



SISO/EFI Deeper Dive: Case Study on Surf Expo

Riding the Wave: Surf Expo Shifts to Serve Market Needs



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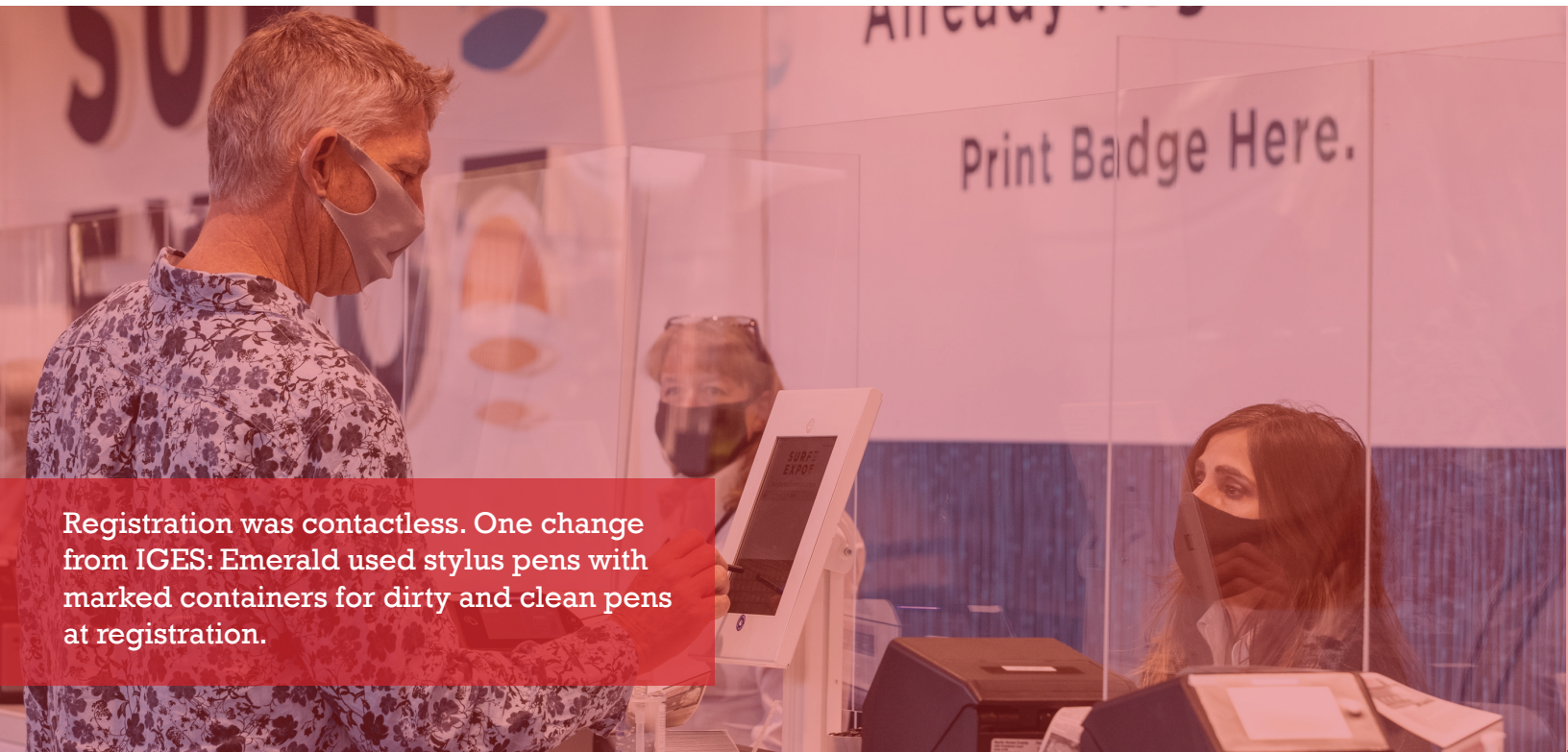
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Registration was contactless. One change from IGES: Emerald used stylus pens with marked containers for dirty and clean pens at registration.

Overview

The call to move forward with Surf Expo in Orlando in 2021 was complicated by so many conflicting factors — the pandemic, health and safety, the fact that Florida is open for business, and market needs. “The main concern has been safety,” said Roy Turner, Surf Expo Show Director.

