

## CONTEMPORARY TRADE SHOWS AS A PLACE OF KNOWLEDGE SHARING ABOUT TOURISM PRODUCTS

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### **Abstract:**

The main thrust of this paper is to indicate the reasons why exhibitors participate in contemporary trade shows and to what extent trade shows are the place of knowledge sharing about tourism products and tourism industry for them. In order to fulfill this purpose, a distinction was made between the trade show information and trade show intelligence. The information function of fairs was analyzed in relation to the travel industry and special emphasis was put on characteristic features of the tourism product as the object of booth presentation. The authors presented the results of a study that was conducted among exhibitors participating in the Trade Fair of Regions and Tourist Products TOUR SALON - the biggest exhibition event of the tourism industry in Central and Eastern Europe. The findings presented in this paper are based on answers given by the representatives of territorial self-government units (cities, municipalities and provinces) and other entities that exhibited tourism products during the trade fairs such as regional or national tourism promotion centers. The findings of the research confirmed that for exhibitors' participation in trade shows is an important way of gaining market information, particularly about the latest trends in the tourism industry and about the offer and behavior of their competitors. According to the exhibitors, trade shows are also a good place for sharing knowledge about tourism products and present the exhibitor's latest offer. Moreover, trade shows give a great opportunity to recognize customers' demands. The respondents confirmed that participation in fairs plays an important role in an overall marketing activity of their organizations. The research findings served as a basis for conclusions that were presented in the final part of the paper. The prospects of trade shows development and its competitiveness for tourism industry in the era of increasing significance of Internet as a source of information about travelling and attractive destinations for tourists were considered as a final result of the research.

*Keywords: trade shows, knowledge, information, tourism, marketing*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary trade shows continue to offer their visitors what has been offered to them for centuries: the opportunity to establish direct contact and networking and the chance to see products “live”. These two possibilities are the main reasons for endurance of exhibition events in the era of rapid development of the Internet and other electronic media, which enable easy and quick communication. Nowadays, the exhibitors who actively participate in trade shows face more problems and challenges. One of the main challenges is to gain multi-dimensional information in effective way and use information function of trade shows in exhibitors’ favour. Leading trade shows can be a platform for multi-channel communication for diversified industries and they enable to gain specialist knowledge. However, to take full advantage of this “information potential” of trade shows it is necessary to understand the formula of modern fairs and to learn where sources of exhibit information can be found.

The main purpose of this paper is to indicate the reasons why exhibitors participate in trade shows and to what extent trade shows are the place of knowledge sharing about tourism products and tourism industry for them. An important goal of the research was to learn about exhibitors’ opinion on the future prospect of the trade shows in the context of growing importance of the Internet in communication process between suppliers and buyers. An analysis was carried out for the tourism industry due to its proneness to development of modern communication ways and because exhibition activity has been significant and important part of promotion of tourism industry for years.

## 2. TRADE SHOW INFORMATION AND TRADE SHOW INTELLIGENCE

The information function of exhibition events had not been considered as important one only until the last decade. It is manifested by the vast occurrence of the terms of „trade show intelligence” or „exhibit intelligence” in literature (Calof & Fox, 2003; Ratajczak, 2007; Søylen, 2010). Moreover, the concept of RTSI (Return on Trade Show Information) was formulated. It focuses on how, or whether, new information acquired at the trade show is used to provide future benefits for the organization (Bettis-Outland *et al.*, 2010, p. 271). The trade shows have been perceived as an important place of knowledge sharing, despite the hasty, flowing, temporary and highly dynamic nature of these events. The contemporary trade shows enable the development and application of effective knowledge sharing on mutual adaptation and joint actions between exhibitors and visitors (Reychav, 2011, p. 230). It is important to emphasize that intelligence is different from information – it relates to need-to-know, as opposed to nice-to-know. With ever more information, managers have stopped asking for information. In fact, information has become part of the problem: it is what all companies are drowning in, even after they have installed machines and software to handle it. That is why, in fact, what managers want is not information, but knowledge about what is important (Søylen, 2013, p. 127).

