Criteria involved in evaluation of trade shows to visit

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Abstract

An organizer of trade shows (TSs) need to know the framework of criteria used by potential visitors in their ex-ante evaluation of trade shows. This paper comes to fill a gap in the published research, aiming to answer two research questions: which criteria are important for visitors in evaluating TSs to visit? And which is the underlying structure of criteria? A sample of retailers was interviewed and, after using a Confirmatory Factor Analysis, a measurement model was identified. The results confirm the underlying structure suggested by the integration of separate criteria or elements previously identified in other studies. Also, that the changes in the marketing orientation of companies have affected the evaluation criteria used by visitors. Additionally, the results show differences between visitants and exhibitors. The main disparity is the non-relevance of the marketing research criteria: TSs are a good marketing research tool for exhibitors but much more limited for visitors.

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1. Introduction

The abundance of trade shows (TSs) existing today, with a growing number on both the national and the international levels which are not limited to the geographical framework in which they take place (Rice & Almossawi, 2002; Smith, Hama, & Smith, 2003), increases the complexity of exhibitors’ and visitors’ decision to participate. They have to choose from amongst many offers, with a high level of competition among the organizers, who need to consider differentiation strategies by offering a user-oriented service. In this competitive environment, the organizers need to guarantee the trade show’s (TS’s) potential to attract a large number of visitors (Cox, Sequeira, & Bock, 1986), and to accomplish this objective, they need to discover the criteria underlying the decisions of potential visitors. From the exhibitors’ perspective, moreover, it is crucial to understand the motivations behind the visitors’ decisions to attend TSs, since exhibitor-visitor interaction is the key factor in determining TS success (Ling-Yee, 2006).

In the pre-show phase, there is no clear cut distinction between the overall evaluation of possible TSs to visit and the evaluation of one specific TS to decide whether or not to attend, as the second might be embedded in the first. But they address two different states of mind in visitors’ pre-show decision making process. This distinction is relevant for both TS organizers and for companies planning to attend TSs as exhibitors. Since organizers do have a TS portfolio, they need to know not only the specific reasons behind visitors’ selection decisions but also the general framework of criteria used by potential visitors in their ex-ante evaluation of TSs. For exhibitors, identification and understanding of potential customers’ motivations to attend TS are key to effectively and efficiently fulfilling the objectives of their participation (Godar & O’Connor, 2001).

Despite the importance of understanding the criteria used by potential visitors in their ex-ante evaluation of TSs, however, they have attracted little attention in the research on potential participants’ TS attendance decisions. This gap in the research can be extended to all areas regarding visitor attitudes and behavior (Blythe, 2002). The specialized literature tends instead
to assign the main role to the exhibitor and has developed an accepted body of knowledge regarding either the grounds for the evaluation of TSs or the grounds underlying the decision to select one specific. Table 1 provides a list of published empirical studies that give some evidence of how exhibitors and visitors evaluate TS and/or how they select TSs in the last 20 years, little more than 10 articles have paid attention to this important topic. On the visitors’ side, moreover, only three articles have been found about the decision of selecting specific TS. Some non-empirical articles have dealt in varying degrees with the issue of TS selection by exhibitors (Bellizzi & Lipps, 1984; Bello & Barczak, 1990; Bonoma, 1983; Browning & Adams, 1988; Shoham, 1999), and visitors (Godar & O’Connor, 2001). To our knowledge, no previously published research has empirically explored the general criteria that potential visitors use transversally for TS evaluation and selection.

The goal of this paper, therefore, is to provide answers to two key questions relating to the state of mind of potential TS visitors:

– What are their main criteria in evaluating which TSs to visit, and
– Is there an underlying structure linking these criteria with different weights?

In order to accomplish these objectives, the paper is organized in different sections. In Section 1 we provide a literature review on TS research in an attempt to reveal the structure of the criteria. We propose, accordingly to parallel developments about the decisions to attend on the side of exhibitors, a decision structure with three criteria: the information about TSs, the marketing objectives of the company, and the perceived costs. In Sections 3 and 4 we describe the empirical setting and the methodology used to confirm or not the criteria’s structure and their components as well as the relative importance of the three criteria. In Section 5 we discuss the results of our empirical analysis to answer the two research questions. Finally, we provide the core conclusions of the research (Section 6) and the managerial implications (Section 7) that might benefit the TS sector, and the limitations of the study and the suggested further research (Section 8).

2. Trade show visitors’ evaluation and selection criteria

The outcome of attending TSs for visitors is uncertain as organizers cannot fully guarantee the achievement of the particular objectives pursued by individual visitors. Hence, the evaluation of TS with selection purposes is mostly about the expected beneficial effects of trade shows for visitor. These benefits can be facilitated by the characteristics and management of the TS, their suitability to the marketing objectives of the visitor, and the perceived costs of attending. But from the perspective of the visitors, there is not empirical evidence on whether visitors actually get such benefits in the end and whether visitors use such expectations as selection criteria for future show selection.

But this lack of research form the visitor’s perspective doesn’t mean that there is not a relevant research background to rely on. As TSs are an encounter between supply and demand, the reasons for exhibitors to attend TSs should to some extent mirror those of visitors. The empirical findings about exhibitor’s attitudes and behavior are therefore a good complement to the little research found about visitor’s motivations to attend TSs. The literature reviewed allows us to identify different variables or indicators within three general criteria that may influence the potential visitor’s TS selection decision: perception of/information on TSs, the marketing objectives of the company, and the perceived costs deriving from attending TSs. These will be considered as possible dimensions of the visitor’s decision to attend TSs. Table 2 is designed to show the empirical and conceptual basis of these criteria as reported in the literature.

2.1. Trade show perception/information

TSs, and the venues in which they take place, have increased so much in number and variety that organizers are competing with more specialized TSs targeting more segmented markets. In this situation, potential visitors need to rely heavily on the perception and information they can obtain concerning some basic TS features, since the pursued outcomes of the visit are only possible if the right exhibitors meet the right visitors. The basic features suggested by the review of the literature on TS evaluation and selection are: type of TS, convenience of the location and timing, the TS reputation and its management, and the anticipated quantity and quality of attendance.

