eventamin
Vision & Intelligence

EVIDENCE BRIEF
NOVEMBER 2026

EVIDENCE BRIEF · EXHIBITOR ROI

Leads Counted, Returns Assumed

How do exhibitors measure trade show returns?

Forty percent of event professionals say the return on events is hard to prove. Studies of exhibitors in Mauritius, Finland, Russia, China and the U.S., and measurement frameworks published between 1976 and 2025, show what exhibitors aim for, how rarely they evaluate, and which metrics connect a stand to signed agreements.

By Eventamin · How we work 14 November 2026

Worldwide, U.S., Germany, Mauritius, Finland, Russia, China, Australia

14 studies · 3 industry sources

trade show ROI measurement | exhibitor KPIs | trade show objectives | cost per lead | cost per contact | trade show evaluation | lead follow-up | booth KPIs | event ROI | trade show information value

EDITION	Evidence brief · Published 14 November 2026
DOI	https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.24378250
CITE AS	Eventamin. (2026). Leads Counted, Returns Assumed: How Do Exhibitors Measure Trade Show Returns? [Evidence brief]. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.24378250
WEB EDITION	eventamin.com/evidence/exhibitor-roi/how-do-exhibitors-measure-trade-show-returns, with interactive charts, chart data and the corrections log
LICENCE	Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) · © 2026 Eventamin

KEY FINDING

Exhibitors aim mainly at new customers, image and relationships, but few evaluate systematically: in German data, only 27 percent evaluated their participation regularly. The metrics that link a stand to sales exist, from cost per contact to follow-up over 12 months, and in one manufacturer's records the quality of stand activities tracked the share of contacts that turned into agreements.

14 studies, 1976–2025; industry data 2025–2026

Key findings

- **Proof is hard.** Forty percent of event professionals said the return on events was hard to prove in 2026, down from 70 percent a year earlier[1].
- **Exhibitors aim at customers, not orders.** Mauritian textile exhibitors rated identifying new customers highest, at 4.56 of five, while selling at the show ranked 21st of 23 objectives[2].
- **Few evaluate every time.** In German data, 27 percent of exhibitors evaluated their participation regularly, 40 percent only for important events and a third not at all[3].
- **Stand quality tracks agreements.** Across nine shows of a Russian medical-equipment maker, the quality of stand activities correlated at 0.92 with the share of contacts that led to agreements[4].
- **Information pays when used.** At Helsinki trade shows, how far participants used the information they gathered was the strongest predictor of its value[5].

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.24378250 · CC BY 4.0 · © 2026 Eventamin

FOR THE MARKET

Market outcomes

What the studies mean for each part of the industry.

Exhibitors & sponsors	Objectives set before the show decide what can be measured after it. Cost per contact, the share of target visitors reached and revenue traced at three, six and 12 months turn a general impression into a return.
Organisers & associations	Real-time dashboards, matchmaking data and audited visitor profiles give exhibitors the inputs for their own ROI. Exhibitors who cannot prove a return are the ones who cut space first.
Academia	Frameworks are plentiful but rarely tested. The few empirical links between stand activity and agreements come from single firms and small samples.