An analysis of exhibitors and visitors activity concerns, among others, the quality of trade show information. This quality refers to the level of accuracy, relevance, clarity, and timeliness of the acquired trade show information. Accuracy defines the objectivity of the information, and implies a certain amount of information validity. Relevance describes information that is perceived to be necessary and important for the task at hand. Clarity of information refers to whether the information was easy to follow and “made sense” to the trade show attendee. Timeliness describes the usefulness of information received at the trade show, based on temporal priorities of the attendee (Maltz & Kohli, 1996, p. 53; Bettis-Outland *et al.*, 2012, p. 386). Trade shows provide “premium quality information” due to the fact that they gather in one place and time thousands of specialists and experts devoted to a particular branch or area of activity (which is often very narrow). Furthermore, trade shows enable to exhibit latest offer to the market. However, it only depends on participants of the exhibition event to what extent and how effectively gathered information will be used.

Contemporary trade shows create an opportunity for „multichannel gathering information”. In this context the main sources of information are the following:

- face-to-face conversations at the stands,
- demonstrations of exhibits,
- printed advertising materials (leaflets, brochures, catalogues, folders),
- promotional materials on electronic devices (promotional films and presentations of a company on CD or pen drives),

- trade fair catalogues issued by organizers of the events (they contain detailed information about all exhibitors and they are handed out or sold to visitors),
- trade fair website (in particular pages on relevant branch and exhibitors),
- additional events prepared by organizers during the trade shows (contests, seminars, conferences, etc.).

In the context of gathering information by exhibitors and visitors, it is necessary to emphasize the meaning of additional events prepared by organizers during the trade shows. These events have become an important part of contemporary trade shows and to name this tendency the term „the trade show of scientific and technical knowledge” is used. It indicates how important during trade shows is demonstration of exhibits as well as using the opportunity for expanding knowledge. These two aspects of trade shows continually attract attendees, so as a result many shows have expanded their conference sessions and look to sponsorship as a means to provide quality speakers at a low cost to the attendee. Many trade shows adopt a mandate of helping their attendees to grow and develop professionally and are updated on what’s hot and who’s hot from a topic and speaker point of view (Allen, 2007, p. 93). In business trade shows are often acknowledged as a convenient way for „public spying”, which refers to information function of exhibition events in general. In this context there are two main questions – how to gather information without (i) breaking the law, and (ii) violating company’s ethics (or own personal moral code). The first issue is legal, and the second belongs to the study of business ethics (Søilen, 2013, p. 127).

One of the factors that determines how information-related advantages of contemporary trade shows are used, is the multiplicity of sources of information. It is also very significant what will come in a post-show period. Once the trade show information is disseminated throughout the organization, this information is either utilized or discarded. By utilizing this trade show information, the organization will realize tangible benefits, including (Bettis-Outland *et al.*, 2012, p. 386):

- new customers,
- increased sales from current customers, and/or
- purchase of new products, services, technical training, and updates to enhance customer support.

Disseminated trade show information is also used by the organization to produce intangible benefits. These intangible benefits include (Bettis-Outland *et al.*, 2012, p. 386):

- improvements in strategic planning,
- improvements in policy development,
- new product development ideas, and
- improved corporate image.

When organisations decide to use trade shows as relevant source of information, it can yield important tangible and intangible results for them, as well as it can enhance their position in increasingly competitive markets.

### **3. TOURISM PRODUCT AS A TRADE SHOW „EXHIBIT”**

During tourism trade shows self-territorial units exhibit at their stands a tourism product, which has got a complex construction. This tourism product is a part of a territorial product that, apart from a tourism product, consists of other so-called “sub-products”, such as: residential product, social product, investment product, commercial and service product, recreational and sports product, transport product, education product, culture and exhibition product.

The tourism product is defined in literature in a very lapidary way, by reference to its complexity. Hudson, for instance, claims that tourism product is a group of selected components or elements brought together in a bundle to satisfy needs and wants (Hudson, 2008, p. 147). In turn, Holloway *et al.* perceive the tourist product as a complex amalgam of different services, each of which must be brought together and presented to customers by the various sectors of the industry (Holloway *et al.*, 2009, p. 165). Moreover, Candela and Figini define the tourism product as a basket of different goods and services demanded by the visitor during the tourism experience. A basket which contains, in technical sense, products with the same aim, the holiday (Candela & Figini, 2012, p. 33). And Raju indicates that the tourist product can be seen as a composite product, as the sum-total of a tourist attractions, transport, accommodation and entertainment which hopefully result in consumer

satisfaction. The tourist product can be entirely a manmade one or nature's creation improved upon by man (Raju, 2009, p.123).