Before deciding to move forward with the in-person component at the Orange County Convention Center (OCCC), “We did research among exhibitors and attendees to determine: first, is there a market need? and second, are people willing to participate?” Turner said. “In the beginning, before we even decided to go down the safety protocol path, we wanted to know: is there still a market need?”

While the overall scale was not at pre-COVID levels, based on the number of exhibitors and attendees who participated, there was very clearly a market need in this sector. On site, Surf Expo buyers and retailers who sell surfboards, wakeboards, kayaks, stand-up paddleboards and supplies for every other water sport, reported they prefer to touch and feel the product in-person and build relationships and trust with their vendors now more than ever. This sentiment amongst customers further reinforces the relevance and power of face-to-face trade events.

“For some retailers, last summer was one of the best ever,” Turner said. “Once the beaches opened, everybody wanted to get out of their house. If you live near the ocean, you bought a surfboard or a boogie board. Even last summer,

there was interest within our communities to participate in trade events. Retailers need product, and the supply chain shut down temporarily in China.” Even before the pandemic, brands were running into production schedule delays because of tariffs and levies, he said.

“We were closed for two months during the lockdown, but we shifted to online sales and promotion, which helped us survive. We opened Memorial Day weekend because we were deemed an essential business since we sell bikes,” said Brian Farias, Owner of Farias Surf and Sport, whose family started the business on the New Jersey shore with one store in 1969. The business has expanded to seven locations on the East Coast.

“We had a strong summer, and we were busy through the holidays. The population in our area has risen considerably, and we need new product,” said Farias, who drove to Surf Expo to write orders. “I haven’t taken off more than one or two days since we reopened.”

Show Dates & Locations

Surf Expo

Jan. 6-8, 2021

Orange County Convention Center,
Orlando, FL

Contractor: Shepard Exposition Services

Registration: Maritz Global Events

On the first day of the show, he wrote a Flojos sandal order and met with two new vendors – a sticker brand and Kanga Coolers.

“We are here to do business, and I feel safe because everyone is wearing masks,” Farias said.

For small businesses, like Kanga Coolers, Surf Expo offers the opportunity to meet new customers, like Farias.

“The opening day of the show was our single best day at a trade show ever,” said Logan LaMance, Founder of Kanga Coolers, whose company exhibited for the first time in January 2020. The company sells a product called Kase Mate, which was featured on Shark Tank. LaMance launched his business while in college to serve a need for tailgating.



“The opening day of the show was our single best day at a trade show ever,” said Logan LaMance, Founder of Kanga Coolers.

“We didn’t know what to expect,” said LaMance, who has exhibited at the Atlanta Gift Show and PPAI in Las Vegas. “We are excited to get back to shows this year and have the opportunity to sign new business.”

He and his team drove eight hours from Greenville, SC, to participate. “The show has done a good job with the safety measures like the wristband for temperature checks. I was wearing a jacket on the first day, so the wristband wasn’t visible. Someone always stopped me at the door to check it.”

What makes the show a success? “Buyers and sellers interacting with one another,” said Emerald COO Brian Field. “Ultimately, when people ask why we’re running the show, the answer is simple: Surf Expo’s customers told us they want us to do business. And for many, our show is a critical marketplace for their survival. It’s our responsibility to provide our customers with that opportunity, even though everyone understands that the show experience will be different.”

In spite of the decreased number of exhibitors and attendees, Emerald gained practical experience, producing its second live event in the last 11 months. By comparison, the public company produced more than 140 events in 2019. In 2021, “we’ve pushed 30 events into the back half of the year,” said Emerald CFO David Doft. As vaccination distribution continues and testing improves, the Emerald team is ramping up for a full calendar of shows in second half of year.

“While it’s one thing to sit in an office and design

all these safety protocols and practices, it's a different thing to actually have to do it and put them into practice," said Emerald President and CEO Hervé Sedky, who was walking the show floor on his third day on the job. "As Emerald—and the entire industry—returns to face-to-face events, continued implementation and refinement of these various, new protocols are critical for building our new operational muscles and demonstrating the levels of safety we can provide to our customers."

Against this backdrop, Surf Expo kicked off 2021 as the first major B2B trade show on the calendar in the U.S. opening at 100,000 NSF. "Normally we're 200,000-plus square feet, so we're just under half," Turner said. "We're expecting the exhibitors that purchased a booth will see an improvement in the booth-to-buyer ratio. Typically, we shoot for somewhere around a three-to-one ratio."