2.1.1. Trade show type

Two main measurements have been used to profile TSs: geographic market coverage, and the vertical vs horizontal focus of TSs (Gopalakrishna & Williams, 1992). Both play an important role in potential exhibitors’ and visitors’ decisions as to whether or not to attend. From the exhibitor’s perspective,
Table 2
References linked to the proposed structure of TS evaluation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TS perception/ information (PI)</td>
<td>Type of TS</td>
<td>(Bello &amp; Barczak, 1990; Dekimpe et al., 1997; Navarro, 2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location and time convenience</td>
<td>(Kijewski et al., 1993; Navarro, 2001)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>TS reputation and management</td>
<td>(Browning &amp; Adams, 1988; Golfteto, 1988; Hough, 1988; Kijewski et al., 1993; Munuera &amp; Ruiz, 1999; Navarro, 2001; Trade Show Bureau, 1991)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quantity and quality of attendance</td>
<td>(Bello &amp; Barczak, 1990; Browning &amp; Adams, 1988; Dekimpe et al., 1997; Dickinson &amp; Faria, 1985; Gopalakrishna &amp; Lilien, 1995; Gopalakrishna &amp; Williams, 1992; Kijewski et al., 1993; Navarro, 2001; Trade Show Bureau, 1993)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing objectives (MO)</td>
<td>Customer acquisition and retention</td>
<td>(Banting &amp; Blenkorn, 1974; Bello &amp; Lohtia, 1993; Blythe, 2002; Dekimpe et al., 1997; Hansen, 1996, 2004; Kijewski et al., 1993; Munuera &amp; Ruiz, 1999; Rosson &amp; Seringhaus, 1995; Seringhaus &amp; Rosson, 2001; Williams et al., 1993)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distribution networks</td>
<td></td>
<td>(Moriarty &amp; Spekman, 1984; Munuera &amp; Ruiz, 1999; Rosson &amp; Seringhaus, 1995; Sharland &amp; Balgoh, 1996)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product scanning</td>
<td></td>
<td>Bello &amp; Barczak, 1990; Bello &amp; Lohtia, 1993; Blythe, 2002; Godar &amp; O’Connor, 2001; Munuera &amp; Ruiz, 1999; Rosson &amp; Seringhaus, 1995)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing research</td>
<td></td>
<td>(Dekimpe et al., 1997; Munuera &amp; Ruiz, 1999; Rosson &amp; Seringhaus, 1995; Seringhaus &amp; Rosson, 2001; Sharland &amp; Balgoh, 1996)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived costs (PC)</td>
<td>Relative costs to planning and budgeting</td>
<td>(Browning &amp; Adams, 1988; Hough, 1988; Kijewski et al., 1993; Navarro, 2001; Rosson &amp; Seringhaus, 1995; Sharland &amp; Balgoh, 1996)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differential costs</td>
<td></td>
<td>(Hough, 1988; Navarro, 2001; Rosson &amp; Seringhaus, 1995)</td>
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According to Kerin and Cron (1987), companies with successful TS programs tend to concentrate their participation on vertical rather than horizontal TSs. Similarly, Gopalakrishna and Williams (1992), confirm that vertical TSs facilitate more effective contacts than do horizontal TSs. But for both potential visitors and exhibitors, the advantages of vertical shows over horizontal ones depend largely on the firm’s objectives. When visitors are more orientated towards making effective purchases or establishing effective leads, vertical shows are preferred. Otherwise, in the absence of predominant purchasing objectives, horizontal shows offer more advantages (Rice & Almossawi, 2002).

A second major aspect of the show profile to be considered is the market coverage (Seringhaus & Rosson, 2001). Smith et al. (2003) show that the factors underlying success in meeting attendance targets differ according to whether one is dealing with a domestic or an international show. This finding confirms that, although international and domestic shows pursue the same objectives, there is a difference in the means used and the level of success attained.

2.1.2. Location and time convenience

As in any activity requiring physical presence, the venue and calendar schedule are among the first data to be evaluated by TS attendees. From the exhibitor’s perspective, Kijewski, Yoon, and Younget (1993), confirmed that “timing and location of the show”, was a prime driver of the evaluation and selection decision for exhibitors. This factor corresponds to the variables relating to the time and location the event will take place. From the visitor’s perspective, it also seems reasonable that the extent to which these factors fit in with the action plans of potential visitors must be the key to the decision of which show to visit (Hough, 1988).

2.1.3. Trade show reputation and management

Kijewski et al. (1993) identified “reputation of the show” as one of the main factors involved in the exhibitor’s evaluation and selection decision. Also, Shipley and Wong (1993) found that the image of the show was an important among the decision criteria for selecting TSs. Reputation and image are built on the basis of experience and communication strategies. On the exhibitor’s side, the outcome of previous events is a basic determinant of TS selection (Hansen, 2004). In this direction, personal experience and word-of-mouth appear to give TS its reputation. On the visitor’s side, the works of Swandby and Cox (1980) and Swandby, Cox, and Sequeira (1990), described the feedback of past and future TS events, which explains how the appeal of a TS is affected by the number of visitors to prior editions. That is, future editions of the show will provide greater incentive to a greater number of effective visitors. The number of visitors at previous editions and the number of potential visitors to the next edition, which may be forecast by the organization, is relevant information when selecting a show to visit.

TS managers can use other complementary media in order to enhance its image. These include sponsorship by public authorities or endorsement by industry associations. This should be particularly effective for non-experienced potential visitors who take these signals as indicators of TS quality. From the visitor’s point of view, Golfteto (1988) and Trade Show Bureau (1991), claim that the selection decision taken by professional visitors is influenced by the information they receive from the TS organizers, industrial associations, Chambers of Commerce, advertising in general, the specialist press and experience gained on previous visits. That is to say, potential visitors expect to receive information that will help them to make their selection decision.