Although the quoted definitions present different ways of interpretation of tourism product, they do not refer to all specific features that should be taken into account by the exhibitors participating in the trade shows organized for tourism industry. A cardinal problem when exhibiting the tourism product is intangibility of some of its components. In this case, one may indicate an analogy to promotion of services. It was noted in literature that tourism products might more appropriately be viewed as services, instead of goods, because tourism is an experiential phenomenon that brings people and places together over defined periods of time (Fennell, 2002, p. 177). Moreover, the tourism product stands out by some specific features that affect exhibition activity. First thing, such product is complex and multilayered because it has both tangible elements (hotel beds, food etc.) and intangible elements (service delivery) and it can range from a simple one night stay in a hotel or a day trip to a theme park to a tailor-made eight-week round-the-world itinerary. Secondly, the prospective tourist seeks an overall experience rather than a clearly defined product. Thirdly, the future tourist experience is heavily influenced by external factors, which are beyond the control of the tourists or the company that sells them a product. These external influences include weather, strikes, war and outbreaks of disease (Swarbrooke & Horner, 2007, pp. 51-52).

The tourism product consists, therefore, of elements which might be created by local authorities but also by other entities engaged in providing vast range of attractions and services for tourists (for instance owners of amusement parks, hoteliers, carriers) and of elements that are beyond their control. These entities might be involved in promotion of each element of tourism product separately. However, unlike these individual entities, during trade shows local authorities promote the "overall tourism product" and they focus on emphasizing all benefits and values included in tourism product addressed to tourists, instead of promoting single attractions.

The features of tourism product, which have been presented above, cause that it can be considered as specific „exhibit". Its complexity and hybrid structure cause that exhibitors' performances during trade shows have a form of micro-events. These events include among all some contests, food and drink tasting, vocal and dance performances, special shows. Moreover, during such events music and lights are often used which leads to spectacular arrangement of exhibitions. In this way the exhibitors attract attention of visitors and engage all human senses. They also try to make visitors remember the exhibited tourism product with all unique qualities of the place.

The purpose of adding music and light is to present a tourist offer as a whole, exposing unique features of a particular place and making visitors remember all those elements for a long time. Due to the above items, which are added to the offer, tourism trade shows are the most dancing and singing exhibition events.

#### **4. METHODOLOGY**

In general, the aim of this paper was to learn about opinions of the exhibitors representing the tourism industry on their exhibition activity. The main thrust was to indicate the reasons why exhibitors participate in contemporary trade shows and to what extent trade shows are the place of knowledge sharing about tourism products and tourism industry for them. Among the most important research questions were the following:

- 1) Do the exhibitors have clear goals of participation in trade shows?
- 2) In what aspects are trade shows an attractive way of marketing activity for entities from tourism industry?
- 3) Has the importance of fairs for the marketing activity of the cities, regions and voivodeships changed over the last few years?
- 4) To what extent are trade shows a good place for sharing knowledge for exhibitors from tourism industry?
- 5) According to the exhibitors, will the Internet pose a threat to traditional trade shows in the nearest future?

The study was conducted among exhibitors participating in the Trade Fair of Regions and Tourist Products TOUR SALON - the biggest exhibition event of the tourism industry in Central and Eastern Europe. The research was conducted in October 2013. The TOUR SALON trade shows were

organized on the premises of Poznań International Fair, which is a leader on the Polish trade fair market. In 2013 edition there were more than 600 exhibitors (the show gathered offers from 39 countries) and the booths was visited by more than 18.000 guests. According to the organizer, almost half of them were professionals (TOUR SALON 2013 Summary, 2014).