Looking Back

In the last 45 years, Turner has seen it all — literally. The show has survived hurricanes, recessions, 9/11, and now the COVID-19 pandemic. "Our team is pretty veteran to cancellations," Turner said. In September 2019, Hurricane Dorian was bearing down on Orlando, the state of Florida, the southeast and the east coast, and Emerald easily made the call to cancel with the Category 5 storm approaching.

When the show came back last January, it was a banner year, likely due to pent-up demand from the cancellation. In January 2020, Surf Expo

featured more than 1,000 exhibitors showcasing apparel and hardgoods plus a full line-up of special events, including fashion shows, seminars, annual awards ceremonies, and demos.

Then, the industry, along with the world, came to a screeching halt on March 13 when the USA went into lockdown. Emerald canceled 94 events and had not staged an in-person event since the middle of March 2020 until the International Gift Exposition in the Smokies (IGES) in November. In total, these cancelled events accounted for approximately \$236 million of 2019 revenues, according to its [November earnings statement](#).

Surf Expo is typically held twice a year in January and September at the Orange County Convention Center in Orlando, FL. In September 2020, the in-person component was canceled due to COVID-19, but Emerald hosted a virtual event.

Practical health and safety experience

To produce IGES in Q4 2020 in Pigeon Forge, TN, Emerald followed the *All Secure* framework built by the industry and endorsed by SISO and UFI. [Version 2.0](#) was published in late January.

For more on how Emerald produced IGES, read: [Case Study on IGES & SMGS](#).

For Surf Expo, Emerald worked closely with its venue partner, OCCC, leveraging its pandemic production experience. "From March to December 2020, OCCC safely hosted more than 50 events under modified operations," according to a

[press release](#). “Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the OCCC enjoyed a successful 2019-2020 fiscal year, welcoming an estimated 667,000 attendees across 79 events, generating an estimated \$1.49 billion in economic impact.”

Industry veteran Mark Tester took the helm as OCCC Executive Director in February. Throughout the pandemic, Tester had a seat at the table with county government leaders and public health officials, as they provided regular briefings with key community leaders in Orlando.



Staff was hired to walk the floor with mask reminders. The show used the term “face mask” vs. “face covering.”

“Events at the Orange County Convention Center are implementing multiple health and safety measures to ensure attendees, exhibitors and employees are safe,” said Tester. “As a result, we are one of the only convention centers nationwide that is hosting large-scale conventions – safely and without incident. Surf Expo hosted thousands of attendees in our West Building, and I

experienced firsthand how the proper social distancing through signage, floor stickers and safety protocols were implemented to create a safe and controlled gathering.”

OCCC produced a video about Surf Expo:

<https://vimeo.com/503633208>

“We received GBAC star accreditation in July,” he said. As a Global Biorisk Advisory Council (GBAC) STAR™ accredited venue, the OCCC has a disinfectant procedure in place for cleanings, which adhere to the CDC and WHO guidance. Focused on ensuring a clean, safe and healthy environment, the program establishes requirements to assist venues by providing best practices, protocols and procedures to control risks associated with the COVID-19 virus.

In addition, OCCC has an increased number of hand sanitation sites available throughout the surrounding campus, providing alcohol-based hand sanitizer for all attendees and staff. Other precautionary measures include enhancing onsite communications and signage regarding CDC recommendations, increasing the frequency of cleaning and disinfecting bathrooms and commonly touched objects like hand railings and door handles and ongoing training for OCCC staff and partners for best practices on providing a safe and healthy environment.

“With our current policies, we’re only allowing 50% occupancy in meeting rooms and ballrooms,” Tester said. He said the building used Cares Act funding to purchase more than 3,177 signs, window clings and decals for the facility.

Visit Orlando and OCCC worked with Surf Expo to produce a [video about what to expect in terms of health and safety](#). The video was posted to the show web site, and links were sent to exhibitors and attendees.

Cost implications

All these new health and safety measures have increased the cost to produce an event. By how much? “Let’s use IGES as an example,” Doft said. “We spent about \$20 a person on the health and safety initiatives.” For Emerald, those costs include every additional line item: hand sanitizer, masks, temperature checks, security, monitors, signage, extra cleaning, staffing and travel.

“As we’ve been budgeting larger events, there are definitely scale efficiencies. The larger the show, the lower per-person cost,” Doft said. “But if you multiply that out across all our events, you’re talking millions.”

