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## Educational Fairs as a Form of Promotion of Higher Education Institutions

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## EDUCATIONAL FAIRS AS A FORM OF PROMOTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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### Introduction

The upcoming decline in birth rates combined with increasing numbers of high school leavers deciding to study abroad force Polish universities to engage in intense marketing activities. Educational Fairs are one of the instruments allowing for effective communication with future students. However, in order to take full advantage of the participation in educational fairs, universities need to be well prepared by applying the rules of exhibition marketing and taking into account the specific character of education-oriented exhibition events.

The main goal of this paper is to identify the characteristic features of educational fairs. A good understanding of the character of educational fairs will help universities to significantly improve the effectiveness of exhibition activity. Another crucial factor determining the effectiveness of fair events dedicated to higher education is the behaviour of exhibitors. In view of the above, this paper sets out to define conditions for effective communication with high school leavers on the one hand and to identify typical mistakes made by the exhibition personnel. Additionally, the work offers an overview of educational fairs organized in Poland including ways in which they have been impacted by the rise of the Internet.

### The role of educational fairs in the higher education promotion system

Universities can use a wide range of various forms of promotion such as advertising, sales promotion, personal selling, public relations, representing tools for creating the marketing communication system. The most commonly used instruments include various forms of advertising (TV, radio, press, out-door, online, print materials), advertising gadgets, and online activity (university websites and their positioning, profiles on social networking sites).

Often, the range of promotion instruments used by universities includes educational fairs. Because of their specific characteristics, educational fairs may play a vital role as a promotion tool. Contemporary exhibition events allow both exhibitors and visitors to achieve a number of goals.

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This justifies looking at fairs (including educational fairs) as a separate marketing tool, complementary in relation to all elements of the promotion mix but permitting selective use of particular forms of communication<sup>1</sup>. This great marketing potential however is not always used in full by Polish universities.

Despite the unique role that exhibition events may play the opinion is sometimes expressed among academic circles that the impact of educational fairs is diminishing. Yet, universities are not giving up exhibition activity. Participation in events organized in large cities is of importance primarily in terms of image-enhancing tactics. In addition, many exhibitors are beginning to recognize the value of fairs organized outside big cities where high school learners can attend no other events enabling direct contact with representatives of the academia<sup>2</sup>. It seems plausible that, regardless of the professionalization degree of their exhibition activity, universities will continue to need educational fairs as important in terms of their communication systems.

### Organizing participation in educational fairs

A full process of the preparation and delivery of an exhibition event consists in a sequence of steps each exhibitor interested in deriving maximum gains from his exhibition activity should take prior to the event itself. In general, there are eight stages in this process<sup>3</sup>:

- identifying goals of exhibition activity,
- selecting fairs that would permit achieving the goals set,
- setting the budget of the exhibition event,
- refining the presentation concept of the offering alongside design and delivery of the exhibition stand,
- selecting and training members of the exhibition team,
- preparing promotion materials,
- participating in the fairs,
- follow-up activities.

In the case of secondary schools and universities, the above process is reduced to six stages: selecting fairs, setting the budget, forming the exhibition team, preparing promotion materials, participating in the fairs, evaluating the trade fair appearance.

The goal of exhibition activity is clearly set as the presentation of the educational offering in a favourable light and, consequently, encouraging the highest possible number of young people to go into higher education<sup>4</sup>. An attractive trade fair appearance also enables exhibitors to achieve important image goals aimed at creating positive perceptions of the institution in the minds of the target audience. Exhibition

1 cf. M. Gębarowski, *Współczesne targi. Skuteczne narzędzie komunikacji marketingowej*, Regan Press, Gdańsk 2010, p. 56.

2 cf. Ł. Zalesiński, "Student pilnie poszukiwany", *Rzeczpospolita* 2012, No 111(9231), p. A7.

3 M. Gębarowski, *Fairs as a tool of marketing activity of research and scientific institutions [in:] Marketing of Scientific and Research Organizations 3. New point of view of European Marketing*, ed. W. Wiśniowski, *Scientific Publications of the Institute of Aviation*, Warsaw 2012, p. 45-46.

