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Research paper

Disconnect in trade show staffing: A comparison of exhibitor emphasis and attendee preferences

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ABSTRACT

This research explores how and whether staffing at trade shows by exhibitors is consistent with attendee preferences for staffing in this channel. Using secondary data from 9215 attendees and 885 exhibitors, we observe that relative to attendee preferences, exhibitors significantly understaff with technical personnel, while overstaffing with executive/upper management and sales/marketing personnel. Additional comparisons between attendees who are decision-makers vs. influencers in the purchase process, between attendees from different kinds of firms (B2B vs. B2C, large vs. small firms) and between attendees to trade shows that differ in geographic scope suggest that substantial inconsistencies persist between preferences of attendees and staffing by exhibitors.

1. Introduction

In business markets, trade shows play a critical role in brand building, new product introduction, customer acquisition and sales, and maintaining customer loyalty (Sarmento & Simões, 2018). For example, over 20,000 new products are launched at the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) every year, with this trade show featuring approximately 67,000 exhibitors and 109,000 attendees in 2017 (Consumer Technology Association, 2017; De Looper, 2014). Such trade shows are a multibillion-dollar business and a major global activity (Han & Verma, 2014), with exhibiting companies in the U.S. spending approximately $25 billion annually (CEIR, 2014). Despite being a critical component of the marketing mix (Tafesse & Skallerud, 2017), trade shows remain largely under-researched (Sarmento & Simões, 2018; Sridhar, Voorhees, & Gopalakrishna, 2015; Wu, Lilien, & Dasgupta, 2008).

A few studies examine trade show performance (e.g., Dekimpe, François, Gopalakrishna, Lilien, & Van den Bulte, 1997; Seringhaus & Rosson, 2001; Tanner, 2002), often focusing on lead generation (Gopalakrishna & Lilien, 1995), product acceptance (Barczak, Bello, & Wallace, 1992), and/or sales (Gopalakrishna, Lilien, Williams, & Sequeira, 1995; Tanner, 2002) as outcome variables. Researchers have also examined factors and tactics that affect trade show performance, such as trade show size (Sridhar et al., 2015), pre-show promotions by exhibitors (Ling-yee, 2007; Tanner, 2002), and post-show selling efforts (Smith, Gopalakrishna, & Smith, 2004; Sridhar et al., 2015).

Emerging research suggests that exhibitors' allocation of resources across different facets of the trade show can have a significant effect on their trade show performance (Li, Evans, Chen, & Wood, 2011), and that exhibitors should adjust their allocation of trade show resources based on knowledge of prospective customers (Ling-yee, 2007). However, specific guidance on how and where trade show exhibitors need to allocate resources for optimal effect is sparse.

Aligning exhibitor trade show staffing to the preferences of attendees will likely lead to better trade show outcomes for both exhibitors and attendees. The motivations and preferences of trade show exhibitors (Li et al., 2011) and trade show attendees (Lee, Yeung, & Dewald, 2010) have been the subject of recent research. For example, Sridhar et al. (2015) found that higher exhibitor staff count per shift has a significant positive effect on attendee experience. In this paper, we explore how and whether trade show exhibitor staffing aligns with attendee preferences. Specifically, we focus on how attendees' reported reasons to attend trade shows relate to their staffing preferences and to other characteristics. We also compare staffing allocations reported by exhibitors with staffing preferences of attendees.

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2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

We use the term "trade show" to refer to "events that bring together different groups of suppliers (referred to as exhibitors) from a particular industry or technology field with the primary goal to showcase, promote, and/or market their products and services to buyers and other relevant target groups, including purchasing decision influencers, i.e. specifiers, recommenders and end-users of showcased products and services (i.e., visitors)" (Bathelt, Golfetto, & Diego Rinallo, 2014, p. 4). As noted by Sarmento and Simões (2018), the terms "trade show," "trade fair" and "exhibition" are often used interchangeably. Our research examines the role of trade shows in the modern business-to-business marketing mix. Thus, we do not explore business-to-consumer shows. Exhibitors set up physical exhibits at the trade show, where they display their products/services, and where they make contact with trade show attendees. Firms typically send attendees to prescreened trade shows to evaluate potential suppliers, to evaluate market information and to build network connections (Tafesse & Skallerud, 2017).