On the side of the management of the TS, Seringhaus and Rosson (2001) find that complementary facilities and services provided by the organizing body are among the general factors affecting the show selection decision. Browning and Adams (1988) report that the ability of organizers to provide a good service and friendly registration procedures, plays a role, albeit secondary. Munuera and Ruiz (1999), offer some more detailed advice on TS management. This includes recommendations for increasing the quantity and quality of visitors. TSs should be adapted to the needs of the target sector or sectors. Offers and services should be properly planned and organized. Adequate
back-up logistics should be provided and the necessary complementary services facilitated. It is also important to guarantee both the quality and quantity of booths, and facilitate optimum conditions for interaction between exhibitors and visitors.

Overall, service quality and guarantee by public authorities or prestigious industry or trade endorsements have a positive effect on the decision to attend one TS. They instill confidence in visitors, reduce the perceived risk associated with the decision to attend, and increase the chances of success for participants, all of which translate into show-selection indicators.

2.1.4. Quality and quantity of attendance

From the exhibitor’s perspective, one of the main aspects to be considered in the ex-ante evaluation of TSs is the quality and quantity of the attendance. Dickinson and Faria (1985), using the stated perceptions of executives responsible for their company’s participation in TSs, identified that factors relating to attendance size were among the most frequently considered when evaluating TSs. Browning and Adams (1988) also found that the audience-size variables were the most frequently used criteria, together with quality of attendance (the percentage of visitors with power of decision at the TS). Thereafter, most of the published research on potential exhibitors’ decisions as to whether or not to attend has found the quality and quantity of visitors to play a key role (Kijewski et al., 1993; Seringhaus & Rosson, 2001). The qualitative characteristics of visitors mostly widely analyzed in the exhibitors’ literature are those relating to the importance of the role played by visitors in their companies’ purchase decision-making process (Bello, 1992; Bello & Lohtia, 1993). Mirroring this, i.e., from the visitor’s perspective, it is not clear if this is the case, since all exhibitors are supposed to be fully prepared to make sales or to provide reliable leads.

A qualitative issue of major concern to both potential visitors and exhibitors, however, is the possible attendance of competitors. Associated to the issue of competitive attractiveness, which exhibitors pursue by means of booth size and number of booth personnel in relation to their competitors (Dekimpe, François, Gopalakrishna, Lilien, & Van Den Bulte, 1997; Gopalakrishna & Lilien, 1995; Gopalakrishna & Williams, 1992), visitors may also base their own decision to attend on that of their competitors. In general, the attendance of a competitor at TS generates a sense of obligation to attend in other companies wishing to maintain or attain certain positions (Godar & O’Connor 2001). Also, the presence of competitors at a show allows companies to observe their competitors’ activities and methods, and to increase the amount of information obtained from the visit (Shust, 1981; Rothschild, 1987; Hansen, 1996).

2.2. Marketing objectives

TS attendance decisions should be consistent with the two major marketing goals: customer acquisition and retention (Blattberg & Dayton, 1996). In marketing management, however, the focus has moved from discrete transactions and the acquisition of new customers to relationships and the retention of customers. Day and Montgomery (1999) argue that this has contributed to a wider array of relationships, expanding the buyer–seller dyad to include partners up and down the value chain (e.g., suppliers, the customers of customers, channel intermediaries). In our research context, the emphasis on the use of TSs as means for developing and improving channel relationships and their outcomes has been recently studied by Ling-Yee (2007). These dynamics should be reflected in the criteria used to attend TSs when they are expected to contribute to the acquisition and retention of customers, and to surpass the buyer–seller dyad by creating and sustaining relationships with suppliers, customers, and channel intermediaries.

There is empirical evidence confirming that the professional visitor attends TS not with the sole aim of making a purchasing decision, but for a variety of reasons (Blythe, 2002). One is the opportunity for interaction to establish and maintain contacts in the network. Another is the chance to obtain information about products, companies, industry and technology. They also aim to evaluate new products and advances, find and compare new suppliers, gain access to new ideas, participate in specialist events and seminars, and make optimum contacts. Purchases are just a complementary aim (Bello & Lohtia, 1993; Godar & O’Connor, 2001; Hansen, 1996; Munuera & Ruiz, 1999). We have grouped these reasons into four purpose categories: to enhance customer acquisition and retention, to develop distribution networks, to scan new products, and to conduct marketing research.

2.2.1. Customer acquisition and retention objectives

On the exhibitor’s side, the contribution of TSs to customer acquisition has been extensively researched in the “trade show effectiveness” literature (see Dekimpe et al., 1997). The appeal of TSs to companies pursuing new customers is based on the self-selection process of visitors: at TSs, the initiative is taken by the visitor who decides to attend the show with a positive attitude towards the exhibitors (Shoham, 1999). This receptive public is an advantage for the exhibitors and, indirectly, for the organizers who are those most interested in obtaining an affirmative selection decision from potential visitors to their TSs.

On the visitors’ side, however, the issue is given practically no consideration at all, since visitors are not expected to increase sales or meet their current or potential customers at TSs. Nevertheless, one of the major outcomes expected from TS attendance is its contribution to the ultimate marketing objectives: sales, and the acquisition and retention of customers.

2.2.2. Distribution network objectives

Sharland and Balgoh (1996) claim that certain companies select which show to visit and which staffs to send on the basis of the information source they are seeking to tap. This may be the opportunity to meet other representatives and gather information about companies from other sources, or to meet with their distribution partners and compile information about competitors. They suggest that information gathering is the determining factor in the selection of a show, since it is linked to the reduction of risks associated with strategic decision-making in the areas of marketing, finance and production. Information exchanged by visitors and exhibitors helps them to make a more informed choice of business partner, reduce legal
and contractual expenses and determine which part of the business should be maintained, and which should be considered additional or superfluous. Thus, efforts directed at closing a purchase may be less strenuous than those directed at information gathering. In fact, decisions to buy are relatively rare at TSs, while preparation for such a decision is not (Rosson & Seringhaus, 1995).