In order to gather empirical data, the auditorium questionnaire was used by the authors. This research technique is very useful in some crowded and loudly places such as trade shows, where conducting personal interviews might be difficult. The questionnaires were handed out by the authors to all participants of the trade shows and collected from them after two days. Questionnaires were prepared in English and Polish version as among exhibitors there were both Polish and foreign participants.

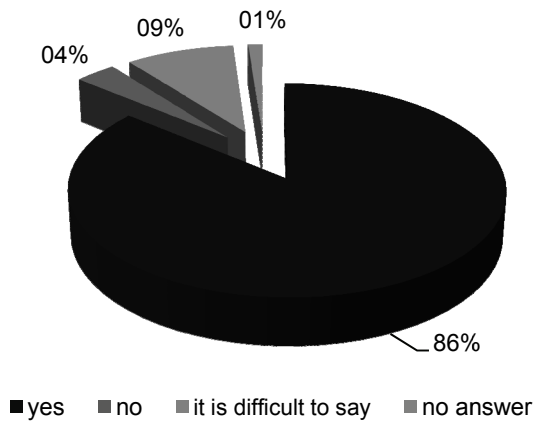
The findings presented in this paper are based on answers given by the representatives of territorial self-government units (cities, municipalities and provinces) and other entities that exhibited tourism products during the trade fairs such as regional or national tourism promotion centers. The questionnaires received from other entities (among them travel agencies, tour operators, tourism service providers, accommodation operators, hotels, SPA and wellness centers, conference centers, carriers, publishers) were not presented in this paper. In general, eighty-six questionnaires were taken into consideration and analyzed, including seventy-two from Polish exhibitors and fourteen from foreign exhibitors.

## **5. TOURISM TRADE SHOWS IN EXHIBITORS' OPINIONS – FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH**

Among eighty-six exhibitors who participated in the research, over 30% had their offer presented in shell booths prepared by the organizer of the TOUR SALON trade fairs. The majority of exhibitors (62.8%) could present customized stands designed by them. These stands covered often a considerable area and were designed in a way which highlighted distinctive features of presented regions, cities or countries. Moreover, the significant group of exhibitors declared that they participate in trade shows regularly. The biggest group (34.9%) was represented by those, who attend from one to three exhibition events per year. The following 29.1% claimed that they are participants of four to six trade shows each year. Finally, almost 13% of exhibitors indicated that they participate in at least ten exhibition events per year. The majority of respondents said that there is a marketing department or unit in their organizational structure but surprisingly, as many as 36% of them declared that they do not have any separate unit responsible for marketing activities.

During the research the exhibitors were asked if they had had their goals set before the trade shows. The overwhelming majority of them claimed that they have clear goals for participation in trade shows, only 3.5% do not have such goals set (picture 1). Among the most important goals pointed by respondents were: promotion, creating the image of the city, region or country, presentation of the region and tourists attractions, communication a mission of the city or the region (64% answers), and also attracting new clients, encouraging tourists to visit the place and increase the number of tourists (23.3% answers). Moreover, almost one in ten respondents indicated as a goal of participation in trade shows networking and establishing contacts with other cities and regions, as well as signing new contracts with companies and sales transactions.