In marketing practice, selling firms often regard trade shows as promotional events where they can promote products, generate leads and negotiate sales. By some accounts, trade shows exist to promote transactions between exhibitors and attendees (Bathelt et al., 2014). Some evidence suggests that selling firms plan trade show staffing on an ad hoc basis, with little regard for strategic objectives (Tanner Jr. & Chonko, 1995). We argue, and our data supports that trade show exhibitors should increase their emphasis on staffing with technical personnel to meet the needs of trade show attendees. In the following sections, we establish background and articulate hypotheses related to attendee motivations for attending trade shows, trade show attendee characteristics, and exhibitor staffing.

2.1. Attendee motivations for attending trade shows

Motivations to participate in trade shows have been described as either *transactional* or *non-transactional* (Wu et al., 2008). These motivations suggest different stages in the buying decision process, with non-transactional motivations experienced earlier and transactional motivations experienced later in the process (Howard & Sheth, 1969; Webster & Wind, 1972). Thus, motivations which have been described as non-transactional in previous research might be more appropriately labeled *pre-transactional*.[1] Evidence for these two types of motivations has been found for both trade show exhibitors (Kerin & Cron, 1987) and attendees (Godar & O'Connor, 2001; Hansen, 1999). Table 1 provides examples of such motivations.

Many studies of trade show attendees characterize them as motivated by pre-transactional goals, suggesting that many attendees are in the early stages in the decision process. In particular, trade show attendees have been found to be motivated to search for information, to investigate markets (Lee et al., 2010), and to find unique educational and informational experiences (Han & Verma, 2014). Research suggests that most attendees at trade shows are not interested in making an immediate purchase (Borghini, Golfetto, & Rinallo, 2006). This information-acquisition perspective is also highlighted in research by Bathelt et al. (2014), Rinallo, Borghini, and Golfetto (2010) and Rinallo, Bathelt, and Golfetto (2017); these authors suggest that trade shows are temporary clusters that facilitate diffusion of knowledge across geographical distances. While attendees may have a diverse range of motivations, we expect that most attendees will report reasons to attend a trade show that relate to information acquisition. We expect that relatively few attendees will report transactional objectives in addition to information-acquisition objectives. We do not expect that any attendees travel to trade shows with the sole motivation of completing transactions. Thus, we hypothesize:

Table 1
Transactional and pre-transactional motivations of trade shows exhibitors and attendees.

	Pre-transactional motivations	Transactional motivations
Exhibitors	Awareness Generation	Deal Closure
Attendees	Information Search	Product/Vendor Selection

H1. Most trade show attendees will report that information acquisition is their main reason for attending the trade show.

During pre-transactional stages (e.g., information search) of the process, a business customer may need specific technical information, and thus may want to interact with an engineer or technical professional at a trade show. On the other hand, customers may prefer to interact with more business-oriented personnel (e.g. sales, marketing) during negotiation and deal closure at later stages of the process. Attendees' motivations to attend a trade show may influence the type of personnel they hope to interact with while there. Specifically, we expect to observe a greater preference for potential information providers when attendees have only information-acquisition objectives, and a greater preference for business-oriented exhibitor personnel when attendees also have transactional objectives. We hypothesize:

H2a. Compared to trade show attendees with transactional motivations, attendees with only information-acquisition motivations will have a greater preference for interaction with information-rich exhibitor personnel.

H2b. Compared to trade show attendees with only information-acquisition motivations, attendees who also have transactional motivations will have a greater preference for interaction with business-oriented exhibitor personnel.

2.2. Attendee characteristics and motivations to attend

To help exhibitors allocate staff that would meet attendees' expectations, we investigate relationships between certain attendees' characteristics and their expectations. If such relationships exist, it would make attendees' expectations more predictable and yield opportunities for exhibitors to make effective personnel allocation decisions. We explore differences among attendees based on three firm characteristics (i.e., attendees from B2B vs. B2C firms, from small vs. large firms, and from domestic vs. foreign firms), one attendee characteristic (i.e., attendees acting as influencers vs. decision-makers in the purchase process), and one trade show characteristic (regional, national and international scope).

Compared to B2C firms, B2B firms have less contact with end users and consumers and thus may be motivated to use trade shows as a means to acquire information about end users/consumers and about general industry trends. We hypothesize:

H3a. Compared to B2C attendees, B2B attendee motivations will be more likely to report only information-acquisition motivations for attending.