Emerald is absorbing those additional costs — not exhibitors — to do business in the new normal. “It’s what we have to do,” Doft said. “On an industry blog, people were speculating the cost would be passed on to the exhibitors; but we undertook the cost, and did not charge the customers at all. Ultimately, providing that safe environment and building confidence across our shows, is part of what we do.”

How do these increased costs impact profitability? “Naturally, more costs around our safety measures impacts the overall profitability of a show, though we’re taking a longer-term and

customer-centric view,” Doft said. “With respect to Surf Expo, we have a large customer base that desires the event so they can do business. It’s why we exist, and if it helps our community that we’re serving we’re going try to put it on for them to provide that value. We are doing the right thing for the customer always.”

Will this strategy pay off? “While we will see additional costs around our shows in the shorter-term, we believe it will pay dividends in the long term with deepened customer loyalty,” Sedky said.

Challenge #1: Travel restrictions

“My number-one challenge: 95% of our surf business is based in Southern California,” Turner said. “A lot of those brands and retailers have not been back to their places of work since last March.” In addition, some of the key surfing brands are publicly traded. “Based on a range of travel bans and restrictions, some of our bigger brands were not allowed to travel.”

Surf Expo picked up some exhibitors who were within driving distance. First-time exhibitor, Jack Kempton, owner of Sarasota-based Saltwater Born, said: “We had low expectations coming in, but we already got our first order within a few hours of the show opening.” In 2018, Kempton, a college student at Florida State University, and his father launched the company that sells high-quality sun protective shirts. They attended Surf Expo last year as guests.

“We currently sell in four stores now, but we want to scale up to 10 to 20 stores in the next six months,” Kempton said. “If we get two to three orders on site, we will be thrilled. Another goal is to walk around and see what others have and check out the industry trends. For us, 40% of our time will be spent on seeing what else is out there and 60% will be spent on sales. There’s no reason you can’t do a trade show. I feel perfectly safe.”

Lesson learned: “Where we found strength was in the resort side of our business — coastal apparel, fishing, swimwear, casual footwear, etc.,”

Turner said. “There’s a subset of brands in the surf market — a group of growing grassroots companies, many of which are millennial owned. A lot of them collaborate with each other, and there’s this sense of community. Those

companies are still willing to come and serve the market. There is still surf at Surf Expo, but it’s evolving.”

Challenge #2: Adapting to current market needs

“When we looked at the numbers from IGES, we saw customer satisfaction was higher than we’ve ever seen from the exhibitor side because the buyers who are coming are serious,” Turner said. “Retailers are probably not bringing as many buyers, but the buyers who are coming have a book open to buy. What I’m hearing from our attendee base is they’re looking how to shore up their supply chains. That means they’re looking for new vendors. They’re looking for at-once product. Traditionally, we have been a forward-writing show.”

Turner modified the floor plan, creating product groupings with watersports on one side of the hall and coastal life on the other side. The new floor plan meant a great location for Shore, a lifestyle brand for men and women, in the front of the hall near the one of the main entrances.

“We are working it to our advantage,” said Victoria Madrid, who has exhibited in the show twice a year for the last several years. “Buyers are telling me they are excited to be here. We signed a new account within the first two hours of the show opening.”

Based in Sarasota, Madrid drove two hours to exhibit at the event. “Usually Surf Expo is the best show of the year for us,” she said. “Some of



Despite travel restrictions that prohibited some major surf brands from California to exhibit, Emerald found strength in the resort side of its business -- coastal apparel, fishing, swimwear, casual footwear, etc., Turner said.

our existing buyers are coming, and some are not. We've set appointments with our buyers who are attending. Those who are not will have to order from digital line sheets."

Lessons learned: "While there were customers that canceled up until the very last moment, there were also customers buying until the very last moment," Field said. "We were selling booths up until two days before the show."

Challenge #3: Transparency

"Another challenge was trying to be fully transparent with our customers," Turner said. "You're excited about the show, but you're still trying to present reality to them. We're telling the buyers and brands that before you get on a plane, I want you to make absolutely sure you know who's coming in. We want to make a trip worthwhile for them."

One exhibitor, Psycho Tuna, an apparel company based in Los Angeles, decided the trip would be worthwhile, despite having to quarantine for 10 days upon return to California. "I had zero expectations coming to the show," said Patricia Thorton, VP, Psycho Tuna, a company that launched 2019. "The first day was insanely busy. We got new business, and we got some repeat business. Retailers are telling me they are excited to touch and feel the merchandise. The show has done an amazing job with safety protocols and temperature checks. I don't feel like anyone is nervous, and I am very pleasantly surprised."