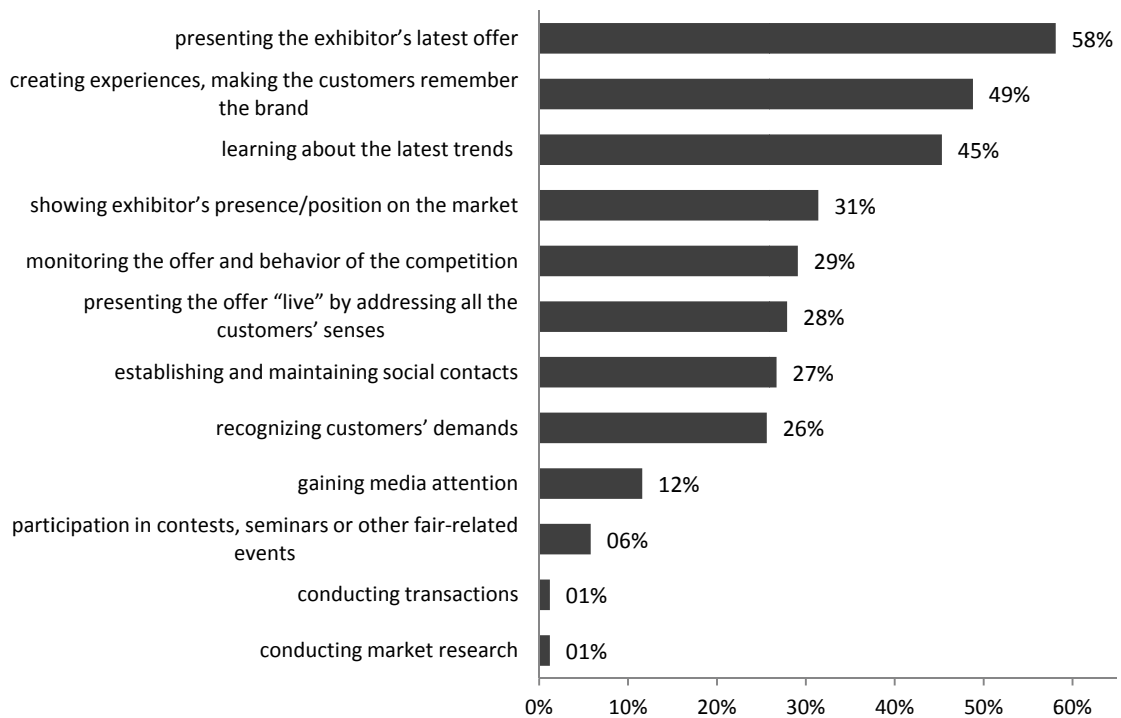
**Picture 1:** Does the exhibitor have clear goals for participation in the trade show?



Source: Own study.

Participation in trade shows enables the exhibitors to reach more specified goals. The most important goals were those related to presentation of the exhibitor’s latest offer (58.1%), creation of memorable experience, as well as making the customers remember the brand (48.8%) and gathering information about the latest trends in the industry (45.3%). Almost one third of respondents aimed to show exhibitor’s presence and position on the market and slightly less than 30% declared that their intentions were also to monitor the offer and behavior of the competitors. Moreover, nearly every fourth respondent claimed that trade shows give a great opportunity to recognize customers’ demands. The similar group of 26.7% said that they establish and maintain social and business contacts during trade shows. According to the exhibitors, trade shows are also a good place for presenting the offer face to face because it enables to have an impact on all customers’ senses (27.9%). The least important for respondents is to gain media attention, to participate in seminars, contests or other additional events, to conduct market research and to make transactions (picture 2).

**Picture 2:** What goals can be realized most effectively by participating in the fair?

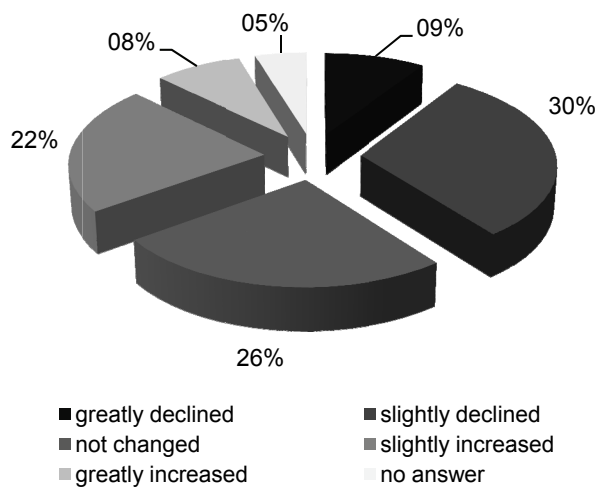


Source: Own study.

Monitoring the competitors' offer and visiting other exhibitors' stands are important activities undertaken by exhibitors during trade shows. Only 27.9% respondents noticed mistakes made by other exhibitors during the trade shows. Among the most often listed mistakes were: ignoring visitors who were awaiting at the stands and insufficient ways of interaction with them. Moreover, some of the respondents pointed out that staff at stands did not have a broad, detailed knowledge of exhibited tourism products.