TSs provide a wide array of activities and opportunities to interact with a variety of economic agents in the distribution network. Visitors, as well as visiting exhibitors, take part in social events and attend seminars with the aim of establishing and maintaining connections (Bello & Lohtia, 1993). TSs are also seen as a chance for companies to set up, build on, defend or extend their position within the network (Rosson & Seringhaus, 1995). This means developing the most useful contacts and, in a complementary way, carrying out purchases (Barreyre & Letrein, 1990; Blythe, 2002).

In summary, visitors might consider TSs not only as selling/buying or communication tools, but also as interactive business networks (Bello, 1992; Bello & Lohtia, 1993; Ling-Yee, 2007; Rosson & Seringhaus, 1995), and as an excellent setting for evaluating business partners, distributors and suppliers (Sharland & Balgoh, 1996).

2.2.3. Product scanning objectives

Although the shift from transactions to relationships implies a shift in the visitor’s emphasis from product to exhibitor, TSs remain as an important information tool for new products. Given that many industry participants are present at TSs; companies, experts and sector-related associations, who can facilitate desired information (Sharland & Balgoh, 1996), TSs are perceived as a means of acquiring knowledge and preparing for the future (Rosson & Seringhaus, 1995). This information and knowledge is available in a business setting without frontiers; a heterogeneity of tastes, cultures and other market variables that offer the chance to gather, quickly and cheaply, the information and knowledge that can secure and enhance a company’s competitive position (Sharland & Balgoh, 1996). In general, when deciding whether or not to attend to one specific TS, potential visitors are concerned about the information they expect to find about products, companies, industry and technology (Blythe, 2002). Their marketing objective is to assess the state of the art in new products so as to improve their competitiveness (Hansen, 1996; Munuera & Ruiz, 1999; Sharland & Balgoh, 1996).

2.2.4. Marketing research objectives

Finally, TSs are also an efficient tool for marketing research purposes. Their potential to provide relevant information for marketing decisions should therefore be among the criteria for the evaluation and selection of TSs. That is, potential attendants take into account the opportunities they expect to find in the TS setting to obtain ideas for product development and to carry out market research. From the exhibitors’ perspective, this issue has been identified in various ways. Companies can discover a lot about their competitors in a very short time (Sharland & Balgoh, 1996) and TSs provide a unique setting for research into product development and are an excellent source of ideas (Bello & Barczak, 1990; Hansen, 1996). The potential of TSs as a marketing research tool is lower from the visitor’s perspective (in general, competitors attending the TS disclose no information about their activity, and their customers are not expected to attend). However, there is still some potential for marketing research resulting from the information provided by exhibitors, such as product and service comparisons, or visiting new companies in the market (Blythe, 2002).

2.3. Perceived costs

TSs are considered efficient communication tools, and, from the visitors’ point of view, they provide the opportunity to acquire useful information at a low cost (Sharland & Balgoh, 1996). Costs continue to be a barrier to TS attendance, however, and have been identified as one of the criteria in the evaluation and selection of TSs (Kijewski et al., 1993). These costs might be seen as part of the yearly planning and budgeting or as discrete decisions on whether to attend or not. Rosson and Seringhaus (1995) state that, in general, large companies view TS visits from the first of these perspectives. That is, as an activity that must be planned within a fixed budget. These considerations suggest two groups in the perceived cost criterion: the relative costs, and the differential costs of TSs.

2.3.1. Relative costs

This group includes the relative costs of TS attendance and will be affected by the number of TSs the company considers visiting per year (Navarro, 2001). It also involves costs linked to sending personnel to the event. The opportunity costs will vary depending upon the position the person who visits the show holds in the company (Browning & Adams, 1988). The greater the responsibility the visitor has within the company, the greater the perceived costs of his absence while visiting TSs. However, the effectiveness of the visit may also be affected by the visitor’s position within the company, which makes this a difficult, interlinked decision process.

2.3.2. Differential costs

This group includes the variables relating to the differential costs of the venues. On the one hand, we have costs at the venue; that is hotel expenses and, implicitly, the cost of complementary leisure activities. On the other hand, there are
costs related to distances to be covered between the visitor’s city and the TS venue (Navarro, 2001).

3. Empirical setting

In order to carry out this research, a structured questionnaire was designed to elicit the views of retailers from Zaragoza. These companies were considered to be potential visitors to professional TSs targeting this sector. They were identified from the XIII Caixa Commercial Yearbook of Spain (2000), and the Aragon Yearbook (1999–2000).

For inference purposes, the starting point of the sampling was to ensure its representativeness. The sample was stratified by zones and activities, in order to reflect the characteristics of the total population. The random route procedure was followed, to control the remaining factors that might introduce heterogeneity or bias into the response. Interviews were conducted without prior appointment and non-respondents were substituted by whichever retailers engaged in the same activity were the next to be selected by the random route method. This substitution procedure was intended to minimize non-response bias. A response rate of 25% was achieved. This procedure resulted in a total of 280 interviews, although only 262 were valid for use. Table 3 summarizes the technical report on the survey.

The questionnaire was divided into two sections. The first was aimed at obtaining general information about the company (main activity, commercial format, company type, size of business) while the other contained questions on the behaviour and attitudes of the retailer as a potential visitor in the period prior to the TS. These attitudes and behavior were not about one particular TS but, in general, any TS that retailers might visit in the future, in an approach similar to that used in other previous empirical studies (Rice & Almossawi, 2002).