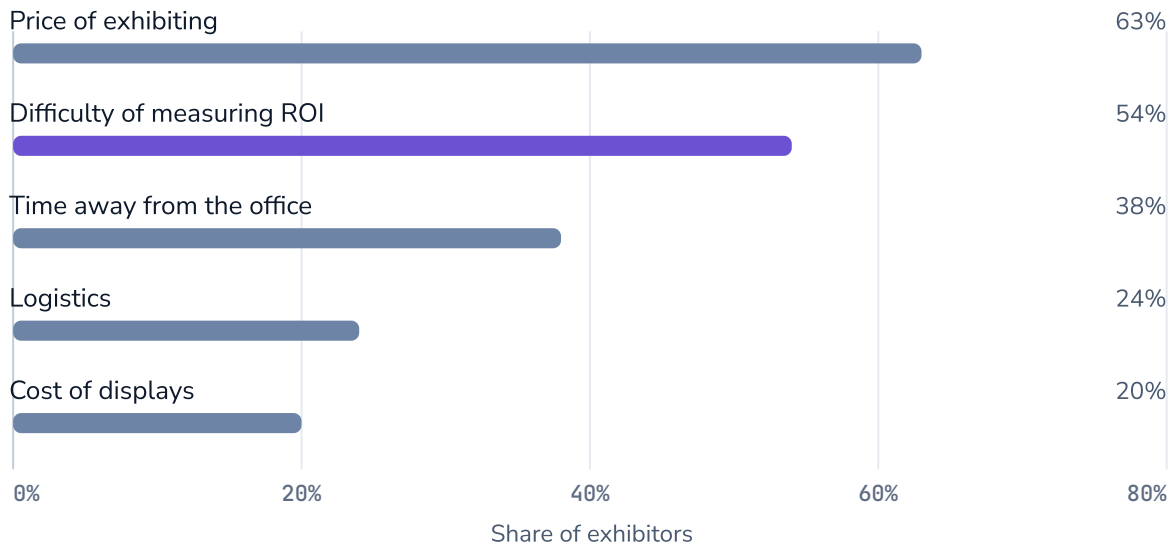
A return that is hard to prove

In Bizzabo's 2026 review of event trends, 40 percent of event professionals said the return on events was hard to prove, down from 70 percent a year earlier[1]. Exhibitors measure success mainly through lead volume, pipeline generated, opportunities created and deals closed, according to the 2026 chair of the International Association of Exhibitions and Events[6].

Before the pandemic, an industry survey cited in a 2023 study listed the difficulty of measuring return on investment as the second-largest problem for exhibitors, after the price of exhibiting[7].

Main problems of trade show exhibitors before the COVID-19 pandemic

Share of exhibitors naming each problem.



Source: Jugănaru (industry survey cited) · Release date: 2023 · Region: Worldwide · Survey period: before 2020