H3b. Compared to B2B, attendees, B2C attendee motivations will be more likely to report transactional motivations in addition to information-acquisition motivations (i.e., mixed motivations) for attending.

Larger firms typically have more resources and longer decision processes. They consequently allocate more resources to information acquisition before making a purchase decision. Among trade show attendees, those from larger firms should demonstrate greater motivation

[1] We thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting that non-transactional goals might be more appropriately labeled pre-transactional.

for information acquisition. Conversely, trade show attendance is a relatively more costly activity for smaller firms so they may seek out less expensive means to acquire information prior to travel to the trade show. Because of time and budget constraints, attendees from smaller firms may have more urgent motivations to complete purchase decisions. Given these factors, attendees from smaller firms may have more transactional objectives for attending trade shows. We hypothesize:

H4a. Compared to trade show attendees from smaller firms, attendees from larger firms will be more likely to report only information-acquisition motivations for attending.

H4b. Compared to trade show attendees from larger firms, attendees from smaller firms will be more likely to report transactional motivations in addition to information-acquisition motivations (i.e., mixed motivations) for attending.

The cost of trade show attendance is partly determined by the distance from the firm to the trade show location. For domestic firms (i.e. firms from the country where the trade show takes place), the cost is generally lower than the cost for foreign firms (i.e., firms from other countries). For this reason, compared to foreign firms, attendees from domestic firms may be likely to attend a trade show even when they have no clear transactional objective. On the other hand, given cost constraints, potential attendees from foreign firms may focus on other communication channels (websites, etc.) to acquire information and will only invest in travel to foreign trade shows when they have a broad range of objectives, including completing transactions. Some foreign attendees will be importers who use trade shows as opportunities to identify potential business partners and to strengthen existing business relationships (Evers & Knight, 2008; Sarmento & Simões, 2018). We hypothesize:

H5a. Compared to foreign trade show attendees, attendees from domestic firms will be more likely to report only information-acquisition motivations for attending.

H5b. Compared to domestic trade show attendees, attendees from foreign firms will be more likely to report transactional motivations in addition to information-acquisition motivations (i.e., mixed motivations) for attending.

Industrial marketing research has long recognized that buying centers occupy a central role in the purchasing context, and that individuals play different roles in these buying centers (Johnston & Bonoma, 1981; Kohli, 1989; Lewin & Donthu, 2005; Lilien & Wong, 1984). Individual attendees are likely to play different roles in their respective buying centers, and attendees playing different roles are likely to have different motivations for attending (Bello & Lohtia, 1993; Borghini et al., 2006; Rinallo et al., 2017; Zerbini & Borghini, 2012).

Buying firms that recognize trade shows as opportunities for information exchange are likely to send people with the ability to recognize and to collect relevant information; such personnel typically have an influencer role in the purchasing process. Firms motivated by more transactional objectives are more likely to be represented by people with the authority to negotiate and close deals, which corresponds to a decision-maker role. We hypothesize:

H6a. Compared to attendees acting as decision makers, attendees acting as influencers will be more likely to report only information-acquisition motivations for attending.

H6b. Compared to attendees acting as influencers, attendees acting as decision makers will be more likely to report transactional motivations in addition to information-acquisition motivations (i.e., mixed motivations) for attending.

Bathelt et al. (2014) argue that regional trade shows are commercial offshoots of permanent regional industrial clusters. Thus, attendees at regional shows will likely be already engaged within permanent regional industrial clusters. On the other hand, national and international trade shows put buyers and sellers from different geographic regions in direct contact with one another. Trade shows with larger geographic scope are more likely to provide exhibitors and attendees with knowledge about distant markets, about industry trends and innovations, and about potential business partners from different regions. Because they are often separated from their workplace by time and distance, attendees to international shows can concentrate on trade show activities with few interruptions from daily work situations (Bathelt et al., 2014). Thus, attendees at a national or international trade show will be immersed in the trade show and the dense ecology of communication and information flows that such shows offer (Bathelt et al., 2014; Bathelt & Schuldt, 2010; Sarmento & Simões, 2018). Following this logic, we hypothesize:

H7a. Compared to attendees at regional trade shows, attendees at national and international trade shows will be more likely to report only information-acquisition motivations for attending.

