

eBusiness Marketer

A blog about B2B Marketing in the Trenches

HOME ABOUT CONTACT



Virtual Trade Show Marketing: What We Learned from 2020

It's Trade Show season again!

And this year, most conferences are going back to IN-PERSON EVENTS!

But did we, as manufacturers and exhibitors, learn anything we can take away from the dark days of 2020? The Year when our big exalted trade shows went completely online?

Or... do we just try to *forget* about it like some terrible fever-dream?



Crescent Electric Supply did a nifty thing for NECA 2020 Live. They utilized their backdrop tiles to invite attendees to enter a live chat with their booth personnel – each with their own product or application expertise. And best of all you see their faces – a nice human touch.

Virtual Trade Shows: worth the investment?

I think most of us in exhibitor-land assumed virtual trade shows were going to “suck”.

And like a self-fulfilling prophesy, they probably did “suck”.

But not every exhibitor “phoned-it-in” for 2020. An intrepid few took the hands they were dealt, and played em’ the best they could...

... And I'll bet good money those intrepid exhibitors walked away with the lion's share of attendee leads that year!



For NECA 2020 Live, ABB (parent company of Thomas & Betts and GE Industrial) opted for rotating backdrops. So one minute you see these products...



... And the next minute you see THESE products. A pretty good way to feature multiple products while giving them equal weight of importance.

So in this post, we're gonna' break down one such industry trade show that went virtual in 2020. Can it give us a glimpse into the future of "hybrid" trade shows? And how should we change our marketing mindsets going forward?

I will try to give you one B2B marketer's glimpse into those questions. And maybe you'll dig-up a nugget or two you can take to heart.

Seven Predictions I Made About Virtual Trade Shows in 2020

What I got right. What I got dead wrong.

As our example, let's look at my industry's "Super Bowl" trade show event — the [National Electrical Contractor's Association \(NECA\) Convention](#) (taking place in Nashville, Tennessee this year).

In my [last post written prior to NECA 2020 Live](#), I made seven predictions about:

- **How exhibitors should re-think** their classic trade show marketing strategy
- And what **new opportunities** might be available in the virtual (or "hybrid") setting.

While I talk about the NECA Show specifically, my hope is that some of these insights ring true for your big industry trade show. Take what works for you. Discard the rest.

So, were any of my predictions right?

To help answer that, I got the chance to sit down with [Beth Ellis](#), the Executive Director of Convention and Meetings for NECA. For almost 30 years, Beth has been running a tight ship for the organization, making sure each NECA Show goes off without a hitch.

Big thanks to Beth, who was super knowledgeable, very gracious with here time, and was really a great sport for agreeing to comment on this non-descript blog o' mine.

Prediction #1

NECA (read: your trade show) will see more attendees than in any other year, possibly as much as 3X more people if events like [2020 Adobe Summit](#) are any indication.

I figured if NECA saw 10,220 people in 2018, NECA 2020 Live could see as much as 30,000.

VERDICT: FALSE

BETH ELLIS: "The trade shows you're comparing don't quite tie together like that. If you recall, NECA 2018 was held in Philadelphia – a large city with a very strong [labor] Union presence. So **attendance at these shows will vary depending on the city they're held in.**"

*NECA 2020 Live ultimately saw **5,104 attendees** during it's official trade show period in October (though people continued to attend "on-demand" through December 2020 – an interesting consideration for your virtual event).*

I asked Beth if this seemingly "low" number was due to a technology learning-curve for folks who prefer in-person events.