In the opinion of the representatives of territorial self-government units and regional or national tourism promotion centers who participated in the study, the meaning of fairs for their marketing activity in the last 5 years has changed – for 39.5% of them the role of trade shows has fallen. On the contrary, slightly over 30% claimed that fairs have become more significant (picture 3). Only every fourth respondent thinks that the importance of trade shows has not changed.

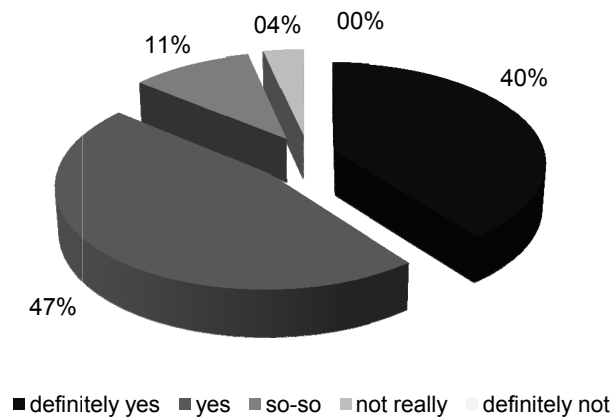
**Picture 3:** The importance of fairs for the marketing activity of the entity in the last 5 years



Source: Own study.

Trade shows are a good place for gaining knowledge about relevant industry. Overwhelming majority of respondents think in this way, 39.5% of them declared that fairs are definitely a good place for gaining knowledge and 46.5% of them said that "fairs are rather important place for gaining knowledge". Every tenth of exhibitor has not got any opinion on this issue and only 3.5% of them think that trade shows are not really a good place for gaining knowledge. None of the respondents chose the answer "definitely not" (picture 4).

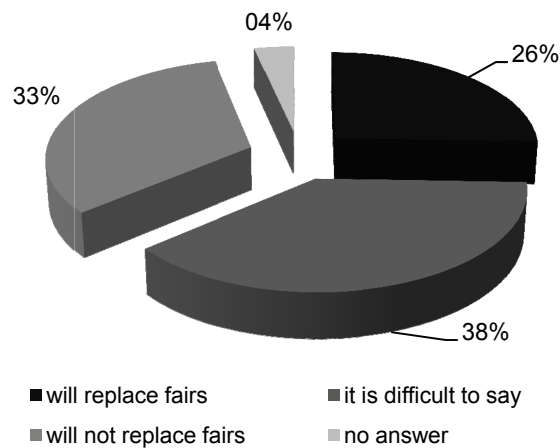
**Picture 4:** Respondents' opinion on fairs as a good place to gain knowledge about the relevant industry



Source: Own study.

Nowadays internet plays a very important role in marketing communication process because it provides additional communication channels and allows organisations to promote themselves in many different ways. Due to these distinctive and significant features of internet it is necessary to analyse how it affects more traditional ways of communication between organisations and clients, including face-to-face communication during trade shows. According to every fourth respondent there is a possibility that over the next ten years internet, as a rapidly developing form of communication, will replace traditional exhibition events (picture 5). On the contrary, over one third of exhibitors in the study do not share this opinion. Moreover, nearly 40% of respondents have no clear opinion on this matter.

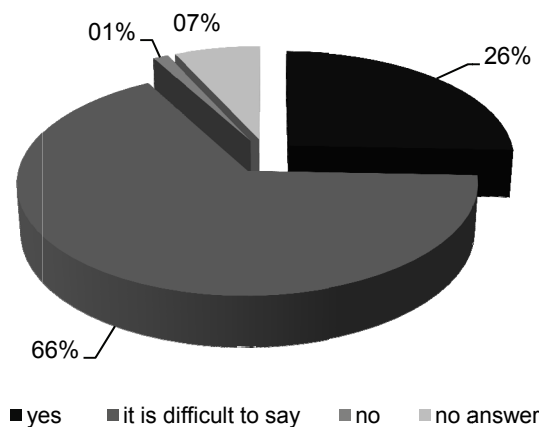
**Picture 5:** Respondents' opinion on the impact of the Internet on fairs over the next ten years



Source: Own study.