"Without shows, it's hard to do business," said Birgit Coles, Co-Founder of Simbi, a company that sells bracelets and other accessories and uses the proceeds to purchase water filtration systems in Haiti to combat cholera.

Birgit Coles, Co-Founder of Simbi, agreed. Her company sells bracelets and other accessories and uses the proceeds to purchase water filtration systems in Haiti to combat cholera. "This is our first time exhibiting since the pandemic," she said. "We are here because we want to see our customers, and retailers tell us they don't like to order online. They want to see the product, feel it, touch it."

Her company furloughed workers for a few months. "Without shows, it's hard to do business," Coles said. In a typical year, Simbi exhibits at four to five trade shows. "I love trade shows. They are a lot of work, but it gives us an opportunity to interact with buyers and tell our story about our mission to give back."

Lesson learned: “Even with an uptick in cases during the last eight weeks leading up to the event, sales were steady,” Turner said. “One exhibitor, Exist, has been in from day one and never faltered. While some brands, like Body Glove did decide not to participate in the January show, they didn’t ask for refunds. They simply transferred their money to our September event. That’s indicative of the majority who chose to cancel — 90%.”

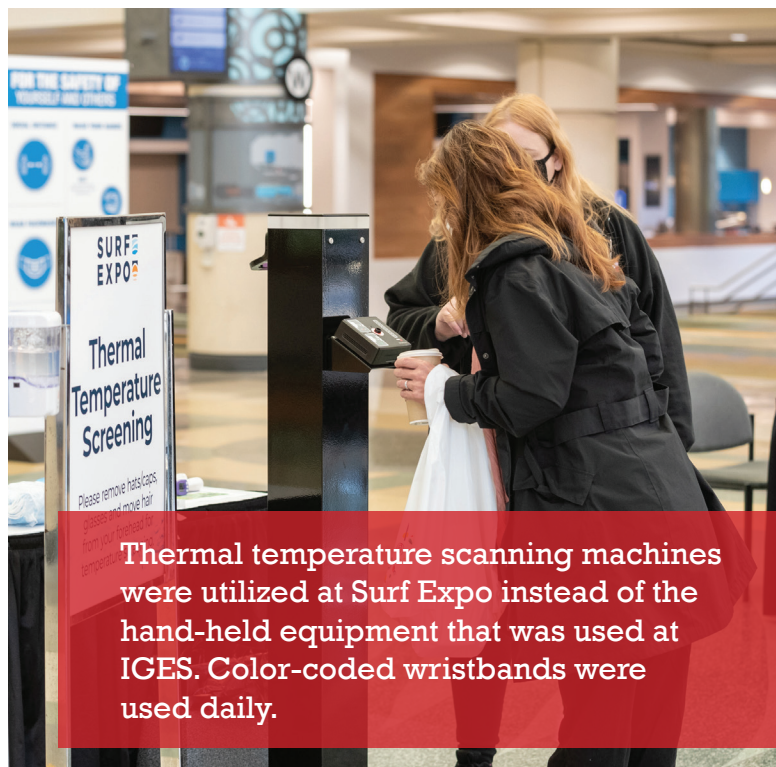
Challenge #4: Marketing during COVID-19

How do you promote an event when some of your audience wants the event and some don’t?

“It’s split,” Turner said. “You’ve got 50% of the people that want it in-person, you got 50% who don’t. How do you balance that with your customer base? Because at the end of the day, we’re neutral. We’re trying to maintain that line, but we also appreciate the fact that somebody can side one way or the other.”

In November, Surf Expo announced that it would be moving from the North/South Concourse to the West Concourse to provide added space for physical distancing. The marketing plan focused heavily on messaging around health and safety measures.

“We shifted from promoting specific brands and categories to promoting the floor plan and the most up-to-date exhibitor list, due to last minute changes based on corporate travel bans, local



Thermal temperature scanning machines were utilized at Surf Expo instead of the hand-held equipment that was used at IGES. Color-coded wristbands were used daily.

restrictions and overall health concerns,” said Adrienne Belk, VP of Marketing at Emerald.

“I felt safe at the show because of the temperature checks and open spacing,” said Wendy Wildenberg, Co-Owner of H2 For The Soul, a first-time attendee who launched her online business for water-related products last year. “Everyone has been compliant with no handshakes. It’s difficult not to do.” She participated in Surf Expo’s virtual edition in September, but she was hoping that in-person she would find more products to expand her offerings and learn more about what others are doing.

