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Vision & Intelligence

EVIDENCE BRIEF
NOVEMBER 2026

EVIDENCE BRIEF · EXHIBITOR ROI

Returns Come With Repetition

Do trade shows pay off for exhibitors?

Exhibitions take 40.8 percent of B2B exhibitors' marketing spending, the largest share of any channel. Studies of 221 Korean exhibitors at overseas shows, 102 travel-fair exhibitors in Taipei, 267 furniture-supply exhibitors in Guangzhou and four construction fairs in Peru, Chile and the U.S. show what a stand returns, why firms invest, and which decisions raise the return.

By Eventamin · How we work 14 November 2026

Worldwide, U.S., Germany, South Korea, Taiwan, China, Peru, Chile, Portugal

8 studies · 6 industry sources

trade show ROI | exhibitor ROI | exhibition marketing budget | trade show leads | cost per lead | booth size | trade show follow-up | exhibitor investment | repeat exhibitors | B2B trade shows

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KEY FINDING

A stand mainly returns contacts: the average Korean exhibitor gathered 81.9 prospects but closed 4.1 orders. Returns rise with repeat participation, booth size and after-show follow-up, while investment is driven by image and relationship goals rather than by sales expectations.

Eight studies, 1997–2025; industry data 2026

Key findings

- **Exhibitions lead the marketing budget.** Exhibitions account for 40.8 percent of B2B exhibitors' marketing spending, and 28 percent of exhibitors plan to add shows in 2026[1].
- **A stand returns contacts first.** Korean exhibitors at overseas shows gathered 81.9 prospects, 15.8 qualified leads and 4.1 orders on average, from stands of 17.3 square meters costing US$21,769[2].
- **Image drives spending, sales do not.** At construction fairs in Peru, Chile and the U.S., expectations of image and relationship building raised exhibitor investment, while sales expectations had no measurable effect[3].
- **Repetition pays.** Export-promotion efficiency was 42 percent for exhibitors with one participation, 56 percent with two and 100 percent with three[2].
- **Size and follow-up count most.** At China's largest woodworking and furniture-supply fair, booth size and after-show follow-up raised exhibitor performance more than staff numbers, attention-getting techniques or training[4].

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FOR THE MARKET

Market outcomes

What the studies mean for each part of the industry.

Exhibitors & sponsors	Judging a show on one edition understates its return: orders and contracts lag contacts by up to two years, and efficiency in export promotion rises with each participation. Follow-up after the show belongs in the budget alongside the stand.
Organisers & associations	Exhibitors buy image and relationships as much as sales. Training exhibitors in image and relationship building raised their spending by 69 percent in a field experiment, which makes exhibitor education a revenue lever.
Academia	Most evidence measures perceived performance or efficiency against other exhibitors, not profit. Studies that track the same exhibitors' contacts, orders and revenue over several editions are missing.

The largest line in the marketing budget

Exhibitions take 40.8 percent of B2B exhibitors' overall marketing spending, according to the Center for Exhibition Industry Research (CEIR), whose 2026 Marketing Spend Decision Report surveyed 362 B2B exhibitors in late 2025[1,5]. Budgets are mostly flat: 47 percent of exhibitors plan the same number of shows in 2026, 28 percent plan to add shows and 83 percent plan to keep their booth size[5].

Exhibitors at trade fairs in Germany spend €11.8 billion in total, according to the latest study by Prognos for AUMA[6]. In AUMA's 2026/27 survey of around 400

exhibiting companies, 97.5 percent called trade fairs indispensable, yet the average number of participations fell from 5.4 to 5.1, which AUMA reads as more selective planning[7]. Roughly two-thirds of companies name rising costs as the biggest challenge of participation[8]. International exhibitors at European venues spend around €67,000 each, twice as much as national exhibitors[9].

Whether that spending pays off is the question research on exhibitors tries to answer.

What a stand returns

A stand returns contacts first and orders later. Among 221 Korean exhibitors supported by a government program at overseas shows in 2018, the average stand covered 17.3 square meters, was staffed by three people and cost US$21,769 in total[2]. It produced 81.9 prospects, 15.8 qualified leads and 4.1 orders, with an average contract amount of US$132,093 and wide gaps between firms[2].

