



Exhibitions in 2021/2 – an IFES global outlook



Justin Hawes, managing director of exhibition infrastructure company Scan Display, is the current IFES President. IFES, the International Federation of Exhibition and Event Services, was established in 1984, and has over 250 members from forty countries. Business Events Africa caught up with Mr Hawes to find out what the international outlook for exhibitions is right now, according to his network.

Across the globe, exhibitions are on hold with little certainty on when they will be able to resume. The exception is the Middle East, which seems to have been better able to stem the spread of the virus.

Many organisers have developed online platforms to continue working. However, these have not been successful. **Uta Goretzky**, executive director of IFES, believes that exhibitions work because face-to-face meetings engender trust quickly and effectively, allowing business to proceed. It's much harder to build trust online.

Since the global industry has largely been paused, there is a pent-up demand for

trade shows. UFI's research also shows that more value is now placed on face-to-face marketing. Yet, the unknowns around vaccine efficacy, and how long it will take consumer confidence and marketing budgets to return, make it hard to know when exhibitions will resume.

Across the board, it's agreed that events will begin locally, followed by regionally and then internationally. They will likely be smaller with fewer visitors, at least initially, and will depend on technology to improve both safety and reach.

North America

John Pavek, vice president of publishing for EXHIBITOR Media Group in the USA, said that while a few exhibitions are happening, 90 per cent have been postponed or cancelled. "Most analysts predict Q4 in 2021 and Q1 in 2022 will see a strong return of exhibitions, but a lot depends on vaccine distribution. Exhibition organisers are struggling to make decisions and confirm venue dates.

"What will 2022 look like? It's really hard to say. It will be a year of seeing whether or not attendees/visitors will return in large numbers. This all depends on consumer confidence with regards to travel."

He also expects many events will include virtual and hybrid elements for those who don't yet feel comfortable attending live events.

No known trade events are happening in

Canada, reports **Cam Stevens**, chief executive officer of Stevens E3 which has offices in Canada and the USA. "We are in a severe lockdown within our region, with stay-at-home orders that are likely to strengthen before they become more relaxed. We have begun seeing cancellations for events happening spring, summer and fall of this year. Some of this is due to the international nature of the core of our customer base," he said.

"I expect we will see a return to exhibitions in 2022, unless we cannot get vaccinations more widely distributed or there are side effects/shortened effects of the vaccine."

Mr Stevens believes that the return of trade shows will compare with as when they were first cancelled. "First it was one event, and then a few more, and then we had a tumbling effect as people began to follow the lead of larger events. I believe the same will be true of the return to events. We will see a tentative start to the return to exhibitions which will become a much stronger push in the three to six months following. It will also take longer as it takes more time to plan and prepare for an event than it does to cancel one."

He anticipates that the new exhibition environment will be altered in the following ways: reduced number of exhibit companies; newly founded exhibit companies from the ashes of the old ones that did not survive; cash shortages to get

projects fulfilled; reduced budgets which could mean smaller stands or, depending on social distancing requirements, larger stands but with fewer properties; possible difficulty in shifting dollars from other marketing channels back to exhibitions.

South America

Alejandro Escalante Aguilar, chief executive officer of OMEGA Group in Mexico, said that Latin America has seen the broad cancellation and postponement of all events. It's expected events will start returning optimistically in July/August, or more conservatively in September/October, while the global revival of exhibitions will probably only start in 2022. These timelines also hinge on vaccines successfully bringing infection and mortality rates down.

Mr Aguilar also predicts that the return of live conferences and exhibitions will coincide and will be gradual.

"Exhibitors, visitors and buyers are afraid to gather in enclosed places with a high capacity of people," he said. "On the other hand, people are also tired of being isolated, and all virtual and

online event attempts have not worked, as the results are not what was expected of them. These factors will help to drive the return of live events."

Europe

Like the rest of the world, no live events are currently taking place in Europe and there is a great deal of uncertainty about when they will resume – although many are expecting the second half of 2021 will start to see improvements.