4 A vast majority of exhibitors at education fairs represent schools beyond the gymnasium level of education (senior secondary schools including comprehensive, vocational and trade schools, language schools and universities). Exhibitors may also include textbooks publishers and teaching aids producers.

events are therefore a PR tool enhancing the exhibitor's brand. At the same time it is worth noting that entities which decide against participating in some fairs (particularly those crucial for a given sector) send a negative signal to the environment. Absence at a fair is likely to make potential clients ask questions about the reasons behind it while competitors may use it to further their own goals<sup>5</sup>.

Whilst making decisions about selecting appropriate fairs to participate in secondary schools and universities take into account certain specific criteria. These include first of all the reach of the event (in quantitative and qualitative terms – turnout at the fair as well as the profile of visitors and exhibitors). Of importance is also the cost of participation (resulting from direct costs and overheads). Other factors taken into consideration by prospective exhibitors may include accompanying events, participation of direct competitors, the prestige of the show and the organizer's image, level of publicity raised by the former edition of the event, and previous experience.

Financial resources dedicated to participation in education fairs depend on the general level of expenses allocated to marketing communication activities. In the case of exhibitors who participate in a number of trade events around the year – some schools of higher education in particular – expenses on exhibition activity may account for a high proportion of the promotion budget. The total cost of participating in a single event can be broken down into a number of components. Financial resources allocated to the preparation and management of a trade fair appearance fall into two categories – direct costs and overheads. Direct costs include fees charged for space rental as well as design and delivery of a trade show display (if the exhibitor opts for his own trade show display). Beside these, indirect costs are related to the installation and dismantling of the show display including extra furnishings (e.g. chairs, tables, showcases), connecting necessary installations (e.g. electricity), logistics (e.g. transport of exhibits or display elements), accommodation and catering for the exhibition team, preparation of promotional materials and promotion activity at the fair. Overhead costs are more difficult to estimate as they include all remaining expenses such as, most importantly, costs relating to the training and remuneration (if applicable) of the exhibition team as well as travel costs<sup>6</sup>.

Secondary-level schools and higher education institutions rarely opt for using custom-made stands. A vast majority of displays at education fairs are constructed based on a the standard design (the so-called octagonals). This type of a trade show display is made of partitions (usually white) joint and configured by means of metal poles. Standard displays are supplemented with additional furnishings rented by the exhibitor (e.g. tables, chairs, bookcases, showcases, racks for printed advertising materials, platforms etc). The popularity of standard display systems at education fairs is primarily down to cost-effectiveness of these solutions, an important consideration given limited budgets of educational institutions. Another advantage from the point of view an organizer is the fact that such displays are easy and quick to assemble and dismantle and can be reused on other occasions.

<sup>5</sup> cf. P. De Pelsmacker, M. Geuens, J. Van den Bergh, *Marketing Communications. A European Perspective*, Pearson Education, Harlow 2010, p. 509.

<sup>6</sup> cf. M. Gębarowski, *Współczesne...*, op. cit., pp. 84-85.

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The downside of this solution is connected with lack of individual features. Exhibitors are offered stands like many others on the trade floor which they need to visually distinguish and adapt so that they match the concept of the planned fair appearance<sup>7</sup>. Sometimes exhibitors choose to present their offering using custom made exhibition stands. Although such display systems are more expensive, they enable an exhibitor to stand out from the crowd. This solution allows for unrestrained creativity in designing the exhibition space.

While designing an exhibition stand it is important to remember that it has to attract attendees' attention. This said, another factor to consider is consistency with the visual identification system of a given university<sup>8</sup>. This concerns both the stand itself and its furnishings including exhibition panels, roll-ups and the graphics. Consistency with the visual identification system of a given university basically means observing standards set in the visual identification guidebook. This document contains guidelines codified in the form of graphics and instructions on how to use the system elements.

The decision about which type of exhibition stand to choose is connected with the concept of displaying an educational offering.