Measured against the best performers at the same fair, most exhibitors convert their inputs poorly. At the Taipei International Travel Fair in 2016 and 2017, average efficiency in turning booth space, rent, set-up and staff into sales and leads was 0.061 for travel agencies and 0.131 for hotels on a scale up to 1.0[10]. Most exhibitors operated under increasing returns to scale, and each New Taiwan dollar of rent and set-up returned NT$20.77 in revenue for travel agencies and NT$13.54 for hotels[10].

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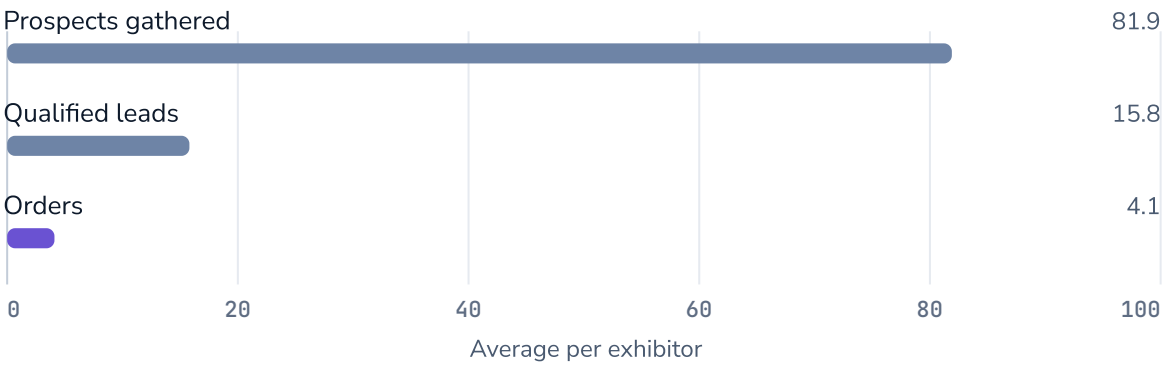
Results per exhibitor at overseas trade shows, Korean exhibitors in a government support program

Average number per exhibitor.



Source: Lee et al. · Release date: 2021 · Region: South Korea (shows in Europe, North America, Asia, China, the Middle East and the CIS) · Survey period: August 2019 · Number of respondents: 221

Why firms invest

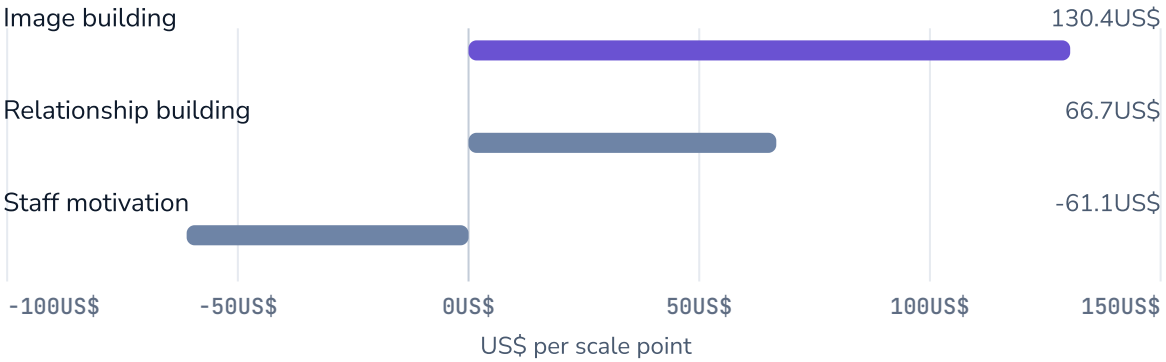
Exhibitors spend for image and relationships rather than for sales at the show. At Excon 2017 in Peru, where the average exhibitor spent US$10,703, one point more on a 100-point scale of image-building expectations added US$130.4 to investment and one point of relationship-building expectations added US$66.7; sales and information-gathering expectations had no significant effect[3]. Image and relationship expectations also raised investment at Edifica 2017 in Chile and World of Concrete 2020 in the U.S[3]..