One of the important aims of the study was to learn about exhibitors' expectations regarding the ways of evolution of trade shows and its future formula, as well as their opinions about directions of changes of exhibition events. However, two-thirds of the respondents have no opinion on this matter (picture 6). Only 1.2% expressed the opinion that trade shows shouldn't change their formula in the future. On the contrary, every fourth of exhibitors suggested some changes for future organisation of fairs. Among the indicated changes were the following: virtual fairs, offering more events during fairs, arranging meetings with interesting and famous people, ambient media events, more creative way of designing stands, interactive and emotion-related exhibitions, less printed materials and using more web and social networking before, during and after fairs.

**Picture 6:** Respondents' opinion on future formula of the fairs



Source: Own study.



In respondents' opinion if organisers of trade shows implemented suggested changes, it would help to increase attractiveness of fairs both for visitors and exhibitors.

## **6. CONCLUSIONS – DO TRADE SHOWS HAVE A FUTURE IN THE TOURISM INDUSTRY?**

The findings of the research confirmed that for exhibitors participation in trade shows is an important way of gaining market information, particularly about the latest trends in the tourism industry and about the offer and behavior of their competitors. According to the exhibitors, trade shows are also a good place for sharing knowledge about tourism products and for presenting the exhibitor's latest offer. Moreover, trade shows give a great opportunity to recognize customers' demands. The overwhelming majority of exhibitors had their goals set before the trade shows. The most important goals were those related to gathering information and sharing knowledge about tourism industry but the exhibitors indicated also other important goals that they aimed to achieve through participation in trade shows. Among them were for example: showing exhibitor's presence and position on the market and presenting the offer face to face. Simultaneously, the results of the research revealed that the exhibitors did not show much interest in additional events prepared by organizers during the trade shows, such as contests, seminars or other fair-related events. It can be assumed that they are not cognizant of benefits of gaining information outside their stands.

In general the study revealed that the importance of fairs for the marketing activity of the analyzed exhibitors in the last 5 years has not change. The respondents confirmed that participation in trade fairs plays an important role in an overall marketing activity of their organizations. Moreover, most of exhibitors perceived contemporary trade shows as a good place for gaining knowledge about relevant industry. This statement can lead to a conclusion that information function of trade shows is commonly used by exhibitors. However, observations made during carrying out the research, as well as the findings of the study revealed that this assumption is a mistaken view of the situation, in particularly due to the mistakes made by personnel at the stands. In order to use the full potential of trade fairs in the field of knowledge sharing it is therefore necessary to improve the skills of the personnel who represent the organization at the stands during the trade shows.

In relation to research findings presented in the paper it is necessary to consider the prospects of trade shows development and its competitiveness for tourism industry in the era of increasing significance of Internet as a primary source of information about travelling and attractive destinations for tourists and growing impact of global computer network on marketing activity of entities operating on the tourism market. First of all, the Internet gives consumers the information and power to plan and book their own travel. It also gives travel agents and tour operators the opportunity to have their own sites and greatly expands their reach. The Web gives suppliers (airlines, hotels, rental car companies, cruise lines, attractions, etc.) a direct sales channel that can reduce distribution costs by having the consumer do the booking, thereby eliminating travel agency commissions and computer reservation system fees. The Internet is both an information source and a transaction source. Moreover, it has the advantage that it can be used by virtually everyone in the tourism industry, from the largest operator to the smallest. But despite its great potential, the Internet has limitations. While it is high tech, it is not high touch. It produces an overwhelming amount of information – in many cases, more than the consumer can digest. It is a challenge to hold the user's attention long enough to deliver the message. Travel distribution uses technology, but travel is not about technology; it is about experiences. Travel is a complex service industry where the customer requires value. In the final analysis, consumer value will prevail over technology (Goeldner & Ritchie, 2009, pp. 196-199). This gives a great opportunity for tourism trade shows to keep a significant place among marketing tools used in tourism industry. Fairs are the only marketing communication tool which enables to deliver relevant information face-to-face, as well as to present cities and regions' offer for prospective customers. During trade shows exhibitors can affect all visitors' senses and provide them entertainment in the atmosphere of festivity. These conclusions have been confirmed by the findings received in the research conducted by the authors of the paper during TOUR SALON trade shows.

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