources)	0.0	0.0	6.3	28.1	65.6
quality of fair infrastructure (fixed base)	0.0	3.1	18.8	31.3	46.9
quality of the trade fair service and organization of the event itself	0.0	6.3	9.4	21.9	62.5
communication during the reservation of the stand and preparations for the fair	0.0	3.1	0.0	25.0	71.9
possibility of promotion at the fair	0.0	6.7	6.7	43.3	43.3
promotion of trade fairs in the media (carried out by the organizer)	6.5	3.2	6.5	58.1	25.8

Source: own research.

While the assessment of the achievement of trade fair goals by exhibitors (tab. 2) is not too high, they very highly assess the cooperation with the trade fair organizer (tab. 3). Both cooperation during the preparation for the trade fair and during the event itself is assessed highly. The fair promotion (at the event and outside the trade fair venue) got a little bit lower but still very high assessments. This would indicate a very high level of trust in the organizer, which is the result of intense, long-term cooperation with them or the lack of market experience of exhibitors [Of course, the assumption can be verified only after a detailed analysis of the policy of individual exhibitors, which is not possible at the moment]. A high level of assessment of this cooperation is certainly a source of joy for organizers, but, at the same time, the awareness of the remaining results determines the need to create programs that help either increase the level of the implementation of the goals set by exhibitors, or make them aware of the opportunities offered by the fair and what trade fair assumptions they should have so that they can be achieved during the event.

Table 4. Assessment of the selected parameters of the trade fairs in which respondents participated

Category of assessment of the trade fair experiences	Declared assessment of experiences and trade fair parameters (percentage of indications)				
	1 (completely unsatisfactory)	2 (meeting minimum expectations)	3 (on an average level)	4 (satisfactory)	5 (fully satisfactory)
number of other exhibitors	6.7	10.0	36.7	<u>40.0</u>	6.7
number of visitors	9.7	12.9	12.9	<u>54.8</u>	9.7
readiness of visitors to establish contact at the stand	3.2	9.7	<u>32.3</u>	<u>41.9</u>	12.9
readiness of visitors to establish cooperation/make purchases in the future	6.9	13.8	<u>41.4</u>	<u>37.9</u>	0.0
level of visitor decision-making	6.9	16.1	<u>48.4</u>	<u>29.0</u>	0.0
promotion of event organizers in the media	3.2	9.7	<u>35.5</u>	<u>35.5</u>	16.1
preparation of own exhibition staff	0.0	6.5	3.2	<u>48.4</u>	<u>41.9</u>
work of own exhibition staff at the stand	0.0	3.3	6.7	<u>43.3</u>	<u>46.7</u>
shape and preparation of your own trade fair stand	0.0	3.3	0.0	<u>60.0</u>	<u>36.7</u>

Source: own research.

It is difficult to clearly interpret the results contained in table 4, because they relate to the participation in various trade fairs. You can certainly notice that when assessing the reality of the fair according to the proposed indicators the exhibitors are most satisfied with their work (the last three rows of tab. 4). The number of participants (with an indication of visitors) and their readiness to establish contacts looks quite good. The readiness of visitors to cooperate and their level of decision-making get the lowest assessments. As you can imagine, market visitors want to find information and establish relationships rather than carry out a specific transaction [This is quite typical of today's investment goods trade fairs, so perhaps what is surprising is again the lack of information and too high expectations from the exhibitors and, consequently, the need for educational activities on the part of organizers]

Table 5. Assessment of the results of participation in the last edition of the fair organized by TwK

Assessment of the results of participation in the fair (percentage of indications)				
1 (completely did not meet expectations)	2	3	4	5 (we are fully satisfied with participation in the fair)
3.1	0.0	28.1	46.9	21.9

Source: own research.

A fairly large group of exhibitors (tab. 5) highly evaluates the overall participation in the last fair event, although it does not give it the highest scores. At this point, it is certainly important for the organizers that the percentage of unambiguously negative scores is only a few percent.

Table 6. Readiness to recommend participation in the last edition of the fair organized by TwK

Readers' willingness to recommend participation in the fair (percentage of indications)				
no	probably not	perhaps	rather yes	definitely yes
0.0	3.1	15.6	43.8	37.5

Source: own research.

The results of the assessment of the exhibitors' readiness to (tab. 6.) recommend the participation in the fair to other potential participants, especially in comparison with the results contained in table 5, look interesting. It may be noted that, even though slightly, the readiness to recommend the fair in which the company took part is higher than the assessment of the participation in it (tab.6.).

Table 7. Readiness of respondents to participate in the fair in the future

Declaration of participation in the fair (percentage of indications)				
probably not	perhaps sporadically	rather yes, but at a lower level than now	definitely yes, at the same level as at present	definitely yes, with more involvement than at present
0.0	6.2	18.8	56.2	18.8

Source: own research.

The surveyed exhibitors predominantly declare their readiness to participate in fairs in the future, with the same or greater involvement than at present, which allows us to suppose that this form of enterprise activity will grow. It can be noticed that current shortcomings in the trade fair activities of exhibitors and, for example, difficulties in achieving the assumed trade fair goals do not adversely affect the recommendation of exhibition events to other market participants and further plans with participation in such events.

7. Summary

The results obtained indicate that modern trade fairs have a very positive image among their participants. Exhibitors feel a strong intuitive need to participate in fairs, but they use their presence in a very traditional and reactive way. They assume that the participation in the fair is connected primarily with the presentation of the company's offer and they do not necessarily find time to look for information or form relations with other participants of the event. In order to change the approach to the way trade fairs are used in the marketing policy of the company, the role of the organizer and various industry associations, which should not only coordinate the organization of such events, but also help the exhibitors prepare and evaluate the results later, will become extremely valuable.

When analysing publications on the trade fair market, one can see that, on one hand, exhibitors declare the need for ever more rational decision-making about participation in fairs. At the same time, decisions about recommending the event and re-participating in it take place despite the failure to fully implement the goals set. On the other hand, organizers of trade fairs, being aware of the intense competition in this sector, are ready to take action to improve the functioning of events organized by them. Observation and simultaneous education of exhibitors should help them better rationalize preparation, plan and evaluate participation. In the process of assessing the level of satisfaction with participation in trade fairs, exhibitors will certainly prefer simple methods and indicators that can be applied relatively quickly after the event [In particular, those that can help make LATER trade fair decisions].

When deciding to re-enter the fair, exhibitors attach great importance to the quality of cooperation with the event organizer. This is very important information for the organizers who are often convinced that the product itself is the priority, that is, the trade fair event, and the exhibitors' relations with them

are of lesser importance. A deeper commitment to improving the exhibitor-organizer relationship is needed, which will increase the exhibitor's confidence in the organizer's competences and thus ultimately improve the assessment of the event by the exhibitor.

Due to the small size of the research sample, presented applications require verification in a broader market research. The framework of the relevant studies was presented together with an analysis of the pilot studies carried out. At the same time, the results already described are valuable information for both trade fair organisers and exhibitors shaping their fair policy.

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