In a randomized field experiment before Excon 2018, 50 firms trained in image and relationship building raised their investment by US$7,402 on average, 69 percent of the previous year's average spend[3].

Other evidence points the other way. In a survey of 350 large Taiwanese manufacturers, selling activity was the strongest driver of exhibition participation, relationship building had no significant effect, and participation was strongly linked to business performance[11].

Effect of exhibitor expectations on trade show investment at Excon 2017 in Peru

Change in investment for one point more on a 0–100 expectation scale, in U.S. dollars. Sales and information-gathering expectations: no significant effect.



Source: Mora Cortez et al. · Release date: 2022 · Region: Peru · Event date: 2017 · Number of respondents: 229 (127 exhibitors, 102 non-exhibitors)

Decisions that raise the return

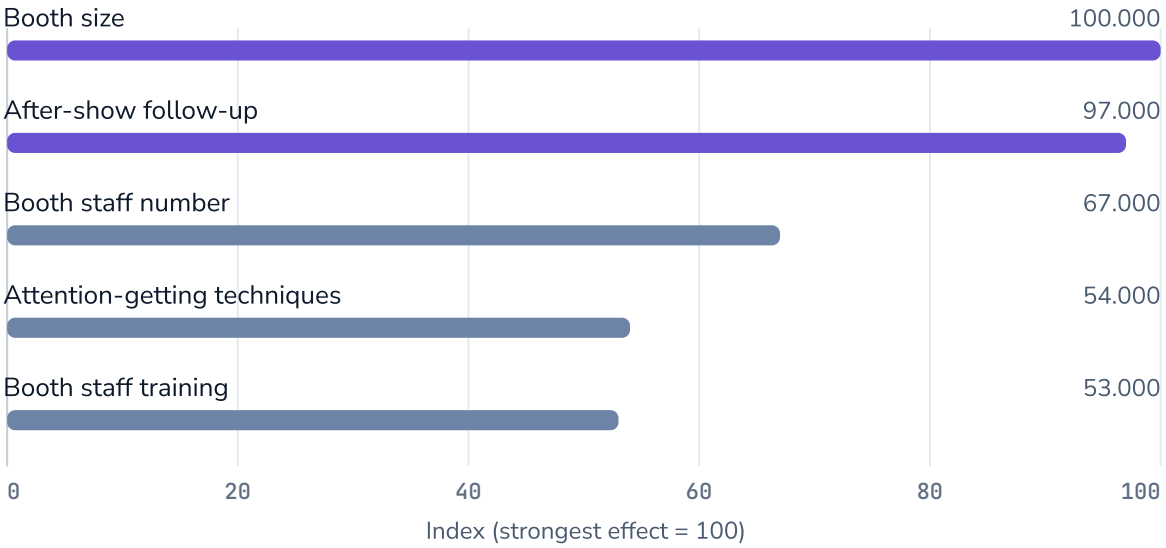
Stand decisions explain part of the return. Among 267 exhibitors at the China International Woodworking Machinery and Furniture Raw Materials Fair in Guangzhou in 2011, booth size and after-show follow-up had the strongest effects on performance, ahead of booth staff numbers, attention-getting techniques and staff training[4]. Experienced exhibitors gained more from booth size and follow-up, while training mattered more for inexperienced firms[4].

Repetition raises efficiency. Among the Korean exhibitors, efficiency in export promotion was 42 percent for firms with one participation between 2015 and 2017, 56 percent with two and 100 percent with three, while efficiency in developing new markets did not depend on frequency[2]. The authors link this to a lag of up to two years between contacts and contracts[2]. Among 362 Portuguese exhibitors, more frequent participation went with higher profit, sales and return on investment, and proactive sales teams built the networks that turned contacts into sales[12].

Experts weight what happens after the show highest. Five exhibition experts in China ranked post-exhibition services first and management during the exhibition second among 23 factors of exhibition effect[13].

Effect of stand decisions on exhibitor performance at a Guangzhou trade fair

Index: strongest effect on exhibitor performance = 100.



