

“Looking Ahead: Trade Shows Interrupted”

What would happen if the telecom industry threw the most spectacular party—but nobody came? Judging by the abysmal drop in attendees and absence of prominent vendors at January’s ComNet Expo in Washington, D.C., the landslide of lackluster enthusiasm for communication trade shows appears to be steadily picking up speed. Dozens of network events over the past year have fallen ill or simply expired due largely to a lack of vendor community spending or waning interest by attendees. And 2003 hasn’t shown any positive signs to reverse this trend.

Threat of war, draconian travel conditions, and looming uncertainty about when a renewed economic expansion throughout the industry will occur is leaving confidence on the sidelines and sponsors parked with reduced marketing dollars. None of this experience is really new to telecom—only shortsighted to the early 90’s when grassroots innovation was beginning and companies starved to make promotional budgets go farther. Then along came the irrational boom of the Internet’s lust for seeking customers at whatever the cost. No expense spared, the behemoth events of COMDEX and SuperComm exploded on the scene to put Las Vegas promotion on a pithy scale of wonder. Money continued to flow and so did the gala parties that wined and dined almost everyone that toted around an “exhibits only” badge. And of course, when the cash currency abruptly ran out, so did the partygoers that once heisted an average of 4 _ weeks out of their offices to attend conferences of all sorts.

Still, the networking community abroad is struggling to regain a sense of market progress next to profitability—with these objectives sometimes at odds for importance on the agenda. Attendees themselves are left wondering where and when a benchmark of quality education and social networking will rebound, given scarce choices for acquiring knowledge and experiential sharing these days. One devout follower of the conference circuits recently told me that he has resigned to halt travel for almost any exposition or event since the past experiences of recent shows have proven disappointment on so many levels. A clear lack of presence by new entrants and mainstay heavyweights was the biggest factor—apart from a disdainful lack substantive teaching in the seminar portions. Apparently, vendors confused the subject of knowledge transfer with marketing hype.

But setting aside the prevailing economic reality for a moment, customers and vendors desperately seek—and still demand—a forum to communicate the progress of technology, share the innovation, and ultimately create real channels for viable products. So, how will the future of trade show events morph to meet competing interests? Observers say that the real answer rests in building more regionalized communities that cater to specific technology tracks—sans the fanfare of buffet-style parties and overly hyped expos. And thus far, the resilience of niche events such as a few in the cable television space has proven to buck the trend, boasting very well-attended audiences and satisfied vendors to boot. The secret sauce: purposeful collaboration between vendor objectives (marketing) and attendee desires (knowledge utility) in a succinctly defined community environment. No more stress of flipping through a plethora of sessions and a conference hall map that makes LAX look tame. And best of all, the successful venues have realized that attendee spending propensity isn’t thousands of dollars but rather hundreds—at best.

Change is always hard to accept, especially when an entire industry reels from a collapse of infinite hope into the sinking doldrums of despairing uncertainty. But the one sure thing it seems is that people need meaningful interaction between those who supply the technology that makes the news to others who implements the goods and services to move progress forward. A lot can be learned from the frivolous heyday of the boom times, but even more can be sought to apply in times of lesser exuberance.