In order to identify the characteristics of retail companies attending TSs as professional visitors, retailers from the sample who had not visited TSs were separated from those who had. Once TSs visitors were identified, the survey questions were specifically oriented towards assessing the importance of the elements involved in the evaluation of TS. They were then grouped under the initial assumptions suggested by the review of literature and described in the previous section: the perception/information of TS features (PI), the marketing objectives (MO) and the perceived costs (PC). The items for each element were presented on five-point Likert rating scales ranging from “not important at all” (1) to “very important” (5). To get the objectives of this paper we need to determine whether these criteria are considered relevant by retailers evaluating a show to visit, and to discover whether they are related or not. Confirmatory Factor Analysis is a methodology appropriate to suit these purposes jointly, providing and estimating a measurement model in which all the relevant criteria and factors participate with different weights (see Law, Wonk, & Mobley, 1998 and Escrig & Bou, 2002).

Table 4, presents the general profile of the sample of retailers who responded affirmatively to the question whether they had attended TS as professional visitors. Most of our sample is made up by small businesses: 67% are sole proprietors, 84.5% are independent traders and 67.3% have less than 120m² selling space (67.3%). In home furnishings and equipment, 69% of retailers have less than 120m² selling space, while in the food sector the figure is 85%.

4. Trade show evaluation (TSE) measurement model

The basic proposition to be tested is that there is an underlying structure in the evaluation of TS by visitors which allows for ranking alternatives within a compensatory model. That is, every TS can be evaluated directly or in relation to others by the aggregation of the relevant elements which, with different weights, can be compensated (a decrease in the evaluation of one element might be offset by an increase in that of another). In this way, the TSs evaluation and selection

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2 Zaragoza is a large city in the North West of Spain. It has a long history of trade shows offered by the Zaragoza Institution (Zaragoza Trade Fair). It has been chosen to host the international event, Expo 2008. There is a strong retail presence in the city in the various formats and activities. The questionnaires were completed in May and June 2001.

3 Food, beverages and tobacco (39.53%), textile, footwear and leather (19.38%), home equipment and furnishing (14.73%), and, other retailers. Geomarketing techniques were applied on the city plan, distributed in 7 zones.

4 The retail companies that are not professional visitors of trade shows is made up of traditional or proximity formats with a high percentage of the former (over 80%), (less than 120m² of selling space). Independent traders (over 80%) and the food sector is the main activity.
decision (TSE) is a latent multidimensional variable formed by dimensions, represented by different indicators. It is accepted that the concept of TSE will direct the efforts of the visiting company in terms of the evaluation of each of the elements making up the model (Law et al., 1998).

The TSE measurement is carried out through Confirmatory Factor Analysis. Each of the criteria considered: PI, MO and PC, are treated as latent variables within a TSE measurement model (see scheme in Fig. 1). Following the standard procedures suggested in the specialized literature (Churchill, 1979), a large number of elements potentially involved in the evaluation leading to the decision was identified. A further analysis filtered out some of these, to leave only the most relevant and thus avoid redundancies. A final number of 29 elements were selected for use as the measurement indicators of the model (Appendices B, C and D).

To explore the underlying factorial structure, a data reduction technique based on Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was applied, to extract the principal components (Harman, 1967; Sharma, 1996) with oblimin rotation of all the items grouped under each of the three criteria. Oblique rotations of the oblimin type, used to obtain theoretically significant factors, are better suited to the aims of the present study than orthogonal rotations, which are preferable when the aim is to reduce the number of variables.

The data fitted in all categories, thus the items could be grouped into factors. A reliability analysis using Cronbach’s alpha, (Churchill, 1979; Nunnally, 1987), the item to total correlation value (Nurosis, 1993), the consideration of common factors greater than 0.5 and the weighting of more than one factor led to the elimination of five items in the OT category.

The application of the chosen method revealed the factorial structure shown in Table 5. Factors grouping General Information (PI) indicators about TSs coincide with the proposed grouping described in the previous section:

- Factor PI1 or “Type of Trade Show”. Potential visitors consider the information about the TS being vertical (specialized) with two indicators: sector specialization and sector leadership.
- Factor PI2 or “Location and Time Convenience”. This factor includes how convenient is the location of the venue and the time of year when it is scheduled.
- Factor PI3 or “Reputation”. This factor includes sponsoring by public entities and endorsement by private associations related to the sector but not TS organizers’ experience, which was initially allocated to this factor.
- Factor PI4 or “Quality and quantity of attendance”. This factor includes the items relating to expectations regarding the number of visitors (quantity), and the participation of competitors (quality). The analysis has also added a third item: organizers’ experience, which, in our proposal, was initially allocated to the “Reputation” factor.

Marketing Objectives (MO) are grouped into four factors:

- Factor MO1 or “Customer Acquisition and Retention”. Four indicators were included at this stage: increasing sales and winning new customers, and customer satisfaction and customer retention objectives.
- Factor MO2 or “Distribution Network Objectives”. This factor includes two elements: seek for distributors and the necessary relationships to become a distributor.
- Factor MO3 or “Product Scanning Objectives”. Included in this factor are the elements about the examination of products and the interaction with experts.
- Factor MO4 or “Marketing Research Objectives”. This factor, which accounts for the lowest percentage of total explained variance, includes the objectives of performing market research, and generating new ideas.

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5 Statistical data treatment was done with the SPSS v.11.5.

6 The indices of fit of available data to a factor analysis are above the suggested critical values: the Kaiser, Meyer and Olkin index is higher than 0.6 and the Bartlett sphericity tests presented highly significant results. But, Varimax rotation gave high specific and error variance percentages, obtained in the residual value. Thus, a comparison of methods and case-specific rotations was carried out to obtain the best solution to the identification of underlying factors. In order to maximize the percentage of total variance explained and minimize error variance, the value of the first indicator was sacrificed for the sake of an improved value for the second. The maximum probability method with oblimin rotation proved to be the most suitable. The structure resulting from the application of the two methods is consistent, as it maintains the factorial structure obtained via varimax rotation. The non-correlation between factors hypothesis was also relaxed.