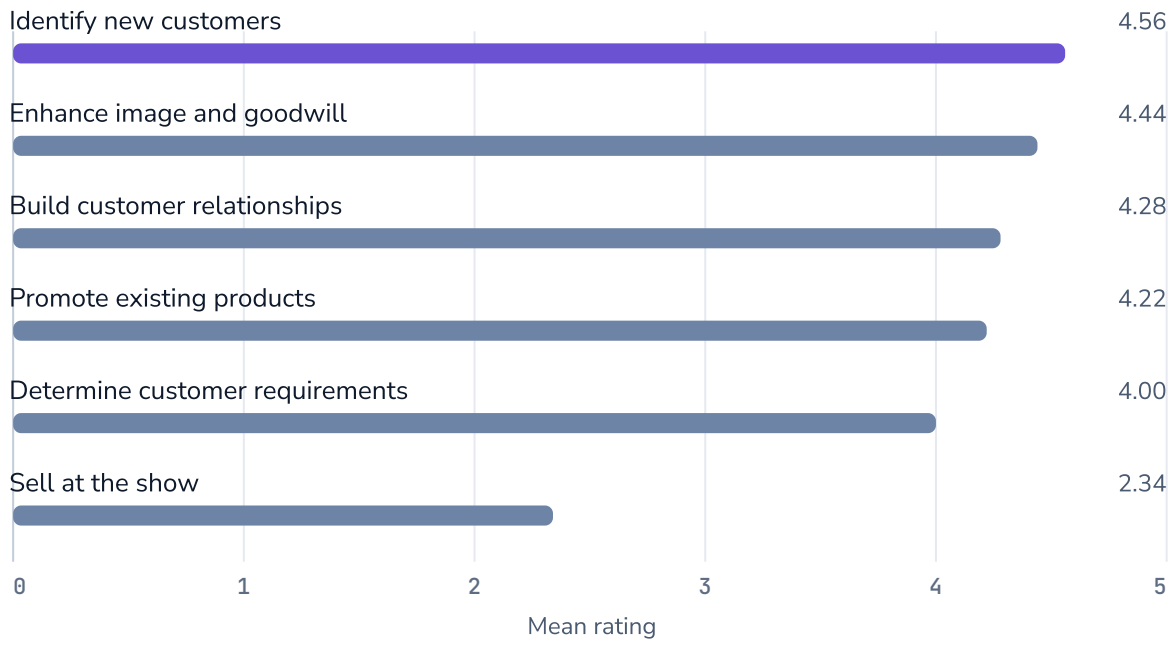
What exhibitors aim for

Exhibitors set relationship and image goals ahead of selling. Among 32 Mauritian textile exhibitors, identifying new customers rated 4.56 on a five-point scale, enhancing image and goodwill 4.44 and building customer relationships 4.28, while selling at the show ranked 21st of 23 objectives at 2.34[2]. In U.S. industry research, lead generation is the exhibitors' most important objective[8].

Exhibitors also rate their success differently by goal. At a Guangzhou trade fair, exhibitors rated competitive-intelligence gathering highest, at 5.33 on a seven-point scale, and sales and relationship development lowest, at 4.14[9].

Importance of trade show objectives for Mauritian textile exhibitors

Mean rating on a scale from 1 (not important) to 5 (very important).



Source: Ramsaran-Fowdar & Oogarah-Hanuman · Release date: 2009 · Region: Mauritius · Number of respondents: 32

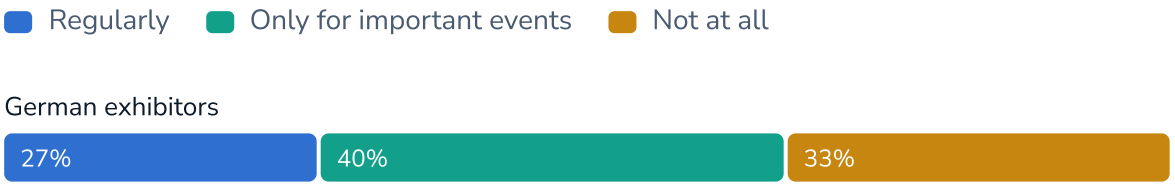
How rarely exhibitors evaluate

Evaluation is the weakest step. In German data summarized in a 2004 paper, only 27 percent of exhibitors evaluated their trade fair participation regularly, 40 percent did so only for important events and a third not at all[3]. The Mauritian exhibitors set objectives, but rated the training of booth personnel at 2.25 of five and seldom monitored or evaluated what staff did[2].

Company cases show the same gap. Electronic Arts cut its budget for Digiexpo in Helsinki by about 45 percent between 2013 and 2014 while keeping a visible presence, but had very few evaluation mechanisms in place to test the return[10]. Marketing managers of eight Australian universities that exhibited at virtual trade shows had no specific metrics at all, applied the same indicators as at physical shows and judged participation mainly on cost savings[11].

How often exhibitors evaluate their trade fair participation, Germany

Share of exhibitors.