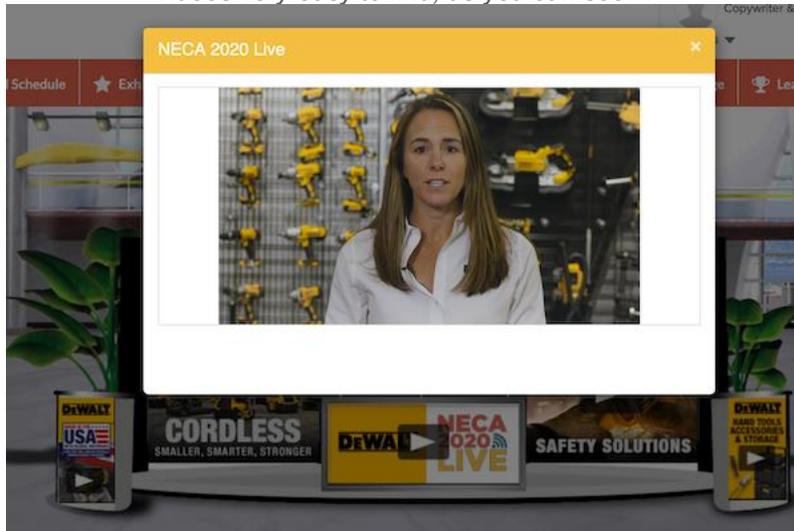
BETH ELLIS: "[In 2020] we didn't know what to expect. We had nothing to compare it to. Only a few other [construction] trades were doing [virtual trade shows]. Most decided to postpone or cancel their [in-person] events."

"We had only a few months [to shift the NECA Show into a completely virtual event]. It's something we thought about doing for years. But the pandemic forced us to finally say 'let's go for it!'"

"Ultimately, we were pleased with the results [of NECA 2020 Live]."



DeWalt Tools produced custom videos specifically for NECA 2020 Live. They made the videos very easy to find, as you can see...



DeWalt was smart to host their videos from the booth (rather than link-out to their website or YouTube – a less expensive option). This helps keep attendees inside the experience and avoid distractions.

Prediction #2

While not wholly “my” prediction, the *NECA Exhibitor Prospectus* from 2020 indicated there would be a “Deeper / wider audience reach.” (ie. More positions in the firm represented than in years prior.)

VERDICT: TRUE

BETH ELLIS: “Yes, exhibitors had [a unique] opportunity to dive deeper into [electrical contracting] firms. At a live destination trade show, companies typically sent owners, presidents, and CEOs.”

“[In 2020] we saw a lot more project managers, supervisors, and foremen.”

“In past years, smaller shops might not have been able to fly everyone to the convention. Now they can – and because it’s **available on-demand** [through December 2020], everyone has the chance to go to NECA!”

After the convention ended, I answered a number of sample and literature requests from my company’s website. These requests were the result of “foot traffic” to our virtual booth. All requests were indeed mid-level

(estimators, PMs, foremen). And they all confirmed it was their first time attending NECA – despite some who had been in the business for over a decade.

Why is Audience Reach at a trade show important?

This may not be true to your business. But in my little corner of the construction world, it's **often the mid-level people who champion our products**, and ultimately win the business.

Not all owners and C-suite executives care about the features and benefits of your product. But their superintendents and foremen DO care. And those mid-level folks can be powerful change agents inside a large company.



Graybar: Best Booth of NECA 2020 Live? While Beth Ellis could not say which exhibitor got the most foot traffic, Graybar wins my Gold Medal in terms of effort. And when you click on any of the backdrops...



Our Prizes



VISIT OUR BOOTH to collect your commemorative

ATTEND OUR EDUCATION SESSIONS for a chance to win a Yeti Tundra Haul!





Supplies are limited!



View rules.



Education Opportunities



Becoming an Integrator in Wireless

- › Available On-Demand in Trade Show Education
- › This session will discuss wireless market needs of the customers, the common challenges faced getting into this type of work and will provide you with solutions you can use today.



Break into Prefab & Digitized Procurement without BIM or Upfront Costs

- Available On-Demand in Trade Show Education
- This session will discuss a way for small and medium contractors to automatically generate comprehensive Bill of Material from your 2D blueprints. This new service can save you time, deliver the pre-fabricated assemblies that you need, and eliminate the upfront cost of hiring and training BIM modelers.

Our Services



• 1 tech to move and pull

... You land on a custom landing page designed specifically for the show. Full of prizes, and a calendar of their out-of-booth livestream events.

Prediction #3

People will not aimlessly “walk through” the virtual exhibition hall. Instead, people will be laser-focused – they’ll either go to the Education Sessions only... or... they will make a bee-line to select exhibitor booths.