H7b. Compared to attendees at national and international trade shows, attendees to regional trade shows will be more likely to report transactional motivations in addition to information-acquisition motivations (i.e., mixed motivations) for attending.

2.3. The disconnect: exhibitor staffing

Bello and Lohtia (1993) suggest that exhibitors would be more effective if they understood the roles and motivations of trade show attendees and targeted them accordingly (see also Blythe, 1999). Previous research on trade shows often characterizes exhibitors as motivated by transactional goals, suggesting that many exhibitors may be focused on later stages in the selling process. For example, Tanner (2002) found that exhibitors use trade shows to find prospective customers and to close sales. Others have advocated measuring return on investment for trade shows by focusing on subsequent purchases made (Gopalakrishna & Lilien, 1995; Smith et al., 2004). While exhibitors may also rely on trade shows for image building and improving relationships (Hansen, 2004; Lee & Kim, 2008; Ling-yee, 2006), such activities are often considered of secondary importance to them (Bello & Lohtia, 1993).

As proposed in Hypothesis 1, we expect that most trade show attendees will report that information acquisition is their main reason for attending. On the other hand, we expect that exhibitors will be predominantly staffed by transaction-oriented sales personnel—thus presenting a disconnect between attendee motivations and exhibitor staffing. We hypothesize:

H8. Most staff representing exhibitors at trade shows will be sales or marketing personnel.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data

We use secondary data collected by the Center for Exhibition Industry Research (CEIR), a leading industry organization that conducts primary research examining the image, value, and growth of trade shows as a marketing medium. Twenty-seven trade show organizers invited their attendees and exhibitors to participate in data collection. In addition, CEIR acquired exhibitor contacts from Exhibitracs top 250 business-to-business trade shows list (Ducate, Breden, & Drapeau, 2012). Data were collected through online surveys with 9215 attendees and 885 exhibitors. A total of 69 trade shows are represented in the final sample. The questionnaires included questions about motivations for attending or exhibiting at trade shows, preferences for trade show activities, and plans to attend future trade shows. The questions relevant to this research are presented in Appendix.

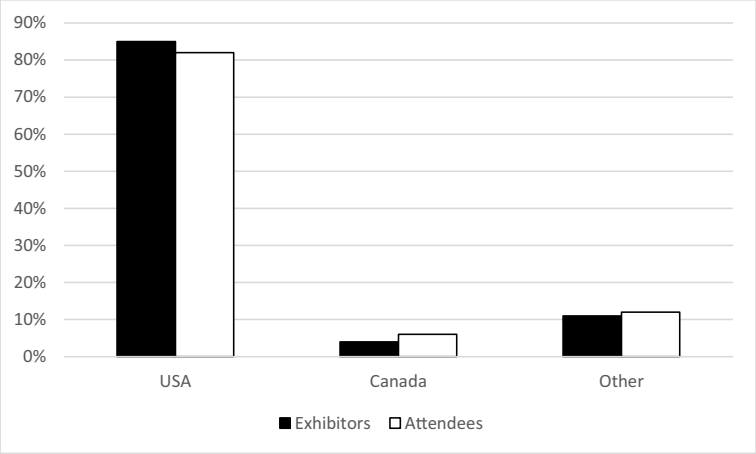

Fig. 1. Firm country.

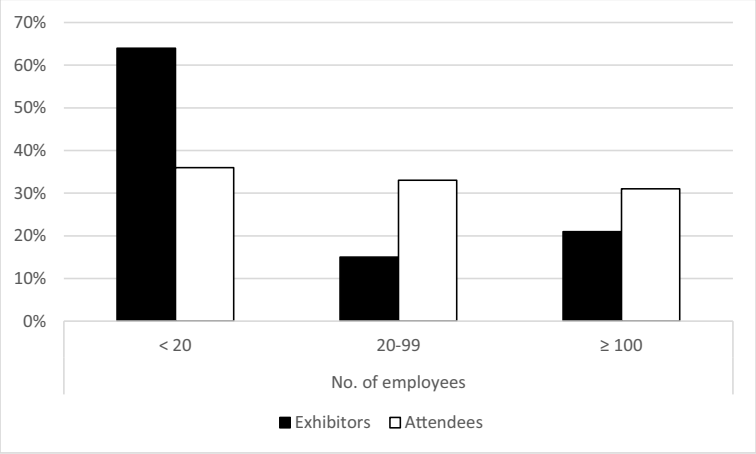

Fig. 2. Firm size.