Andrew Harrison, director of UK-based ESSA (Event Supplier and Services Association), said: "Many variables are at play here, such as the continued roll-out of vaccines, declining transmission rates, insurance, business travel restrictions, testing and client confidence. Time is running out now, if not already gone, for anything of note to take place in early Spring (March) in the UK. The right noises are being made by several shows in late Spring into summer (May onwards), with some of these events being sizeable. But Autumn exhibition season (from September) is probably a more realistic target," he said.

He added: "The world is not moving at

the same pace or on the same path in how it has dealt or will continue to deal with this pandemic. This will impact the return of live events, especially those that require travel."

Mr Harrison also believes that large domestic meetings and conferences will have a better chance of gaining the critical mass they need, unlike exhibitions which generally draw much larger numbers. But - "Once we get going, every exhibition that gets out of the gate in 2021 will feel like the opening ceremony of the London Olympics for everyone."

In France, some national shows are still planned for June while others have been



postponed as far out as 2023. **Philippe Beille**, chief executive officer of French-based Duo, said: "We all want to believe that as soon as enough people are vaccinated, we will be able to open shows, which would be after our summer (September). But our country hasn't been very fast to vaccinate... so we expect to only get back to 'normal' in January 2022, gradually."

He added that the French Meeting Industry Council (UNIMEV) conducted a study with economists. It found that, once exhibitions resume, it will likely take six months for exhibitors to feel safe enough to start planning to spend money on exhibiting again. "This is why our industry is urging the government to provide an expected date for re-allowing shows," he said. "For example, allowing shows with no limitations in number of attendees in Autumn 2021 would let us get back to 'normal' at the end of Q1 in 2022."

One positive that has come out of the lockdowns is that the French events industry has grouped together to negotiate as one – much as South Africa has through the South African Events Council. Mr Beille said: "Everyone from catering to AV,

venues, organisers, stand builders... This would be unbelievable before the crisis but is possible now. We hope to keep it like that for the future."

Eliseu Sancho, managing director of Dylunio, said: "In Spain, everything is digital or cancelled for the next three months. The first big scheduled shows are Fitur, the biggest local and international tourism show, in May and MWC Barcelona in June. However, in my opinion, the second half of the season will be more exhibition-friendly, due to the vaccine effect."

He believes that because exhibitions are more difficult to reproduce virtually, they will push to start sooner than conferences. He adds, "I think there will be two different velocities. The local market, following the velocity of the vaccination, will have an aggressive return, probably between summer and the end of the year. International business will depend on the velocity of vaccination of the different countries involved."

Peter Theodorides, chief executive officer of Vision in Greece, expects

exhibitions will only resume in Southern Europe, soonest, in September 2021. **Voicu Sferdianu**, chief executive officer of XDS Expo Design System in Romania, agrees, saying "hopefully starting in the second half of 2021, but the comeback will depend crucially on the vaccination success."

Middle East

News from the Middle East is more promising. **Javier Ferrer**, director and partner at NOE Group, said that while there have been differing levels of incidence and varied approaches across the region, the spread of the virus has been brought under control through the early adoption of strict health and safety guidelines.

"This is especially the case with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which successfully enforced very comprehensive measures to control the number of cases. It is also the second fastest country to administer vaccines, with approximately 45 per cent of total population already having been vaccinated," he said.

As a result, exhibitions resumed in the UAE in December – although conferences have been slower to return in-person and

seem to be continuing digitally. Gitex Technology Week was held from 6-10 December and hosted over 1 200 exhibitions from 60 different countries. Meanwhile, IDEX, a Military and Defence show, and Gulfood, the largest worldwide annual food expo, are both scheduled for 21-25 February. All indicators are that these events will go ahead, with similar happenings in Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

"2021 is a crucial year for the region," added Mr Ferrer. "We have invested in business and consumer tourism and expect growth will continue this year if we follow all of the required safety protocols. Expo 2021 is on the horizon (1 October 2021 - 31 March 2022), and in fact the Sustainability Pavilion is already open to the public. They are preparing for a large audience using a planned and programmed approach.

