



The arrival of new technology has fundamentally undermined the international exhibition landscape, yet it is the same technology that provides the solution to the needs of global business in a way that trade shows can no longer match.

The changing world of exhibitions

It would probably be true to say that trade exhibitions for the supply side of the leather and footwear industries enjoyed their hey-day in the 1980s and 1990s. Many exhibitors and visitors still retain warm memories of Paris when our world seemed to be dominated by the international Semaine du Cuir show squeezed into the bustling, chaotic halls of Porte de Versailles. It was a time when many companies were moving into exporting and used trade shows to find new partners, a marketing exercise that needed about a five-year programme to provide them with results.

But, as costs rose and returns fell, visitors changed their allegiance, and so the Parisian giant began its decline. When the show moved from the heart of the capital, a most logical step by any objective standards, to the purpose-built, modern exhibition halls of the Parc des Expositions at Villepinte, the rot set in. The subjective charm of Paris had been steam-rolled out by functional modernity. And every time the organisers tried to accommodate the varied thoughts of the trade, so the show struggled on into oblivion.

Paris was not alone—Miami briefly surged but didn't survive for long, New York survived for even less time. Bologna struggles on, despite the unacceptable demands of its hotels and infrastructure, but mainly because it is an important show for design and product development teams to seek fresh ideas. Hong Kong continues, principally because it has the flexibility to adapt to changes in the market and it is not beholden to a single sector. China may have captured vast swathes of the business, but Shanghai does not generate the glamour or allure. Regional shows—whether they are called 'International this or that'—survive because of their proximity to local suppliers and manufacturers and where access is relatively cheap and easy. But they have not become the 'must-do-must-see' venues for world trade.

A changing scene

There are other changes that have come about in world trade, especially in the last five years.

1. Globalisation is a reality and has made it easier to develop consistent supply chains. There has also been huge consolidation in many markets. For example, it is claimed that two-thirds of the huge US market is controlled by just 15 retailers and 15 brands.
2. Travel has become more difficult and expensive (yes, there are cheap airlines but rarely do they fly when you would like to, and to where you would like to go) and there is no budget airline flying from São Paulo to Bologna, from Cologne to Shanghai or Birmingham to Hong Kong. And, on the current political agenda, flying is not seen as environmentally 'green'.
3. Hotels have become more expensive, as have most service industries required by exhibition travellers—when exhibitions start, car hire charges jump; the day after an exhibition, they drop like a stone. Security, health scares and insurance have all become important factors too.
4. Exhibition contractors have become more expensive, so have the costs and problems related to shipping; marketing and display have become more competitive between companies and, as they compete for attention, their booth designs and production costs have risen.
5. Transporting and assembling machines have become more difficult and expensive.
6. Companies have cut back on the number of people being allowed to travel to exhibitions. The CEO of a company may hold the purse strings but he is unlikely to be a technician or chemist who can distinguish between what is good and what is better, yet it is frequently the CEO who makes the trip.



7. The Internet and developing communication systems, such as Skype, have made it easier for people to build up trading relationships. Face-to-face meetings do not have to wait for an exhibition.
8. Time pressures and lean management have reduced the time that an executive can reasonably afford to spend away from the office. Eight days away to attend APLF is now a luxury. Entertainment costs are difficult to contain and many of the remaining exhibition venues do not have the appeal that was always associated with spending time in Paris.
9. Exhibiting companies can no longer generate new products, chemicals or machinery to suit an exhibition launch or schedule. Nor can they wait to introduce an innovation—business has become more immediate and urgent. For some categories, such as leather machinery, the high cost of new product development and of displaying machines cannot be recouped in sales. Similarly, for leather chemical companies, the cost of developing display samples for trade shows and presenting them is becoming too high at a time when, for most, the target needs to be the share of purchase by their top customers rather than their share of market.



you have eased your way without any effort into a taxi, with a driver who welcomes you and takes you—without a single traffic jam, detour or other delay on the way—to the front door of the exhibition centre.

You enter the building without standing in line to find yourself in the reception area, where an efficient and interested exhibition employee moves you automatically to the VIP registration desk (isn't it nice to know that you're now a VIP?) and with minimum effort you register for the show. No charge, no catalogue to buy, no unnerving sense of feeling lost!

As you walk towards the exhibition halls—no pushing or shoving, no sweat—you can decide exactly what it is you want to look at. OK—we appreciate

that there are people who want to chat to you, suggest you meet for a drink or a meal (think of your waistline), but this exhibition is different. You can spend as long as wish on a stand or you can come back tomorrow (and, when you do return, you'll be greeted by name—now *that* is VIP treatment). If you're not happy with an offer, you can move on quickly to the next stand without causing offence or being rude to someone.

If you see something you like, or feel you might be interested in, move on to the stand and stay as long as you like. Get to know the company and the people. See its complete range. The company might even treat you to a trip

around its factory at the same time. And, hey, what's this?—between your visit ten minutes ago and the time of your return to the stand, the company's newest offering is already there. (And you didn't see a stand builder make the change—it happened like magic.)

No time difference, no jet lag, no change to sleep patterns

Now, just imagine an exhibition that was open when you wanted to visit. Like the famous store of LL Bean in the USA, which in *reality* never closes—that's why the store has no locks on the doors—your imagined show is there whenever you want it, day or night. You arrive when it suits you, you leave when it suits you. If you want to nip in for half-an-hour, go for it. No one's going to refuse you entry. As an exhibitor, you can leave the stand whenever you feel the need and you still won't miss a potential customer. What's more, there is no limit on what you can exhibit or demonstrate.

What you have been visualising is an exhibition designed to meet your needs (whether as an exhibitor, buyer or just an interested party) at a most affordable cost. And it's always up-to-date. What's even better, you're told every time something new is launched by an exhibitor.

No need to make an appointment if you want to call. And, what's more, there is a good chance that the exhibitor will speak your language.

So, what can't this Utopian exhibition do?

For one thing, it won't give you tired, aching feet!

So, does the virtual exhibition exist in reality?

The answer is yes, it's not a dream—check out www.leatherfair365.com

A permanent, continuing need for information

For all the changes that have come about in commercial and industrial life, there remains the need for a truly international exhibition to serve the global leather and footwear markets. Given the nature of business, it is difficult to envisage where and when such an event could be staged.

Competition has not diminished and buyers are continually searching for new suppliers and manufacturers. Investment in new technology still has to be made and decisions about what and when to buy still need to be taken on the basis of the most up-to-date information.

In the same way that exhibitors cannot wait for exhibitions, buyers do not wish to wait for the next show to come around. But, in the same way that new technology has fundamentally changed the exhibition landscape, the same technology also provides the solution that trade shows and directories can never match. (By the time a trade directory is assembled and printed, the information it contains is out-of-date and once-a-year exhibitions cannot meet immediate day-to-day demands or needs.)

The virtual daily exhibition

You're probably reading this article, either in its printed format or on your computer as an e-zine, while sitting comfortably. Now let your imagination roll. Without leaving your own familiar surroundings and environment, picture yourself arriving instantaneously (and for free) at an international airport. As you walk out of the terminal, without having to collect your luggage (remember, you didn't pack any and you didn't forget your toothbrush either) or wait in line to have your passport checked,