3.1.1. Descriptives

Figs. 1–3 show the structure of our exhibitor and attendee samples in terms of firm country, size, and business sector.

Validation checks with industry experts (from CEIR, ExhibitTracs, and Exhibit Surveys) confirmed that the demographic characteristics of the attendee sample and the exhibitor sample are consistent with the demographic profiles of each respective population.

4. Analyses and results

Our objective is to explore how and whether trade show exhibitor staffing aligns with attendee preferences. We will explore whether attendees' reported reasons to attend trade shows relate to their staffing preferences and to other characteristics, and we will compare staffing allocations reported by exhibitors with staffing preferences of attendees.

4.1. Tests of hypotheses

4.1.1. Attendee motivations to attend

From among ten options, attendees were asked to select the reasons why they were attending the trade show. The response options pertain to pre-transaction information (e.g. to look for new products/new vendors), to transaction information (to make a purchase) or to post-transaction information (e.g. to see and talk to current vendors/suppliers). Attendees could select as many options as they wanted. Fig. 4 shows the distribution of responses.

Attendees were then asked to identify their two main priorities from among the selected reasons to attend. Most respondents gave this additional information regarding their motivations (n = 7741). Based on this measure, we classified attendees into two categories: 1) attendees who selected only information-acquisition reasons (informational motivations); and 2) attendees who reported that they were attending to make a purchase and to acquire information (mixed motivations).[2] Table 2 shows the distribution of attendees across these two categories. A binomial test confirms that the proportion of attendees reporting only informational motivations is significantly greater than 50% ($p < .001$). H_1, which predicted that most trade show attendees would report information acquisition as their main reason for attending, is supported.

4.1.2. Attendee motivations to attend and their preferences for interaction with exhibit personnel

We investigated the relationship between attendees' motivations and their preference for interaction with specific exhibitor personnel. Attendee preferences were measured with the following question: "Please rate your preference as to the type of person that you would like to talk to when visiting an exhibit where 1 is least preferred and 5 is most preferred." Response categories were: executive/upper

[2] No attendee in our sample reported only transactional motivations. Only one out of the ten response options is about making a transaction, while the nine others are related to information acquisition.