Most commonly, education institutions go for a static presentation with the exhibit staff telling interested people about the possibilities and conditions of studying at a given university. Presentations of this type may be supported by elements enhancing visual attractiveness of the message such as models, mock-ups, boards or posters. Or, a fair appearance may take a more active form incorporating additional events such as competitions, raffles or special shows, some of which would sometimes require a special arrangement of some section of the exhibit space.

The core members of exhibit teams are teachers and current or former students. Their attitudes determine to a large extent the exhibition outcomes<sup>9</sup>. This is why a selection of the exhibit team and their subsequent training is so important. Communication skills and a knack for conversing with young people are the key traits one should look for in building an exhibit team. This is of particular significance in relation to academic teachers who may often find it difficult to get their message across to young people. Including students in the team will make a fair appearance more credible. Good preparation

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*7 To achieve an individual character, an exhibition designed on the basis of a standard design system typically uses various additional elements such as exhibition panels, literature dispensers, roll-ups, and stands for printed promotion materials.*

*A commonly practised solution is to use colourful posters or foil, or to pin up balloons.*

*8 In Poland, not all universities implemented systems of visual identification. Those which did employ systems of varying degree of complexity. Simpler variants consist of a university logo only (e.g. Poznań University of Technology – <http://info.put.poznan.pl/content/logo%20PP>) or just several elements (e.g. Łódź Medical University – [http://www.umed.pl/pl/doc/bpiw/ksiega\\_znaku\\_1.pdf](http://www.umed.pl/pl/doc/bpiw/ksiega_znaku_1.pdf), [http://www.umed.pl/pl/doc/bpiw/ksiega\\_znaku\\_2.pdf](http://www.umed.pl/pl/doc/bpiw/ksiega_znaku_2.pdf)). More complex systems include more detailed specifications (e.g. The University of Economics in Poznań – <http://www.ue.poznan.pl/uczelnia/siw-uep>), including on exhibition furnishings such as exposition panels and counters (e.g. The AGH University of Science and Technology in Cracow – <http://www.agh.edu.pl/pl/uczelnia/o-uczelni/system-identyfikacji-wizualnej-agh/ksiega-identyfikacji-wizualnej.html>, Rzeszów University of Technology – <http://dokumenty.portal.prz.edu.pl/komunikaty-dla-pracownikow/do-pobrania/system-identyfikacji-wizualnej/informacje-ogolne>).*

*9 It can be assumed that at education fairs the role of the stand personnel is more important than in the case of other trade shows. This results from the fact that at education fairs the activity of the exhibition teams needs to compensate for the limitations due to relying on standard display systems and restricted possibilities of the customisation of the offerings presented by education institutions.*

of the exhibit staff requires brief training to acquaint them with the objectives of exhibit activity, details of the educational offering, work coordination, and rules of establishing a good rapport with young people sadly, pre-exhibition training is hardly ever organized by Polish exhibitors.

Another important stage is preparation of promotion materials – of appropriate content, in the form acceptable by target clients and in sufficient quantities. At education fairs, due to the mass and superficial character of contact with the audience, exhibitors generally make a wide use of leaflets and prospectuses as well as advertising gadgets (e.g. pens, key leashes, mugs, balloons) and sweets. Prospectuses and catalogues, as more expensive to prepare, are distributed on a more economical basis. Demonstrations are often supported by films or computer presentations, or, less commonly, InfoKiosks with touch screens.

Sampling is not practised at education fairs as they are by definition dedicated to demonstrating services (intangible products). Sometimes, however, there are food tasting events, particularly in the case of culinary and language schools. The latter sometimes offer traditional dishes of the countries whose languages feature in their educational offering. The management phase of a fair appearance focuses mainly on ensuring that the exhibition stand is operated on a continuous base throughout the fair and that all activities take place on schedule. One person should be responsible for supervising and coordinating the whole event. The main role of this person should be managing the work of the exhibit team to ensure that the goals set with respect to the exhibit activity are achieved.