VERDICT: **FALSE, KIND OF**

BETH ELLIS: “We actually received numerous accolades from exhibitors [who reported “foot traffic” to their virtual booths]. And with [the NECA show available] on-demand [through December 2020], attendees took advantage of walking the show floor [long after the show concluded].”

To be sure, keynote speeches and education sessions were popular.

There was an exhibitor directory (and several other methods) for people to “jump” right into specific booths.

*Yet, of the folks that requested samples and literature, a few implied **they in fact did browse the exhibit hall**. So I now think “browsing” the show floor is a preference for some attendees – not just a necessity.*

Prediction #4

Exhibitors should seize every opportunity to livestream outside of their booth. Thus, many ways scoop up more leads besides your booth.

VERDICT: **TRUE**

Indeed, out-of-booth livestream events allowed exhibitors to scoop up more leads (vs. exhibitors with booth only).

BETH ELLIS: “Both our 5-minute Product Demonstrations and 30-minute Trade Show Education slots were sold out. Lots of people attended these events.”

Beth was kind enough to share some attendance figures from 2020. They were quite eye-opening:

DATE:	# OF EDUCATION SESSIONS	ATTENDEES
2019	21	590
2020	24	2,402

*In 2020, the NECA Show drew nearly **six times the number of attendees** to exhibitor-hosted Trade Show Education Sessions. There were also 27 Product Demonstrations which drew 1,225 attendees in total.*

Livestream events at NECA 2020 Live **drew nearly six times the number of attendees** than in previous “real world” trade show years!

I asked Beth which exhibitors at NECA 2020 Live did the best job of hosting / promoting livestream events (either from their booth or outside of it). But due to exhibitor confidentiality...

BETH ELLIS: “I can’t name names. However, I will say that every [exhibitor] started on a level playing field.”

She’s right. Virtual booth space is only a fraction of the cost of a physical booth.

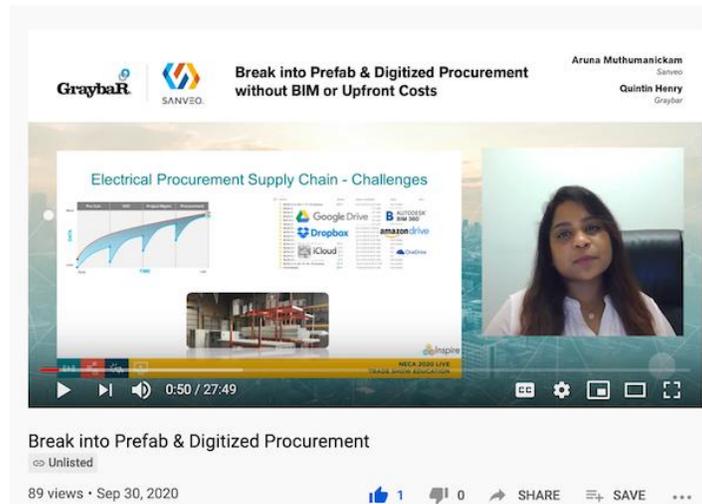
And in the virtual world, there is no airfare, hotel, or physical display costs.

So at NECA 2020 Live, the small or start-up company could afford Platinum-level booths... with all the bells and whistles.

For the first time ever, small agile players could go head-to-head with big companies — those “Super Exhibitors” who normally spend *millions of dollars* a year on trade shows.

The screenshot shows a Zoom meeting interface. At the top, the session title is "Break into Prefab & Digitized Procurement without BIM or Upfront Costs" and the host is Quintinus Henry. The date and time are "Wed, October 07, 2:00 PM (EST)". A "Join" button is visible. Below the title, there is a profile picture of Aruna Muthumanickam. The main content area contains a description: "This session will discuss a way for small and medium contractors to automatically generate comprehensive Bill of Material from your 2D blueprints. This new service can save you time, deliver the pre-fabricated assemblies that you need, and eliminate the upfront cost of hiring and training BIM modelers."