7 See Appendix B. The eliminated indicators appear marked with an asterisk (*).

8 Although the oblimin rotated solution presents a 44% of the PC total variance explained, it is linked to 10% of error variance (64.4% and 70% respectively in the varimax rotation). The total variance explained must be checked in CFA (CV) (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Alpha values are modest too, however, they are consistent with much of the research reported in marketing journals (Churchill & Peter, 1984) and, in particular, with other exploratory industrial studies (e.g. Bello, 1992). Alphas in this range – higher than 0.6 – are adequate for basic research although they do not meet the most stringent criteria (Nunnally, 1987). The composite reliability coefficient must be used in subsequent stages (CR) (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).
The Perceived Costs items (PC) are grouped into the following factors:

- Factor PC1 or “Relative Costs”. This factor includes relative costs relative to the show attendance budget and will be affected by the number of TSs the company considers visiting per year, and by the costs linked to sending personnel to the planned events.

- Factor PC2 or “Differential Costs”. This factor groups together accommodation costs at venue, and distance traveled.

Next, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was applied, based on the structure described earlier. As a description of the procedure used for this step of the analysis would provide no further clues about the final results, we will skip the methodological issues for the moment and include them in the Appendix A.

In order to determine the validity and reliability of the measuring device, the following analytical procedures (a description of which appears in the Appendix A) were performed: (1) the dimensionality of the proposed measurement model, (2) the reliability of estimated parameters and latent variables and (3) a measurement model validity test.

The Third Order TSE model (TO-TSE) is presented in Fig. 2 and discussed in the following section.

5. Discussion of the results

Approximately half of the retail companies that were surveyed identify themselves as prospective and effective visitors. So, the sample is made up of potential visitors who have already accumulated some experience in visiting TS events as professionals, and who also acknowledge the importance of attending these events in order to pursue commercial objectives and business benefits. In these terms, it is a reliable source for the analysis of the two major objectives of the paper: to identify the important aspects for visitors evaluating which TSs to visit, and to check for an underlying structure of criteria across different empirical settings.

5.1. Important aspects in visitors’ evaluation criteria

The review of literature, most of it focused on the exhibitor’s side, helped us to identify 29 specific items which could be used by potential visitors to evaluate TS. All those items relating to the perception of or information on TS features are confirmed, this finding suggests that in the evaluation of which TS to attend, potential visitors consider the same set of TS features as potential exhibitors. The result is consistent with the major purpose of TS, which is to provide a setting for encounter and interaction between exhibitors and visitors. But the results of our empirical analysis also reflect some disparities with the initial assumptions.
There are some disparities as to the importance of the aspects relating to marketing objectives. Our results suggest, as expected, that there is a narrower array of elements linked to marketing objectives in the criteria used by potential visitors. First, there are some elements that fall out of the evaluation criteria because of differences in what exhibitors and visitors expect to gain from TS attendance. As advanced in our discussion of the reviewed literature about customer acquisition and retention, visitors have practically no expectations for gaining new customers or increasing sales at TS, although they may have indirect expectations for these marketing objectives, conditional to the attainment of direct objectives at the TS. This

Fig. 2. TSE measurement model.
is reflected in the results, in which the only elements remaining in the criteria used by visitors are those directly related to customer relationships. The marketing research objectives are also more on the exhibitors’ side than on that of the visitors: in fact, none of the elements associated to marketing research objectives seem to influence the visitors’ TS evaluation. These disparities might have been exacerbated by the composition of our sample, which is entirely made up of retailers who therefore have no customers among the exhibitors and are highly unlikely to meet any among the general visitors. Second, a disparity that may reflect the decreasing importance of making transactions at TS is the non-consideration of possible purchases at the TS as an element in the TS evaluation criteria. This result confirms previous research findings on Spanish TS, in which visitors are driven mainly by non-purchase activities (Munuera & Ruiz, 1999).

Finally, another disparity that shows up in the elements associated to the perceived costs is that the only costs that remain part of this criterion are the relative costs. This is very likely due to our sample composition or the geographical setting for the empirical analysis, in which differential costs are not perceived to be relevant.

5.2. The underlying structure of the criteria

The results of our analysis confirm our theoretical proposition about the grouping of the elements into three criteria and the existence of a link between the three criteria as separately examined in the literature (see Fig. 2). First, there is a consistent grouping of the elements corresponding to the factors discussed in the literature reviewed and, second, these factors form part of the three major criteria that are the pillars of the TS evaluation. As expected, the most important criterion is the expected contribution of TS to the visitors’ marketing objectives. That is, the value that visitors might gain from their decision to attend and the resources allocated to the visit. The three factors – Product scanning, Distribution network, and Customer acquisition and retention – in which the elements were grouped carry similar weight. These factors consider the capacity of TS to provide interaction with experts, in-situ examination of products, opportunities to locate or become representatives and distributors, and access to tools that could be used further in the visitor’s management of customer satisfaction and retention. At this point it is important to stress that marketing research objectives are not present in this criterion, as would be very likely when adopting the exhibitors’ perspective. As already noted, the opportunity for sales or purchases is not included in the criteria. Thus, the discovery of marketing objectives as the prime criteria in TS evaluation confirms the idea that the main value of TS is that they offer potential visitors access to business networks with vertical and horizontal relations, and the opportunity to explore the innovation dynamics within the sector.

Perception of and information on TS features come second. All the factors expected to occupy the attention of participants in their evaluation of TS are present. The most important of them for the potential visitor is the evaluation of the quality and quantity of the attendance. The visitor mainly takes into consideration information about the show in terms of the experience of the organizer, its capacity to attract visitors and the presence of competitors at the TS. Another important type of information considered in the evaluation of TS is sponsorship or endorsement of the event by public entities and private associations. The other two factors are the type of show and the convenience of the place and time chosen for the event. The results reveal one disparity with respect to the initial proposition: the measurement model suggests that “experience of the organizer” is part of the quality and quantity of attendance factor rather than the reputation and organization factor. This might be due to the association between experience and past success of the organization in terms of the quantity and quality of the attendants it has been able to attract.

