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EVIDENCE BRIEF
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EVIDENCE BRIEF · INDUSTRY EVENTS AND MARKETS

Fairs Trade in Tacit Knowledge

What knowledge flows at trade fairs?

Around 500,000 exhibitors took part in Europe's certified exhibitions in 2025, and meeting existing customers is the exhibitor goal that has improved most since the pandemic. Studies of trade fairs, conventions, lighting events and a tourism technology fair show what kind of knowledge changes hands, and why so little of it moves online.

By Eventamin · How we work 12 November 2026 Europe, Germany, France, Canada, Asia

5 studies · 2 industry sources

trade fair knowledge exchange | exhibitor learning | tacit knowledge | temporary clusters | global buzz | product launches | LED lighting fairs | tourism technology | virtual trade fairs | innovation diffusion

Also in Exhibitor ROI

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KEY FINDING

Trade fairs and conferences mainly move tacit knowledge, such as relationships, market trends and judgment of products, and they move it in small steps. Displays at fairs create certainty that a technology is ready, festivals let users adapt it, and online tools carry explicit information but not the tacit part.

Five studies, 2008–2025; industry data 2026

Key findings

- **Most reasons to attend rest on tacit knowledge.** Relationships, networking, market trends, on-site knowledge sharing and product evaluation, the main reasons to attend fairs and conventions, depend mainly on tacit knowledge that meeting technologies transmit poorly[1].
- **Displays create certainty.** At Light + Building 2010 in Frankfurt, nearly all manufacturers showed LED products, visitors concluded the technology was mature, and municipal planners chose their first LED street lights afterwards[2].
- **Festivals let users adapt technology.** At Lyon's Fête des Lumières and Frankfurt's Luminale, city lighting teams and students built LED installations, turning trade-fair products into new uses[2].
- **Fairs anticipate their sector.** Among 176 innovation projects at the Tourism@ fair in France, technologies shifted from software to internet, databases and mobile applications in step with the tourism industry, and 68.5 percent addressed the trip before purchase[3].
- **Knowledge moves in small steps.** Three Toronto business conferences produced myriads of incremental pieces of knowledge rather than breakthroughs[4].

FOR THE MARKET

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Market outcomes

What the studies mean for each part of the industry.

Exhibitors & sponsors	The value of a stand lies in what cannot be sent by e-mail: relationships, the feel of a product and a reading of the market from who visits whom. Hands-on displays that let visitors compare and adjust a product build the certainty that triggers orders.
Organisers & associations	Formats that support tacit exchange, such as lounges, themed clusters and pre-scheduled meetings, carry the core value of a fair; online formats can extend presentations but not replace the floor.
Venues & destinations	Side events such as light festivals around a trade fair let users experiment with new products in public, which extends the fair's reach into the city.

Fairs as knowledge markets

Trade fairs bring large numbers of firms into one place. UFI's Euro Fair Statistics counted 503,552 exhibitors and 49.9 million visits at 1,758 certified exhibitions in 13 European countries in 2025; 38 percent of the exhibitions targeted trade visitors only and 41 percent both trade and public[5]. Among exhibitors' goals, meeting existing customers improved most since the pandemic, according to UFI[6].

Fairs are more than marketplaces. They work as temporary markets for sales, as temporary clusters where firms pick up the global buzz of their industry, and as community gatherings that keep professional networks alive, with physical presence essential to all three[7].

Tacit and explicit knowledge

Most of what visitors seek cannot be written down. A review of reasons for attending trade fairs and conventions found in 14 studies shows that indirect purposes, from building relationships and networking to market trends, on-site knowledge sharing and product evaluation, rest mainly on tacit knowledge[1]. Direct sales purposes, such as selling, buying and launching products, involve both explicit and tacit knowledge[1].

Meeting technologies carry explicit knowledge well because it is accessible, storable and scalable, but they are fundamentally limited for tacit knowledge, since low social presence online restricts trust and networking[1]. In an industry survey cited in the study, 67 percent said networking at virtual events failed to meet expectations[1].

Knowledge behind the main reasons to attend trade fairs and conventions, by type of knowledge

Classification of the study's mapping of 14 studies.

Yes · Partly · No · No data

	Explicit knowledge	Tacit knowledge	Carried well online
Selling and buying	✓	✓	◐
Corporate image and product launches	✓	✓	◐
Building relationships and networking	✗	✓	✗
Market trends	◐	✓	◐
On-site knowledge sharing and discussion	✗	✓	✗
Evaluating products and performance	◐	✓	✗
Expert presentations and skills	✓	✓	✓

Source: Jung & Lee · Release date: 2022 · Region: Worldwide · Studies reviewed: 14 · Classification: Eventamin

Seeing is believing: LED lighting at fairs and festivals

Trade fair displays settle doubts about new technology. At Light + Building 2010 in Frankfurt, covering more than 247,100 square meters, nearly all manufacturers exhibited LED products for the first time[2]. Displays that recreated shops and streets and let visitors dim lights and change color temperature convinced visitors and a German policymaker that the technology was mature, and municipal light planners chose their first LED street luminaires afterwards[2].