During fairs, many exhibitors get involved in a range of accompanying events. Exhibitors are increasingly relying on adding show elements to their appearance in order to attract attendees. This most commonly takes the form of various events organized within the exhibit space or outside (on a trade show floor or outdoors). These initiatives can bring the desired effects provided the following conditions are met<sup>10</sup>:

- events have been planned in order to stimulate appropriate audience response;
- events are original in order to focus attendees' attention and make a lasting impression;
- events are concerned with themes of interest for the fair audience (to obtain best communication effects);
- the form of events harmonizes with the presented offer, the display design and the theme of the fairs;
- events are not too spectacular so that they do not obliterate the offering presented at the fair.

For example, events accompanying the main show may include miscellaneous shows related to the educational profile of the exhibiting institutions such as: first aid demonstrations (Wrocław Medical University), cosmetic treatments (The Higher School of Cosmetology and Health Sciences in Łódź), robots' performance (Technical University in Rzeszów), historical dances (The Pomeranian Academy in Słupsk), rowing ergometers racing (Academy of Physical Education in Gdańsk). Some fair exhibitions may involve events unrelated to education flamenco and belly dance shows (The Philological School of Higher Education in Wrocław) or magic performances (Wrocław University). Some exhibitors may want to use sound, typically by engaging singing and dancing groups or university choirs.

<sup>10</sup> M. Gębarowski, *Targi a wydarzenia marketingowe – wzajemne związki, podobieństwa i różnice [in:] Współczesny marketing. Strategie*, ed. G. Sobczyk, Polskie Wydawnictwo Ekonomiczne, Warszawa 2008, p. 280.

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The last stage of the fair appearance is concerned with follow-up activities. Their scope basically includes three areas: developing contacts initiated during the fairs, organizing information and promotion materials obtained during the fairs, and summarising the results of the exhibit activity. Due to the mass character of fair interactions contacts with individual candidates are rarely followed up. A more common practice to complement talks held with teachers during the fair is sending additional promotion materials to schools. Post fair activities should include the sorting out of printed promotion materials (leaflets, folders, prospectuses) obtained at competitors' stands. It is also advisable to archive for future reference pictures of the fair appearances of main competitors. Materials obtained at the fairs may include the filled-up questionnaires relating for example to high school leavers' expectations or the image of a given university. The evaluation of participation in education fairs concerns a lesser scope of issues than in the case of other trade shows. This is dictated by the specific character of fair audiences, largely comprising students and high school learners, and by the nature of contacts established at fairs. The criteria used in evaluating the exhibition outcomes are usually simple indicators such as quantities of promotion materials distributed, the volume of talks held on the stand, the number of filled-in questionnaires, the number of people taking part in the organized competitions, etc.

### **Communication with visitors to education fairs – its complexity and effectiveness**

From the marketing perspective, it is important to initiate interaction with visitors on the stand. This implies that exhibitors should opt for an active form of trade contacts, for example through organizing raffles, competitions or interactive shows involving the audience. Some exhibitors may use computer stands enabling prospective students to view the school presentation or become familiar with software used for teaching purposes. It is worth noting the specific character of contacts made with education fairs visitors. Compared with other trade shows, talks held on education fair stands have a mass and superficial character<sup>11</sup>. That is the reason why visitors are not usually invited within the stand area and are instead conversed with and given promotion materials at the exposition counter.

An important factor contributing to success in getting the marketing message across to high school learners is the ability to use open-style communication. This style of communication is characterised by:

- tolerant and kind attitude to visitors, who may behave in an undisciplined way,
- patience in answering questions including those to which answers are seemingly obvious,
- resigning from the mentor-like tone, typically used by academic lecturers,
- using the language which is understood and accepted by young people - informal and free of academic jargon.