Source: Damböck · Release date: 2004 · Region: Germany

Metrics that link a stand to sales

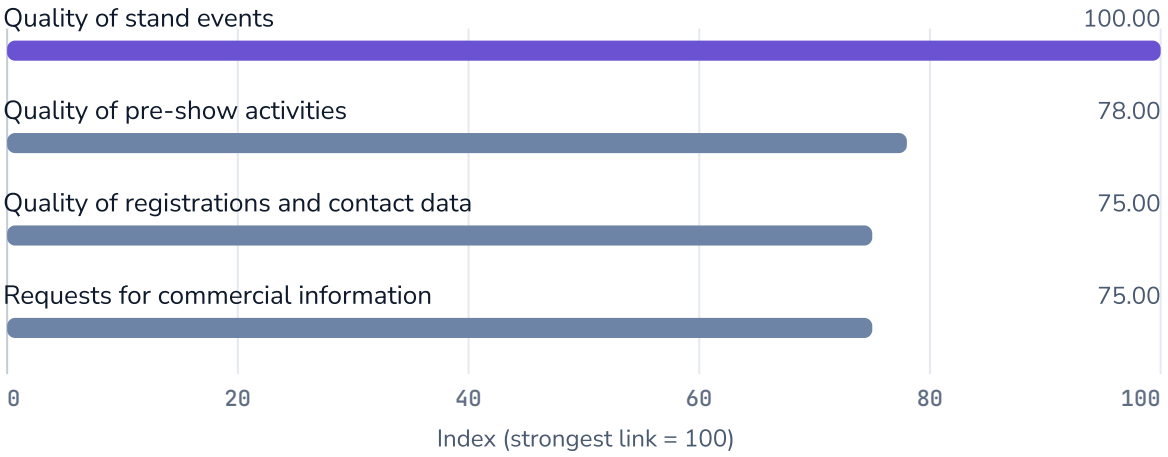
The measures have been defined for decades. A 1976 framework set cost per contact as total cost divided by the target visitors actually contacted, with follow-up of every contact readjusted every three months to show the return to date[12]. Later frameworks add three levels: results such as profit, impressions and the cost of one useful contact, effectiveness as actual against planned values, and efficiency ratios including return on investment[13]. A 2025 index scores whether taking part in a show is worthwhile, from ranked marketing goals and expert ratings: Heimtextil 2024 scored 0.6455 and Apparel Sourcing Paris 2024 scored 0.565 on a scale up to one[14].

One manufacturer's records show how the steps connect. Across nine international medical trade shows between 2014 and 2019, the share of contacts that led to agreements correlated at 0.92 with the quality of stand activities and at 0.72 with the quality of pre-show invitations; reaching agreements with 60 percent or more of contacts required more than 70 percent of invited contacts to visit the stand[4]. Stand designers recommend a first review after seven days and revenue checks at three, six and 12 months[15].

LEVEL	INDICATORS	SOURCES
Result	Leads, contacts, orders, profit from sales, impressions, media reports	6,13
Effectiveness	Actual against planned values for each objective	13
Efficiency	Cost per contact or lead, cost per contract, return on investment, payback	12,13,15
Before the show	Feasibility of taking part, from ranked goals and expert scores	14

Link between stand activities and the share of contacts leading to agreements, nine trade shows of a medical-equipment maker

Index: strongest link with the share of agreements = 100.



Source: Kapustina et al. · Release date: 2020 · Region: Russia (shows in Germany and the United Arab Emirates) · Period: 2014 to 2019 · Number of shows: 9

Information as a return

Part of the return is knowledge. Among 450 exhibitors and visitors of B2B trade shows in Helsinki, how far participants used the information they gathered was the strongest predictor of its value, followed by its quality and how widely it was shared[5]. In a U.S. survey, informal sharing with other departments raised the perceived contribution of trade show information to company success, while

business discussions with exhibitors lowered it, which attendees explained by fear of giving away company secrets [16].

Organizers are building the data layer. Twelve of 12 senior trade show professionals interviewed in Europe, Asia-Pacific and Thailand named AI-powered matchmaking, and 10 named real-time ROI dashboards that show visitor engagement, lead counts and time per interaction [17].

Notes on the data

The figures are based on 14 studies published between 1976 and 2025: surveys of 32 Mauritian exhibitors, 450 participants of Helsinki trade shows, 66 attendees of a U.S. trade show and 267 exhibitors at a Guangzhou fair, the records of one manufacturer across nine shows, interviews with eight virtual trade show exhibitors and 12 senior organizers, a company case, a 2004 review of German practice and five measurement frameworks or reviews [2–5,7–14,16,17]. The German evaluation shares and the list of exhibitor problems are taken from industry data reported in the studies; their original surveys are not named. Correlations across nine shows are indicative only. Industry figures are from Bizzabo, IAEE and R2 Stand [1,6,15].