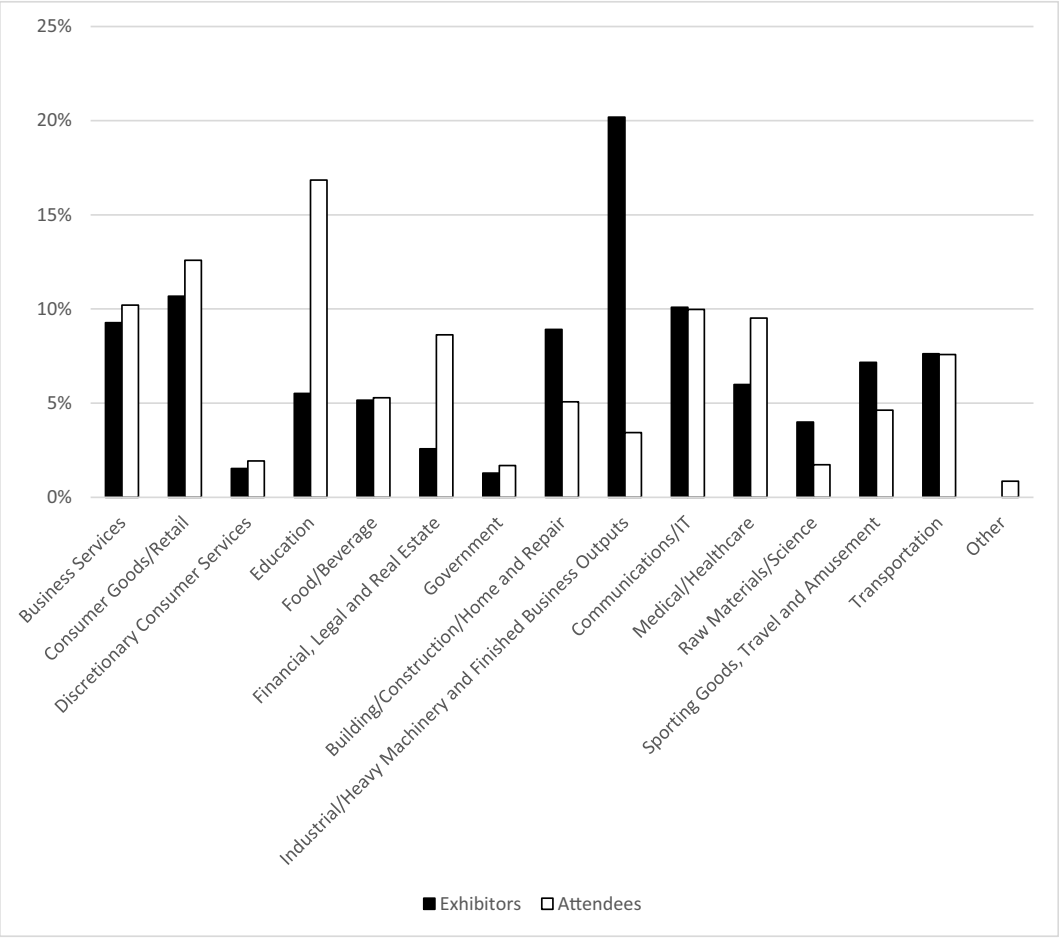

Fig. 3. Business sector.

management; sales/marketing; production/operations; engineering; scientific/technical; research/development.

Compared to attendees with mixed motivations, attendees with only informational motivations reported a significantly greater preference for interaction with engineering, scientific/technical, research/development personnel. This provides support for H_{2a} which predicted that attendees with knowledge acquisition motivations will have a greater preference for interaction with information-rich exhibitor personnel. Attendees with mixed motivations reported a significantly greater preference for interaction with sales/marketing employees, executives and upper management. This provides support for H_{2b}, which predicted that attendees with transactional motivations will have a greater preference for interaction with business-oriented exhibitor personnel. See Table 3 for a summary of these results.

4.1.3. Motivations of B2B vs. B2C attendees

Trade show attendees were classified as either working for firms that marketed primarily to other businesses (B2B firms), or working for firms that marketed primarily to consumers (B2C firms) based on the product/service offerings and industries they reported working in. For example, a buyer from a retail chain would be classified as a B2C attendee, while a buyer working for an OEM automotive supplier would be classified as a B2B attendee. Among the attendees who answered the motivation questions, 1184 were clearly identified as coming from B2B firms and 1154 from B2C firms. The remaining attendees could not be unambiguously categorized as coming from either B2B or B2C firms or they did not answer relevant questions.

Table 4 shows the distribution of attendees by their motivations and their business type (i.e. B2B or B2C). These variables are found to be significantly related ($\chi^2 = 61.24, p < .001$). A comparison of observed and expected frequencies suggests that there are more B2B attendees with only informational motivations than expected, and more B2C attendees with mixed motivations than expected. Thus, $H_{3a,}$ which predicted that B2B attendee motivations will be more likely to report information-acquisition motivations for attending, and H_{3b}, which predicted that B2C attendee motivations will be more likely to report transactional motivations for attending, are supported.

4.1.4. Motivations of attendees from larger vs. smaller firms

Attendees representing firms having less than 100 employees were classified as coming from small firms, and those with 100 employees or more were classified as coming from large firms. Of the attendees who answered the firm size and the motivation questions, 3573 reported working for a company with less than 100 employees, and 2306 reported working for a company with 100 employees or more (3336 attendees did not answer at least one of the questions).

The distribution of attendees based on their motivations to attend and the size of the firm they work for is presented in Table 5. These variables are found to be significantly related ($\chi^2 = 55.45, p < .001$). A comparison of observed and expected frequencies suggests that the number of attendees from larger firms who report only informational motivations is greater than expected, and that the number of attendees from smaller firms who report mixed motivations is greater than expected. Thus, $H_{4a,}$ which predicted that attendees from larger firms will be more likely to report information-acquisition motivations for attending, and H_{4b}, which predicted that attendees from smaller firms will be more likely to report transactional motivations for attending, are supported.