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<sup>11</sup> *This communication style fits with the model of communicating with fair audiences known as the touch & go interacting technique (cf. D. Kreuter, Targowe techniki sprzedaży. Pięć kroków do pozyskania nowych klientów podczas targów, Akademia Sukcesu – HDT Consulting, Warszawa 2004, p. 70).*

Education fair audiences are largely comprised of learners, for whom practically all promotion materials available on the stands are attractive. Quite often, printed materials obtained by a visitor land in a garbage basket or are discarded somewhere else even before he left the trade fair floor. Therefore it makes economic sense to distribute advertising gadgets, folders and prospectuses prudently. By doing so, we may, firstly, avoid distributing all promotional materials in the early hours of the show and, secondly, keep the costs of promotion materials within reasonable limits. Observing a handful of simple hints will enable controlling quantities of materials distributed to visitors. First of all, all materials, with the exception of ordinary leaflets (whose printing costs are relatively low), should be handed in only to people who are interested in the details of the offer. Moreover, to curb free access to literature racks, they should be placed further inside the exhibit space rather than at its edge. More valuable advertising gadgets can be given to winners of simple competitions organized by the stand personnel.

Participation in exhibit events frequently offers opportunities for contacts with journalists. At education fairs, they usually represent local media (the press, internet portals, radio and TV). Media communication should be a responsibility of a specially appointed person (e.g. a university spokesperson) equipped with suitable materials and trained in giving interviews (unafraid of public speaking and possessing knowledge and skills in the area of media relations).

Another element affecting the impact of a fair appearance is the looks of the stand personnel. At education fairs, the stand staff usually wear clothes with emblems of a university they represent. Most commonly, these are students wearing T-shirts printed with a university's emblems. Academic teachers, on the other hand, tend to wear more formal clothes. Some universities may opt for uniforms for the entire exhibition team, which definitely makes them stand out from the crowd<sup>12</sup>. Sometimes exhibitors may employ people who are extravagantly dressed and resemble well-known public figures (lookalikes) or clowns, mime artists, stilt walkers, etc.

With adequate training, communicating with fair visitors may become a worthwhile market research tool. By asking a previously defined set of questions it is possible to find out about visitors' opinions on issues such as expectations towards a university's educational and social offer as well as probe a university's image as perceived by high school learners. The answers given should be noted down in the relevant questionnaires to be analysed after the show. Alternatively, it is possible to run a survey by handing questionnaires to members of the fair audience so that they could fill them in on their own.

A constraint on market research carried out at education fairs is a limited amount of data which could be obtained. This is due to high volumes of attendees and little time for interaction with visitors to the stand. That is why a questionnaire should contain several questions only and separate room should be made available to fill it in (furnished with a table, a chair and pens).

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<sup>12</sup> This is most commonly observed in the case of the uniformed services schools (military and police academies etc). Other schools may sometimes use this option – e.g. Rzeszów University of Technology had a fair team including students specializing in piloting who were wearing the characteristic uniforms of passenger airlines pilots.



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Increasingly, fair appearances staged by higher education institutions are taking the form of spectacular shows to impact all senses of the visitors. Such shows offer the possibility to observe the audience reactions to particular stimuli and enable tailoring communications to target clients' preferences. Moreover, engaging fair visitors by means of multisensual experience creates rich possibilities for accentuating intangible assets of a university and shaping associations permanently linked with this university in the minds of its stakeholders.

### **Education fairs in Poland**

A characteristic feature of Polish education fair market is a high degree of fragmentation. Beside a dozen or so of leading events organized in major cities and large academic centres, there are a number of low-profile events held in smaller places.

Education fairs in Poland fall into two categories in relation to target audiences. The first group comprises shows where exhibitors are senior secondary schools (beyond the gymnasium level) whilst the audiences consist of gymnasium learners faced with further education choices. The second category of fairs brings together universities and, sometimes, other types of higher education schools, and prospective students. Some exhibit events may attract schools of mixed education levels.

Education fairs feature in the schedules of the leaders of Polish exhibition industry including Poznań International Fair, Łódź International Fair, Kielce Fair, Lublin Fair and Cracow Fair. On the other hand, events organized under the title of education fairs are also initiated by senior secondary schools, universities, job agencies, local authorities and other institutions (including entities organizing fairs for profit). This latter group of shows, taking place outside the major fair centres, is characterised by a larger reach and, generally, a lower degree of professionalism in terms of organization and the quality of exhibition appearances (with educational offerings quite often presented using improvised stands rather than professional display systems).