Festivals let users reshape the technology. At the Fête des Lumières in Lyon, the city's public lighting department built an LED show from children's drawings, and at Frankfurt's Luminale, students built an interactive cloud of 1,600 LEDs[2]. The same professionals visited fairs as buyers and presented at festivals as makers[2]. Lyon's smaller lighting fair, LumiVille, showed few LED displays in 2010 and later became biennial, alternating with Frankfurt[2].

EVENT	TYPE	ROLE FOR LED TECHNOLOGY
Light + Building, Frankfurt (2010)	Trade fair	Created certainty: technology seen as mature; first LED street lights ordered[2]
LumiVille, Lyon (2010)	Trade fair	Few LED displays; key players absent; later biennial[2]
Fête des Lumières, Lyon (2011)	Light festival	City lighting team experimented with LED installations[2]
Luminale, Frankfurt (2010)	Light festival	Students built an interactive cloud of 1,600 LEDs[2]

A fair that anticipates its sector

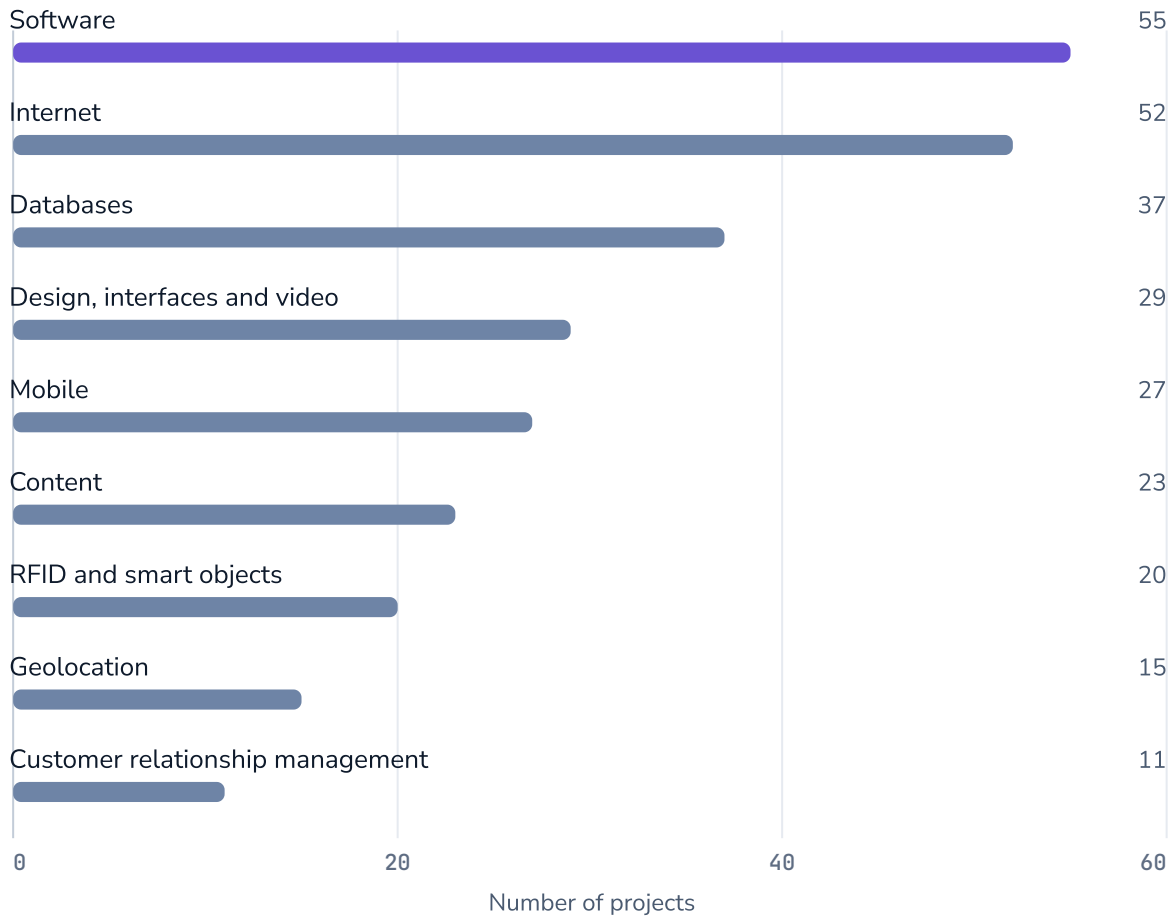
Innovation projects at a fair show where an industry is heading. At Tourism@, an annual two-day fair on the French Riviera linking tourism and technology firms, 176 projects entered for its innovation awards were analyzed[3]. Software was the most common technology, followed by internet, databases and mobile

applications, and the sequence of technology waves mirrored the tourism sector's own evolution[3].