“It’s a good turnout,” said Sophie Mardsen, Territory Sales Manager, Southeast, for 4ocean, an ocean cleanup company that makes products from the marine debris. “I was expecting there

would be fewer with COVID, but what's good is there are serious buyers. I've heard from several buyers they appreciate this because it allows for more one-on-one time and more time in each booth. It's been a much more intimate experience."

Based in Boca Raton, FL, Mardsen drove to the event. Was she concerned about her health before agreeing to come? "Yes, but I appreciate the temp checks and the mandatory masks. People are being respectful. We have picked up some new customers who are discovering new brands. That's exciting as a vendor."

Would she exhibit again? "Absolutely," she said.

Lesson learned: "Expect and plan for pivots," Belk said. Her team evaluated activity and results daily based on feedback from calls, social chatter and email replies. "Develop approved talking points early to ensure the internal team is prepared in advance to respond consistently to tough questions," she advised.



First-time exhibitor, Jack Kempton, owner of Sarasota-based Saltwater Born, said: "We had low expectations coming in, but we already got our first order within a few hours of the show opening."



"While there were customers that canceled up until the very last moment, there were also customers buying until the very last moment," Field said.

What's Next?

Emerald doesn't have any shows scheduled in February. A number of Emerald's Q1 shows, like KBIS and Outdoor Retailer, were canceled. The Original Miami Beach Antique Show and ASD Las Vegas in March have also been canceled, but Emerald is launching the ASD Road Show, a series of 2-day live events in three cities: March 24-25, 2021 in Dallas, April 8-9 in Orlando, and April 28-29 in Phoenix. The next Surf Expo is scheduled for Sept. 9-11 at OCCC.



Hervé Sedky
Emerald President and CEO

"While it's one thing to sit in an office and design all these safety protocols and practices, it's a different thing to actually have to do it and put them into practice," said Emerald President and CEO Hervé Sedky.



Health & Safety Highlights

- Thermal temperature scanning machines were utilized at Surf Expo instead of the hand-held equipment that was used at IGES. Color-coded wristbands were used daily.
- Emerald employees were required to respond to daily health and safety screening questions through the ADP app, beginning a few days before the show and during the show.
- The show used the term "face mask" vs. "face covering." No neck gators were allowed.
- Registration was contactless. One change from IGES: Emerald used stylus pens with marked containers for dirty and clean pens at registration.
- No group badge pick-up, as each attendee needed to sign the terms and conditions.
- No carpeting. Emerald does not plan to use carpeting at any events in 2021. This allows exhibitors to have more time to get their booths ready, and is also more environmentally beneficial.
- Temperature checks for exhibitors beyond the freight doors. Exhibitors and EACs picked up badges in the back of the hall.
- New signage, floor decals, window clings and more. Staff was hired to walk the floor with mask reminder signs.
- Limited access points/entry doors. Some doors were exit only.
- Shuttle buses with reduced capacity from the hotels. Temp checks and wristband at hotels were required before boarding the bus.





About SISO: SISO members include companies, corporations and other for-profit entities that own, produce or provide full-service management of “face to face” trade shows, consumer shows, expositions, conferences and events. SISO membership is a combination of large corporations and small entrepreneurial enterprises that do business around the world. SISO’s almost 200-member companies produce thousands of events around the world. SISO’s Mission is to meet the common needs of our members by providing peer networking opportunities, education, industry information, streamlined business processes and best practices in the industry.



About UFI – The Global Association of the Exhibition Industry: UFI is the global trade association of the world’s tradeshow organisers and exhibition centre operators, as well as the major national and international exhibition associations, and selected partners of the exhibition industry. UFI’s main goal is to represent, promote and support the business interests of its members and the exhibition industry. UFI directly represents more than 50,000 exhibition industry employees globally, and also works closely with its 60 national and regional association members. More than 800 member organisations in 83 countries around the world are presently signed up as members. Around 1,000 international trade fairs proudly bear the UFI approved label, a quality guarantee for visitors and exhibitors alike. UFI members continue to provide the international business community with a unique marketing media aimed at developing outstanding face-to-face business opportunities. UFI is supporting the work of global, regional, and national institutions that deal with the COVID-19 outbreak. On this page, we are listing some resources for UFI members and the industry at large: <https://www.ufi.org/industry-resources/coronavirus/>.

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