Graybar for the win! They hosted several out-of-booth livestream events (a.k.a. Trade Show Education Sessions). Each with titillating titles like this: “Break into Prefab & Digitized Procurement without BIM or Upfront Costs”. It’s technology / leadership focused, uses a hot-button word (“prefab”), and the title even uses a great copywriting formula (the ol’ “With / Without” headline).



Video replay of Graybar's Trade Show Education Session.

According to Ellis, one way manufacturers can re-invest their 'saved' trade show dollars is in **giveaways and gamification**. For instance, NECA has an incentive program they've done for years. Attendees will visit participating booths, collect tokens, and then qualify for raffle prizes later.

She mentioned some exhibitors are skeptical of such incentive programs, but...

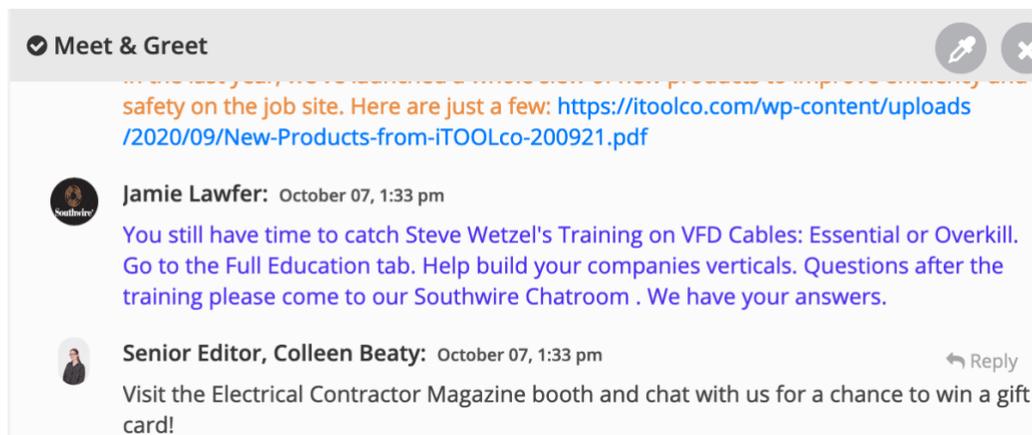
BETH ELLIS: "They [Giveaways and gamification] work. And attendees get to meet vendors they might not have otherwise met."

Prediction #5

Exhibitors should send out "spies" to the Lounge Area (or anywhere there was a public chat room). That way, you can announce livestream events and let people know about your booth.

VERDICT: TRUE (WITH A 'BUT')

Guess I wasn't the only "genius" marketer that caught onto this idea. Just take a look at the screenshot below, showing a snippet of the NECA Lounge:



The NECA 2020 Live Lounge Area.

Exhibitors and trade show staff sorta' bum-rushed the virtual lounge!

(It was kinda fun to imagine twenty exhibitor salespeople standing on soap boxes, pitching their wares at each other in a crowded, poorly ventilated room. Meanwhile one attendee pokes her head in, sees the shouting salespeople, and ejects herself from the room immediately!)

As far as I could tell, there were no moderators. Exhibitors were very well behaved, though (albeit a little "Chat Bot"-like.) I wanted to break into the chat and yell in ALL CAPS to my fellow marketers:

ARE WE COMPLETELY THROWING OUT THE RULES OF
NETWORKING JUST CUZ ITS VIRTUAL NOW?

When I conjured this prediction from my crystal ball, I imagined something a little more... genuine.

Savvy exhibitors and attendees of the Social Media Age, having real conversations. Spirited discussions about business and life. Talking solutions instead of products. Really connecting with each other...

... and then I remembered what industry I'm in!

Prediction #6

**When buying a virtual booth package, make sure it comes with
"Match-Making" enabled.**

VERDICT: "MEH"

So I guess I didn't understand Match-Making programs as well as I thought.

Match-Making pairs exhibitors with attendees who are likely to buy the exhibitor's wares. I think it happens during registration, where people select the products and topics that interest them.

Exhibitors are then alerted somehow when there's a "match". (Kind of like Tinder.) As I understood, exhibitors get to "see" that person's data and reach out for meetings.

It also sounded like matched-attendees get included in the final "leads" file – whether they visit your booth or not.