Additionally, there are also a few non-standard events such as the Wrocław Index held annually since 2010 in the capital of the Lower-Silesian voivodship. As unique in the scale of Poland, this show for high school leavers is open only to higher education institutions of Wrocław and every year attracts some 25 universities, both public and private. Another example is Salon Maturzystów, a several year-old event comprised of a cycle of nearly twenty education fairs held in different cities of Poland in September<sup>13</sup>. These events are organized on the initiative of the publishing house Perspektywy Press in cooperation with district examination commissions and regional rectors' conferences. Salon Maturzystów is accompanied by an extensive programme of lectures addressed to learners in last years of gymnasium.

Integrating education fairs with job fairs is a common practice particularly in small towns where it might be difficult to attract high numbers of exhibiting universities. Other types of exhibition events related to education are sometimes organized beside educational fairs<sup>14</sup>. Quite often, contemporary education

<sup>13</sup> The 2012 edition of Salon Maturzystów staged 18 events in major academic centres of Poland.

<sup>14</sup> e.g. Poznań Education Fairs accompanied by exhibitions organized by Salon Wyposażenia Szkół and Poznańskie Spotkania Targowe – Książka dla Dzieci i Młodzieży. The 2012 edition of the event attracted over 30 thousand visitors (<http://edukacja.mtp.pl>).

fairs are accompanied by additional events such as conferences or specialist workshops addressed to teachers.

Increasingly, Polish universities are extending their exhibition activity by participating in education fairs abroad in an attempt to attract foreign students via face-to-face contacts.

During events organized in remote corners of the globe (e.g. in China) – due to high costs – fair exhibitions generally take the form of collective presentations of several exhibitors from Poland within single exhibit space<sup>15</sup>. Individual exhibitions are an option chosen by universities situated near the border if fairs are organized in a nearby city in the neighbouring country. Noticeably, with each coming year there is a growing number of foreign universities (e.g. from Germany and the UK) presenting their offers at education fairs in Poland. Sometimes smaller-scale events are held to display an educational offer representing one country only<sup>16</sup>. Over the course of recent years, the growing number of foreign exhibitors has caused internationalization of education fairs.

### Internet as a tool for communicating with audiences of education fairs

When analyzing the forms of contemporary education fairs it is impossible to ignore the rise of electronic media, rapidly gaining popularity with young people. Since many target candidates treat the Internet as the basic communication tool, both universities and fair organizers need to use it as well to achieve their marketing goals. It is possible to distinguish the main internet communication channels used by fair operators to reach people interested in education themes. These are:

- education fair websites,
- education fair profiles on social networking sites,
- virtual education fairs (organized in the Internet only).

Education fair websites do not substantially differ from services created to promote other events. Typically, they provide basic information about a show (time and venue, opening hours, entrance fees, programme of accompanying events), references to previous editions of the event, often including photos and films, directions on how to get to the venue, the list of exhibitors and a layout of the trade show floor.

Increasingly, fair operators create profiles on social networking sites for events they organize with the intention of reaching out to young people – potential fair visitors<sup>17</sup>. While relying on this form of commu-

<sup>15</sup> Participation in a fair event of a single university employee may generate the cost between 8 000 PLN to 15 000 PLN. This cost is augmented by the expenses related to the exhibition stand preparation, e.g. the stand rental fee in Ukraine is about 1 thousand euros. To a limited extent, the exhibition activity of universities is supported by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education. For the first time, the ministry allocated in 2011 350 000 PLN for international promotion of Polish universities – including for the participation in the two international exhibition events in Vancouver and Copenhagen (R. Czeladko, "Uczelnie kuszą za granicą", Rzeczpospolita 2011, No. 124(8940), p. A5).