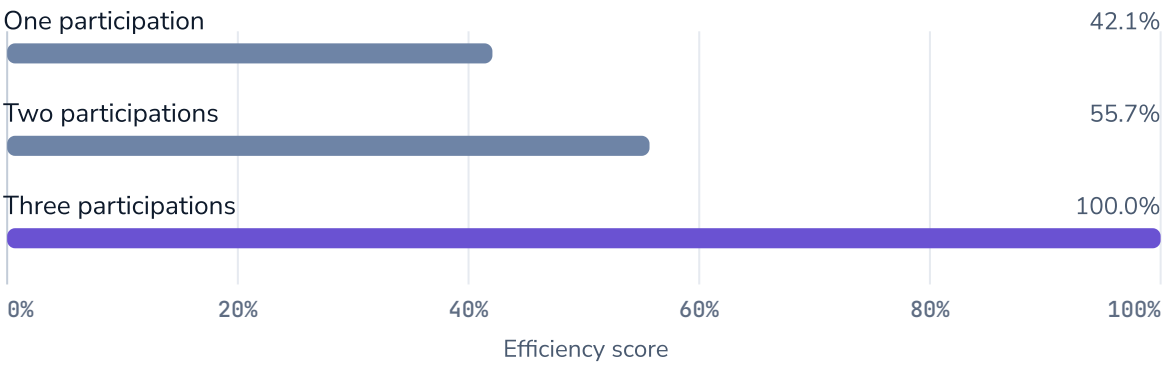
Source: Shi · Release date: 2013 · Region: China (Guangzhou) · Event date: March 2011 · Number of respondents: 267

Returns grow with each participation

The Korean data show how the return builds over editions. Efficiency in total performance and in developing new markets was 100 percent at every participation frequency, but efficiency in export promotion, measured by orders and contract amounts, rose with each participation[2].

Export-promotion efficiency of Korean exhibitors, by number of participations from 2015 to 2017

Efficiency score of each group, in percent; 100 = on the efficiency frontier.



Source: Lee et al. · Release date: 2021 · Region: South Korea · Survey period: August 2019 · Number of respondents: 221

Why some firms stay away

Cost and uncertain effectiveness keep firms off the floor. In a survey of 204 U.S. firms published in 1997, non-exhibitors named high costs (75 percent) and unknown effectiveness (61 percent) as their main reasons, and smaller, service-oriented firms with simple, low-priced products were the most likely to stay away[14]. Firms with complex, high-value, infrequently purchased products were the most likely to exhibit[14].

Notes on the data

The figures are based on eight studies published between 1997 and 2025: surveys of 221 Korean exhibitors, 102 exhibitor observations at the Taipei International Travel Fair, 267 exhibitors at a Guangzhou trade fair, 362 Portuguese exhibitors, 350 Taiwanese manufacturers and 204 U.S. firms, four studies at construction fairs in Peru, Chile and the U.S. including a randomized field experiment with 100 firms, and an expert weighting tested on one Chinese firm's eight exhibitions[2–4,10–14]. Efficiency scores compare exhibitors with the best performers in the same sample, not with an absolute return. Most performance

measures are exhibitors' own ratings. Industry figures are from CEIR's 2026 report as reported by trade media, AUMA, Prognos and EMECA [1,5–9].

Sources

● Study ○ Industry source

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The evidence

8 studies · 6 industry sources

SAMPLE

Eight studies: surveys of 221 Korean exhibitors, 102 exhibitors at the Taipei International Travel Fair, 267 exhibitors at a Guangzhou trade fair, 362 Portuguese exhibitors, 350 Taiwanese manufacturers and 204 U.S. firms, four studies at construction fairs including a field experiment, and an expert weighting with one firm's data; seven industry sources

YEARS

1997–2025 (studies); 2025–2026 (industry data)

METHOD

Surveys, efficiency analyses, regression and structural models, one randomized field experiment

About Eventamin

Eventamin reads the peer-reviewed research on events, exhibitions and hospitality, sets it against industry data and states what it means for the market. Every brief is published by Eventamin as an organisation: its sources, method and corrections are open.

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