However, I didn't recall seeing any place in the exhibitor's dashboard where "Matched" attendees lived. Nor do I recall seeing any "Matched" contacts in the final "leads" file (though likely they blended in with leads from other sources). Either way, I wasn't looking too hard. So from my experience, Match-Making was a "meh."

Your results may vary, so don't take my word for it.

Prediction #7

The top trade show education topics (read: most-attended) would be “Safety” and “Code” related.

VERDICT: **FALSE**

The NECA Show offers two exhibitor-sponsored, out-of-booth events. These are:

1. 30-minute Trade Show Education Sessions
2. and 5-minute Product Demos

Beth could not divulge which exhibitor-sponsored events were the most popular. But, she did share **which of the General Sessions were most popular** with attendees. These were:

- Margin or Markup
- Building High Performance Teams
- New Role of Data in Construction
- How to Lead Virtually
- The Value of Speaking Up

This lit a huge light bulb for me.

Topics of “leadership” and “future of technology” actually out-performed “safety” and “code” related topics.

I guess I thought that contractors by-and-large wanted to learn *hard* skills (like code and safety). Instead, in large numbers, they went after *soft* skills like leadership and construction management technology / methodologies.

But as Prediction #2 highlights – at a “normal” in-person NECA Show, **the majority of attendees are Vice Presidents, owners, and other C-suite.** Even though the trade show had a much lower bar-to-entry in 2020, I’m guessing it was *still* a higher ratio of owners & C-suite.

The screenshot shows a web interface for the NECA 2020 Live Trade Show Education Sessions. At the top, there are two tabs: "Full Schedule" and "Trade Show Education". Below the tabs is a search bar. The main content area displays a list of sessions, each with a speaker profile picture and name, a session title, a description, and a "Join" button. The sessions listed are:

- David Meade** (Speaker): Winning business online has never been more important. Whether its building relationships, sharing case studies, or simply scoping out a project, the time to upskill on this medium is now. This session will show how to use simple software tools to bring your virtual sales calls alive. Easily blending video, pictures, and other media into compelling pitches, this session shows that with a little effort your next remote pitch for business can be as potent as your last in person sales opportunity.
- M18 FUEL™ ANGLER™ Pulling Fish Tape** (Title): Wed, October 07, 11:50 AM (EST). It has 250 lbs of pull force and also winds the tape directly back into the cartridge for no mess and less binding. Three different types of cartridges can all be interchanged on a single base unit: 240ft & 120ft Steel and 100ft Polyester.
- High Voltage Safety** (Title): Wed, October 07, 11:55 AM (EST). The session will focus on understanding electric fields in a utility environment. These energy fields surround line workers on a daily basis. It is important to be equipped with tools that can warn the user of their presence to prevent accidental contacts and injuries.
- Innovation Studio Podcast: Evolution of the EC** (Title): Wed, October 07, 12:00 PM (EST). The Innovation Overload Podcast will feature industry leaders who will share experiences with technology and innovation. Tune in LIVE on

Trade Show Education Sessions schedule at NECA 2020 Live.

CONCLUSION:

Well, I got 3-1/2 out of 7 right. I guess being a psychic isn't in the cards for me. (But, at least I'm as accurate as a TV weatherman!)

One take-away from the Great Virtualization of 2020 is that a lot of **industrial and B2B companies had to think *harder* about their trade show strategy.**

Are the trade shows we're committed to every year really worth the cost and effort?

Which trade show is really picking up the customers we want?

And have we been doing a good enough job as exhibitors?

They say people don't buy anything unless they have an immediate pain in search of a cure.

For too long, we spent the big bucks on conferences, with our hands over our ears and eyes. Going on "blind faith" that we're getting our money's worth ("It's what we've always don"). That just having a "good enough" trade show strategy is good business.

I'm not saying trade shows aren't worth it. I think they are... for most B2B companies at least.

But we've got to stop flying on auto-pilot. Think harder about the attendees experience. And ask ourselves what tangible results we want to achieve at the end of each show.

As we enter 2021 Trade Show Season, let's not forget the lessons of "The Great Virtualization of 2020".