Sources

● Study ○ Industry source

1 Bizzabo. (2026). Event industry trends 2026 [Article]. Retrieved November 7, 2026, from bizzabo.com — Reported

2 Ramsaran-Fowdar, R. R., & Oogarah-Hanuman, V. (2009). To What Extent Do Trade Show Exhibitors Engage In Objective-Setting And Planning? [Conference paper]. *International Business Research Conference, Dubai, 1–13*. Retrieved November 7, 2026, from hdl.handle.net — First-hand

3 Damböck, S. (2004). The Role of Exhibitions in the Marketing-Mix [Working paper]. Retrieved November 7, 2026, from damboeck.com — First-hand

4 Kapustina, L., Izakova, N., Drevalev, A., & Gurova, E. (2020). Evaluating performance of trade show activities as a marketing tool in the B2B market [Conference paper]. *The 14th International Days of Statistics and Economics, Prague, 440–450*. — First-hand

5 Sirén, A. (2017). What to Gain from Trade Show Information: An Empirical Study [Master's thesis]. *Aalto University School of Business*. — First-hand

6 Pagel, B. (2026, August). Exhibitor confidence is back. Now what? [Article]. Retrieved November 14, 2026, from iaee.com — First-hand

7 Jugănaru, I. D. (2023). Recent Evolutions and Trends in the Trade Fairs and Exhibitions Industry, before and after the COVID-19 Pandemic. The ROMEXPO Company's Case (Romania) [Journal article]. *Ovidius University Annals, 23(1), 648–658*. https://doi.org/10.61801/ouaess.2023.1.85 — First-hand

8 Gopalakrishna, S., & Lilien, G. L. (2012). Trade shows in the business marketing communications mix [Book chapter]. *In G. L. Lilien & R. Grewal (Eds.), Handbook of Business-to-Business Marketing, 226 ff.*. https://doi.org/10.4337/9781781002445.00022 — First-hand

9 Shi, W. (2013). Evaluating International Trade Show Performance of Exhibitors in Furniture Supplying Industries [Doctoral thesis]. *The Pennsylvania State University*. — First-hand

10 Virkajärvi, J. (2015). Guide to increasing exhibition ROI - Case Electronic Arts and Digiexpo [Bachelor's thesis]. *Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences*. — First-hand

11 Gottlieb, U., & Bianchi, C. (2017). Virtual trade shows: Exhibitors' perspectives on virtual marketing capability requirements [Journal article]. *Electronic Commerce Research and Applications, 21, 17–26*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.elerap.2016.12.004 First-hand

12 Cavanaugh, S. (1976). Setting Objectives and Evaluating the Effectiveness of Trade Show Exhibits [Journal article]. *Journal of Marketing, 40(4), 100–103*. https://doi.org/10.1177/002224297604000414 First-hand

13 Bulantseva, L. (2022). Exhibition Activity of Transport Companies in Formalized Approach to Assessing the Exhibitor's Success in Exhibition [Conference paper]. *Transportation Research Procedia, 61, 4–11*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.trpro.2022.01.002 First-hand

14 Nahornova, O., Mylko, I., & Ozhema, S. (2025). Exhibition and fair activities in the enterprise marketing management system [Journal article]. *National Interest Journal, 6(1), 23–34*. https://doi.org/10.14456/ni.2025.13 First-hand

15 R2 Stand. (2026). Measuring the ROI of your trade show presence: Essential KPIs for your booth [Article]. Retrieved November 14, 2026, from r2-stand.com First-hand

16 Bettis-Outland, H., Johnston, W. J., & Wilson, R. D. (2012). Using trade show information to enhance company success: an empirical investigation [Journal article]. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing, 27(5), 384–391*. https://doi.org/10.1108/08858621211236052 First-hand

17 Yuaikwamdee, D. (2025). Enhancing Trade Show Value through Servitization Strategies [Journal article]. *Romphruek Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, 43(3), 52–74*. First-hand

The evidence

14 studies · 3 industry sources

SAMPLE

14 studies: surveys of exhibitors and attendees in Mauritius, Finland, the U.S. and China, one manufacturer's records from nine trade shows, interviews with virtual trade show exhibitors and senior organizers, a company case and five measurement frameworks or reviews; four industry sources

YEARS

1976–2025 (studies); 2025–2026 (industry data)

METHOD

Surveys, regression and correlation analyses, case studies, interviews and conceptual frameworks

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.

eventamin.com · contact@eventamin.com · How we work: eventamin.com/method

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.24378250 · CC BY 4.0 · © 2026 Eventamin