Finally, perceived costs come third in the criteria ranking. Their weight in the evaluation of TS (0.51) is about half that of the main criterion, marketing objectives (0.98), and significantly less than that of the second criterion, perception/information of TS (0.66). This is coherent with previous findings reported in the reviewed research, in which costs play a secondary role in the evaluation (Kijewski et al., 1993). Nevertheless, there is a disparity between our proposition and the results: the only costs considered in the TS evaluation are those linked to the number of events planned and budgeted and the number of personnel to be allocated to these visits. Perceived costs therefore constitute a single factor criterion.

6. Conclusions

This paper opens with the reasons motivating the relevance of our study, which are discussed against the current background of the research on TS. As two sides of the same coin, TS visitor’s behavior and TS exhibitor’s behavior ought to have attracted matching research effort and yielded matching findings. However, the literature review of one of the key topics of TS research, TS evaluation and selection, reveals a major lack of research on TS visitors. In this direction, our paper helps to narrow the existing gap between the research on TS exhibitors and visitors. More precisely, we provide an empirical analysis of the criteria used by potential visitors to evaluate the TS that they might attend. That is, the general criteria that

<table>
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<th>Estimated models</th>
<th>g.l.</th>
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<th>$\chi^2$ (d.f.)</th>
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<th>GFI</th>
<th>AGFI</th>
<th>BB NFI</th>
<th>BB NNFI</th>
<th>R-CFI</th>
<th>RMSEA</th>
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<td>0.871</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0.986</td>
<td>0.988</td>
<td>1.35</td>
<td>1</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
potential visitors use transversally in the evaluation of TS in their decisions over time.

Our major contribution to the current theory and empirical research on TSs is the presentation of a model that might provide some interesting cues for both research and managerial purposes. We do this by proposing and estimating a TSE measurement model, which is a unique attempt at disclosing a confirmed multidimensional structure that integrates the three major criteria found in the literature about TS evaluation and selection. Our model shows their relative roles in the TS evaluation process: perception/information about the basic features of TS, the marketing objectives to be attained by visitors at and after TS, and the perceived costs relative to TS attendance planning and budgeting.

The results largely confirm the underlying structure suggested by the integration of separate criteria or elements previously identified in other studies. More significantly, however, they confirm that changes in the marketing orientation of companies have affected the evaluation criteria used by professional visitors. The elements that make up the model reflect the way in which companies have shifted the emphasis in their marketing orientation from transactions to relationships within business networks. The main signals of this shift are the non-relevance of making purchases or sales as a motive to visit TS, and the prevalence of the customer and channel relationships as the main elements among the marketing objectives criteria.

The results also show some differences between visitors and exhibitors in the factors. Although we have no means of contrasting the underlying criteria structure in an exhibitor’s sample, we can identify some differences in those factors or elements of the factors which have been found relevant or significant in the evaluation of TSs by exhibitors in previous research. The main disparity is the non-relevance of the marketing research dimension: TSs are a good and efficient marketing research tool for exhibitors but much less so for visitors.

7. Managerial implications

The empirical research and the TSE measurement model from the visitors’ perspective yield some managerial implications for TS organizers and exhibitors.

Organizers could ensure more benefits to potential visitors by increasing the supply of vertical TSs. First, vertical TSs are more customer-focused than product-based, thus allowing more emphasis to be laid on visitors’ attaining their marketing objectives (relationships and distribution networks). And second, vertical TSs are an easier way to match the expectations of visitors and exhibitors as they are more suited to their common interests.

Another key point for organizers, emerging from this study, is the importance of developing effective pre-show communication, so that the TS is visited by a qualified, professional public. This can be better achieved by sending positive signals to potential visitors regarding the running of the TS, via announcements of sponsorships and endorsements from public and private organizations.

It would be also be very effective for organizers to get permission from visitors to past editions to include their companies in the brochures and documents used for future TS promotion. By doing this, potential visitors become aware of their competitors’ interest and, thus more motivated to attend the TS.

Organizers should acknowledge the increasing emphasis that exhibitors and visitors put on relationships. In this direction, they should facilitate encounters by providing special spaces and events within each TS to catalyze interaction between exhibitors and visitors. They should also facilitate the recognition of competitors by celebrating horizontal events (conferences, seminars) in the TSs, and to provide access to consulting services about establishing new upwards and downwards relationships.

Organizers should make an effort to reduce the relative costs by offering bonuses or discounts to actual visitors who engage in multiple TS events and venues. With respect to their own events, these initiatives would have a positive impact on the visitor’s probability of attending future editions of the TS or other events hosted at the organizer’s premises. With respect, to other complementary, non-competitive events, they might reach agreements with organizers at other venues to increase common potential attraction. Via this approach, organizers would address visitors’ TS attendance budgets rather than just the costs of individual events.

Finally, another managerial implication for TS organizers would be to improve the timing convenience of their TS portfolio by scheduling events in collaboration with local business associations and Chambers of Commerce.

For exhibitors, the managerial implications run in parallel with the above-mentioned implications for exhibitors. Two more specific recommendations would be to incorporate personnel at the booths with functional and formal capacity to initiate relationships, and to allow for product inspection at the booth, making sure that they can provide answers to any relevant questions about the company’s products.

8. Limitations and further research

The study has some limitations that derive from the empirical setting and the objectives of the research project. Certainly, retailers are a relevant part of the target market for TS organizers so that the analysis provides insightful conclusions for TS management in general. However, some of the conclusions should be checked against studies incorporating a wider array of visitors. The sample is geographically restricted; a wider geographical spread would have allowed us to check whether or not the differential costs factor, within the perceived costs criterion, is relevant in the evaluation of TSs. Our findings, however, do not
seem particularly threatened by the fact that our sample of potential visitors includes only small and medium retailers. There is common knowledge as well as empirical evidence of the predominance of non-sales or non-purchases marketing objectives as drivers of TS attendance, as reflected in our study. A further limitation is that the external validity of the measurement model cannot be fully established because the questionnaire did not include the assessment and selection of specific TSs. This prevents the use of the most direct method of checking external validity; i.e., the effect of our latent TSE variable on the assessment and/or selection of specific TSs, is not available. Nonetheless, an attempt has been made to apply indirect methods. We checked the relation between the measurement model and an exogenous variable that is, in theory, sensitive to the TS attendance decision (Bagozzi, 1981).

