



Steve Johnson

Virtual trade show a non-conventional way to network

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Among the advantages to the virtual trade show, an actual convention conducted in cyberspace, are these:

The chance that your luggage will be lost is reduced to virtually nil.

There's no need to erect a mammoth windowless building on prime lakefront land.

You can remove that permanent "Pleased to meet you" grin from your face.

One more advantage: When pesky reporters come by your booth, looking for an amusing or poignant anecdote to help illuminate the particular subculture represented by your company, you can just ignore them.

The trade-show feature story is one of the most durable of journalistic genres.

But what happens, beyond consternation at McCormick Place and in the comfort-shoe industry, when the convention turns from a physical event to a virtual one? This week's eComXpo, part of a new wave of events that take place in two dimensions, rather than three, offers a case study.

In the realm of formerly physical activities gone digital, there's the virtual book signing, pioneered, on parallel tracks, by novelist Margaret Atwood (the LongPen, recently used by Kate Moss for a signing) and Chicago's Abraham Lincoln Book Shop (virtualbooksigning.net, next signing Nov. 4).

A more elaborate simulation is achieved by Second Life, the vast online society that functions like a SimCity game on growth hormone and likely becomes, for some of its participants, more of a first life.

At eComXpo, you not only get prime sponsors (Google, Yahoo, Microsoft, e.g.) and speakers (Chris Anderson, author of "The Long Tail"), you get participants making jokes like this one, during a "Group Chat" Wednesday in the show's "Lounge":

"I'm almost done with the R&D on DownloadPizza.com," typed one Kenneth Gardiner. "Still working on the cheese dispenser. Clogs the COMM port."

In response, someone else typed :) -- virtual trade show for, "I appreciate your joke, yet lack the capacity to laugh."

eComXpo is a trade show for people who aim to help Web sites draw more customers, and it's the baby of John Grosshandler, a former Internet infrastructure salesman from Highland Park. Grosshandler admits that, with his show, "you don't have a handshake. You don't have the buying the drink at the bar. It's not a substitute, but it's a nice extension."

On the other hand, one of the hardest parts about a traditional trade show, beyond the post-show pain in your lower back, is "post-show conversion," turning the contacts you made into business. "What you've got is a person's business card and your scribbles," Grosshandler says.

His virtual show leaves you with a detailed record of every Instant Messaging chat you had upon entering a company's "booth" or sitting down in the lounge. And the food is an improvement: "We talk about the mystery pasta at lunch that we're not able to offer," he says.

For the show that ran Tuesday through Thursday at www.ecomxpo.com, the fourth, Grosshandler says he had 7,500 registered participants and 450 paid exhibitors. The first, in February 2005, had 92 exhibitors and 1,600 attendees. The next show is next February.

Cost to the public is free, but it costs money to exhibit, and the "Platinum" sponsors, including Google, Yahoo and Microsoft, paid between \$5,000 and \$10,000 to be there.

The show mimics a real convention much like a video game mimics, say, real street racing. You see an overview of the convention floor. You click on a booth, and it comes into full view on your screen. Little people icons on top tell you who's "in" the booth, and you can click on them to initiate a conversation, perhaps as follows:

"So, Tiffany, from Microsoft, what does your company do?"

There's even, Grosshandler claims, some of the hooking up that occurs at a real trade show. He was at an event at a downtown restaurant this summer, when a couple seemed especially excited to meet him.

They had met, they explained, at the February eComXpo and, from there, decided to move over to the benefits of a relationship in three dimensions.

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