"I believe 2021 will be a year of transition, and 2022 will be the year of recovery. Business needs continuous stimulus and ways to reach clients, and consumers will have a 'craving' for travel and attending events."

Asia

"There is no clarity on whether the exhibitions planned for 2021 will happen, especially in the first half of 2021. If they do go ahead, they are probably going to be mostly digital or hybrid," said **Sarah Chew**, executive director of The Kingsmen Experience which has offices in Asia Pacific, the Middle East and America.

She added that these outcomes will be largely dependent on travel restrictions, regulations, and whether it is commercially viable to run physical events with lower attendee numbers. "It also depends on how soon countries get their situation in control, where their exhibitors and visitors typically come from, and the nature of the show and its target market. China has seen some exhibitions return since last year, but these are mostly domestic. Meanwhile events in many Asian cities are being delayed to the Q2 or Q3 in 2021."

In terms of how aggressively exhibitions will return, Ms Chew said, "a lot depends on the vaccine availability, roll-out and acceptance level, amidst new variants and uncertainty over efficacy, which will affect

border controls, travellers' confidence etc. In Asia, the ability of each country to get the pandemic under control is extremely varied. While some may be able to stage events earlier, others will remain in the woods."

She added: "We anticipate that more physical events may return in 2022 and pent-up demand may push economic growth further. However, we do not expect exhibitions to return to pre-Covid levels so soon."

Speaking about China, **Liang Guo**, director of International Cooperation at the Beijing Eagle International Exhibition,



said that the virus has been well controlled since April 2020 which allowed the industry to reopen at roughly 50 per cent capacity. But, with new cases emerging in January 2021, Beijing stopped all events of more than 100 people and gatherings are not encouraged.

"Since the beginning of January, the Chinese government started to vaccinate those who have a high frequency of meeting people, such as taxi drivers, people working in retail, those who need to travel abroad, etc. After the Chinese New Year (12 February 2021), our government will arrange vaccinations for all the citizens. We believe the virus won't disappear; we have to live with it. So most people see getting the vaccination as the only solution," he said. "If most people are vaccinated in 2021 or the beginning of 2022, we think we can have at least 60-70 per cent turnover return in 2022."

Australia

"The Industry is still very nervous of committing to anything at the moment," said **Alan de Beer**, senior exhibition stand designer at Perth Expohire. "There were some limited numbers of local events and

exhibitions which took place late last year in Western Australia, but all of the larger shows were either cancelled or postponed. We are currently hoping that our main home shows and mining exhibitions will go ahead as planned in March. The Mining Expo (AOG) is much smaller than last year, so I sense that exhibitors are still worried about committing to shows."

Regarding the return of exhibitions, Mr de Beer said: "I personally think it will take a few years to hit the heights that we have experienced in the past, as exhibitors will still be nervous, and the budgets just won't be there anymore."

Africa

Alastair Stead, director of Scan Display Africa, said Rwandans are hopeful that events will resume in the second half of the year, with some large events currently planned in September and November 2021.

He added: "I believe that there is going to be a 'wait and see' plan to see who is brave enough to take the first step, and

if all goes well others may follow, but it will not be a flood of events. However, with the roll-out of vaccines, there is hope that 2022 will be a positive year. It will not be a return to pre-Covid levels, but there will at least be more activity."

What next?

It's hard to plan for a future when so much is uncertain. But the continued push to reopen the industry is critical. We need to be able to get back to business as soon as possible, it will take time to organise shows and gain the confidence and support they need to succeed. We cannot afford more delays.

The SA Events Council is driving this dialogue with Government. It is requesting that business events be distinguished from mass gatherings, and that the maximum attendance cap on events be removed as it isn't viable for exhibitions.

In the meantime, many businesses are on hold or seeking opportunities elsewhere. I am hoping the exhibition industry will be included in some of the pandemic response measures, such as building nationwide vaccination centres and other support facilities as needed. ■