The theoretical relationship is that importance given by the retailer to those strategic communication objectives most closely related to attending TSs (innovation, collaboration with the marketing channel, motivation of the personnel, and competitive reactions), will be positively related to the TS evaluation process based on the indicators of the measurement model. They all suggest the external validity of the measurement model.11 Further research should also be conducted to check the predictive validity of the model by directly tackling the assessment and selection of specific TSs.

The limitations are a primary source of inspiration for further research. A research project, including the total array of visitor types and with a wider geographical spread should be carried out to confirm the measurement model. Further research should also be conducted to check the predictive validity of the model by directly tackling the assessment and selection of specific TSs.

### Table 8
Results of AFC. TO-TSE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>M.AFC. TO-8D</th>
<th>PI1</th>
<th>PI2</th>
<th>PI3</th>
<th>PI4</th>
<th>MO1</th>
<th>MO2</th>
<th>MO3</th>
<th>PC</th>
<th>PI</th>
<th>MO</th>
<th>TSE</th>
<th>t-value</th>
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M.AFC. TO-8D: confirmatory third order factor analysis model with 8 first order dimensions.

*The parameter was established as 1 to fix the latent variable scale.

### Table 9
TSE scale reliability*

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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of TSs planned to be visited</td>
<td>PC</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost of sending personnel</td>
<td>PC</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PI</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>0.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MO</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PC</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TSE</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>0.77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Values equal to or greater than 0.5 indicate a high level of reliability. CR is composite reliability and CV is cumulative variance.

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11 This test is available upon request from the authors.
An extension of the research would be to include in one empirical study companies playing a dual role as both visitors and exhibitors at TSs. This would give a different and very promising perspective. This empirical setting would allow for an accurate analysis of the differences between exhibitors and visitors in the TSE model.

It would also be very interesting to consider an empirical setting in which to explore the dynamic aspects of TS participation. By collecting information from a panel of visitors, it would be possible to analyze the effects of past experience on the assessment of TSs.

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Appendix A

A step prior to the factor model estimation was an analysis of the unidimensionality of the first-order factors corresponding to the individual dimensions of PI, MO and PC. The estimation method selected was ML with robust estimators. Evaluation using these indicators provides a better fit than those obtained by the multinormality supposition. Two indicators: the marketing objective of increasing sales, and the objective to perform market research at the TS were eliminated due to their low factorial weight and individual reliability (see Appendices C and D). Goodness-of-fit was adequate in all the respective models (see Table 6).

We then proceeded to analyze the fit of the factorial model of the third order (see Fig. 2 and Tables 7, 8 and 9). Four indicators were eliminated due to their factorial weightings and the results of the Lagrange test. These were the marketing objective of winning new customers, the objective of generating new ideas, the perceived costs of communication infrastructure, and the perceived cost of accommodation at venue (see Appendices C and D). After checking the conceptual fit, the “Experience of the organizer” indicator (V7), is now associated with the “Quality and quantity of attendance” factor (PI3).

Content validity is measured subjectively by the researchers (Bollen, 1989). In this study, content validity is supported by the literature that was used to draw up the initial list of indicators and group them by criterion. The values of the Bentler–Bonett coefficient are considered acceptable for the convergent validity — each indicator on the scale is considered as a different focus for measuring the same concept and testing for possible convergence (Escrig & Bou, 2002), both in the case of the factor models for grouped individual dimensions, and in the case of the third-order factor model.

With respect to discriminant validity, it is worth noting that the correlation between each independent dimension and its respective second order dimension is higher than between the latter (second order dimensions) which, in turn, is lower than 0.8 (Barrio & Luque, 2000). All the correlations among the dimensions are positive and significant, thus supporting nomological validity. These correlations between dimensions and their t-value are: PI-PC=0.323 (2.11); PI-MO=0.578 (2.30); MO-PC=0.496 (4.67).

Appendix B. Measurement of trade show perception/information

Trade show type
V1. Sector leader
V2. Sector specialization

Location and time convenience
V3. Location convenience
V4. Time convenience

TS reputation
V5. Sponsorship by public entities
V6. Sponsorship by association in sector
V7. Experience of the organizer

Quality and quantity of attendance
V8. Number of visitors
V9. Participation of competitors

Appendix C. Measurement of marketing objectives

Customer acquisition and retention
V10. Customer satisfaction
V11. Win new customers***
V12. Increase sales at TS**
V13. Buy exhibited product*
V14. Customer retention
V15. Promote/reinforce company image*

Distribution network
V16. Seek for distributors
V17. To get a distribution
V18. Contact exhibitor’s executives*

Product scanning
V19. Interaction with experts
V20. Examination of products
V21. Search for new products and innovations*

Marketing research
V22. Market research**
V23. Generation of new ideas***
V24. Information about the sector*
Appendix D. Measurement of perceived costs

Relative costs
V25. Number of TSs planned to be visited per year
V26. Cost of sending personnel
V27. Communication infrastructures***

Differential costs
V28. Accommodation costs at venue***
V29. Travel distance**

*Indicators eliminated from the scale in the AFE.
**Indicators eliminated from the scale in order to fit first order factors.
***Indicators eliminated from the scale in order to fit third order factor modeling.

References


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Carmen Berne received her PhD from University of Zaragoza, where she teaches business and marketing, and has been visitant researcher at the University of Oxford. Her main research interest is focused on retail services, trade shows and consumer behavior. She has been published in the main European journals of distribution research.

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