Most projects served the trip before purchase, 68.5 percent, and 27 percent the trip itself; information functions dominated[3]. Projects aimed directly at tourists grew as technologies first built for providers reached consumers, and most innovation was incremental[3].

Technologies used in innovation projects at the Tourism@ fair in France, by number of projects

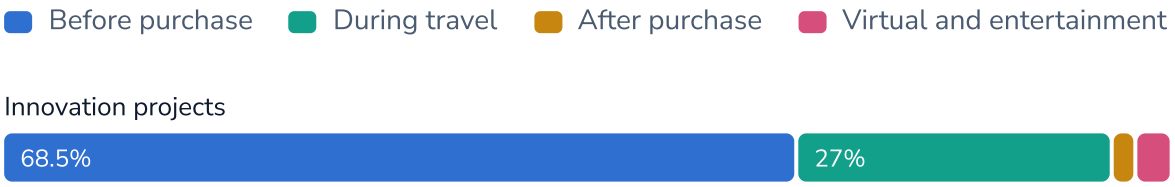
Number of projects; projects can use several technologies.



Source: Aldebert et al. · Release date: 2008 · Region: France (French Riviera) · Projects analyzed: 176

Innovation projects at the Tourism@ fair in France, by phase of the trip addressed

Share of projects.



Source: Aldebert et al. · Release date: 2008 · Region: France (French Riviera) · Projects analyzed: 176

Incremental, not radical

Knowledge at fairs and conferences moves in small steps. At three Toronto business conferences in 2012, attendees renewed contacts, picked up incremental updates and watched which sessions others attended to read trends; the disaster management conference yielded myriads of incremental pieces of knowledge rather than a few results[4]. Fairs support learning along existing paths and specialization, but can also spread promising practices quickly[7].

Notes on the data

The figures are based on five studies published between 2008 and 2025: a conceptual study mapping 14 studies of attendance reasons with industry statistics, 33 interviews at three Toronto conferences, a conceptual analysis of trade fairs, an ethnography of two lighting fairs and two light festivals, and an analysis of 176 projects at one tourism fair[1–4,7]. The tourism fair study is a draft conference paper with some inconsistent shares. The classification of knowledge types is Eventamin's coding of the reviewed findings.

Sources

● Study ○ Industry source

1 Jung, S., & Lee, J. (2022). Current and future influences of COVID-19 on the knowledge management function of conventions and exhibitions [Journal article]. *Service Business, 16(2), 391–410*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11628-022-00488-7 First-hand

2 Schulte-Römer, N. (2018). Extraordinary LED installations: events for user–innovation interaction [Journal article]. *Industry and Innovation, 25(7), 699–727*. https://doi.org/10.1080/13662716.2017.1345678 First-hand

3 Aldebert, B., Dang, R. J., & Longhi, C. (2008). Temporary Clusters and Knowledge Creation: The Case of Tourism@ [Conference paper]. *Paper presented at the 24th EGOS Colloquium, VU University Amsterdam*. Retrieved November 7, 2026, from shs.hal.science First-hand

4 Henn, S., & Bathelt, H. (2015). Knowledge generation and field reproduction in temporary clusters and the role of business conferences [Conference paper]. *Geoforum, 58, 104–113*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2014.10.015 First-hand

5 UFI. (2026, October). Euro Fair Statistics 2025: Certified key figures of exhibitions in Europe [Report]. Retrieved November 12, 2026, from ufi.org First-hand

6 UFI. (2026, April). Global Exhibition Industry Statistics [Report]. Retrieved November 9, 2026, from ufi.org First-hand

7 Bathelt, H., & Sydow, J. (2025). Beyond Temporary Organizations: Trade Fairs as Temporary Markets, Clusters, and Community Gatherings [Journal article]. *Project Management Journal, 56(5), 557–566*. https://doi.org/10.1177/87569728251335244 First-hand

The evidence

5 studies · 2 industry sources

SAMPLE

Five studies: a review of 14 studies with industry statistics, 33 conference interviews, a conceptual analysis of trade fairs, an ethnography of four lighting events and 176 innovation projects at a tourism fair; two industry reports

YEARS

2008–2025 (studies); 2026 (industry data)

METHOD

Conceptual and empirical studies of trade fairs and conferences in Asia, Canada, Germany and France

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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