<sup>16</sup> e.g. the American Education Fairs organized in cooperation with the US Embassy in April 2012 at the Warsaw University Library brought together 12 US universities while visitors could familiarise themselves with the American recruitment system, acquire information about the possibilities of financing studies and the requirements for a student's visa as well as talk to graduates ([http://polish.poland.usembassy.gov/pr\\_targiedu.html](http://polish.poland.usembassy.gov/pr_targiedu.html)). Polish universities too have started to display their offerigns abroad. The first Polish University Fair took place in May 2011 in Chicago.

<sup>17</sup> e.g. Facebook where the following events are present: Move2study - the International Education Fairs in Warsaw, Education Fair in Gliwice, and Absolwent (the education fairs held in Gorzów Wielkopolski, Zielona Góra, Piła and Leszno).

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nication it is advisable to follow some guidelines concerning the use of profiles for marketing purposes. First of all, information should be posted on a regular basis throughout the period in between the two subsequent editions of the event, instead of directly before and during the show. Moreover, the profile should be oriented towards stimulating interaction with internet users, for example by means of provoking discussions (not necessarily related to the event organized) or running competitions.

An example of a virtual education fair is [www.edutargi.pl](http://www.edutargi.pl). Created in 2008, it presents categorized offerings of higher education institutions (beside textual information, there are also pictures and films). On virtual trade show floors there are exhibitions of universities offering a range of degree courses including undergraduate, graduate, postgraduate, PhD, and MBA studies. The service enables users to communicate with university representatives and express opinions about a given university.

Many years ago, in the era of the birth and rapid advance of the Internet, there were fears that real exhibition events were going to be superseded by virtual fairs.

Today, virtual fairs are believed unlikely to ever overshadow traditional events – mainly due to the human need for relating to others and building a network of relations with other fair participants, as well as because of the desire to be able to touch the product and feel the unique atmosphere that accompanies fairs<sup>18</sup>. So it seems reasonable to expect that exhibition events and the Internet will continue to complement each other in marketing activities of education institutions.

## Conclusion

Some Polish universities participate every year in many education fairs (sometimes in over 20 events). This high number of fair appearances proves that exhibition activity targeted at high school leavers brings desired results. Still, entities that decide on such intense exhibition activity represent a minority of universities. Most higher education institutions take part in just a few events, making on these occasions many mistakes which reduce the effectiveness of their activities.

Based on the experience gathered it may be concluded that exhibition events dedicated to school learners have a specific character that needs to be taken into account when planning and undertaking exhibition activities. The features distinguishing education fairs from other trade show events are as follows:

- the process of preparation and conducting a fair appearance is reduced in terms of some stages being omitted,
- the dominant form of exposition are standard display systems,
- local reach – visitors usually have strong ties with the host city and its surroundings,
- the exhibition team is mainly composed of the presenters of the educational offering (quasi salespersons),
- advertising gadgets and printed promotion materials are distributed en-mass,
- interactions with the audience typically have a superficial character, taking the form of brief conver

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18 cf. Ch. Fill, *Marketing Communications. Interactivity, Communities and Content*, Pearson Education, Harlow 2009, p. 691.

- sations and preventing visitors from penetrating the inside the exhibit space,
- in the pre-show period, exhibitors do not use personalised forms of communication (e.g. they do not send individual invitations),
  - "audience quality" measured in terms of the number of specialists representing a given industry is not important for exhibitors; what counts is the highest possible attendance levels.

Noticeably, education fairs are becoming more and more spectacular in character. One of the recent trends is adding "more colour" to exhibition events. Education exhibit events are sharing more and more characteristics with marketing events. On one hand fair operators are making shows more varied by organizing additional events to draw visitors. On the other hand exhibitors themselves stage often quite spectacular performances to attract attendees' interest and make their exhibitions unforgettable.

Education fairs have been deployed in marketing of higher education schools for several dozen years now. But their future, in the era of the rapid development of electronic media as the basic communication channel used by young people, will largely depend on whether fair organizers and exhibitors are able to display their offerings in a sufficiently attractive way. Much will depend on the measure of professionalism, in terms of both exhibition display and effective communication with young people.

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