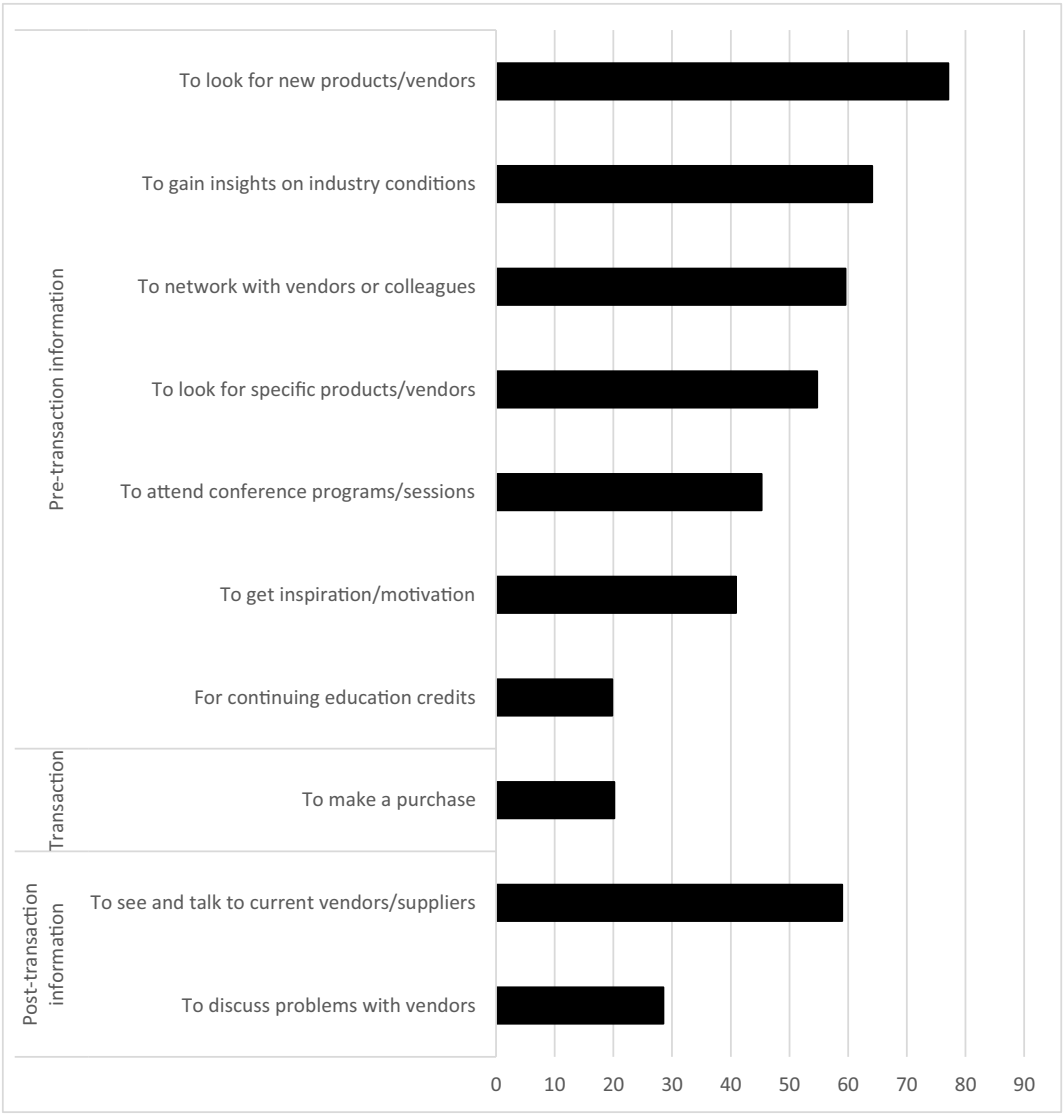

Fig. 4. Attendees' reported reasons for attending the trade show*.

Table 2
Distribution of attendee motivations.

	Freq.	Percent
Informational only	7369	95.19
Mixed (Informational + Transactional)	372	4.81
Total	7741	100.00

4.1.5. Motivations of attendees from domestic vs. foreign firms

The distribution of attendees based on their motivations and the location of the firm they work for is presented in Table 6. These variables are found to be significantly related ($\chi^2 = 12.04$, $p = .001$). A comparison of observed and expected frequencies suggests that the number of attendees from domestic firms who report only information-acquisition motivations is greater than expected, and that the number of attendees from foreign firms who report mixed motivations is greater than expected. Thus, H_{5a}, which predicted that attendees from domestic firms will be more likely to report only information-acquisition motivations for attending, and H_{5b}, which predicted that attendees from foreign firms will be more likely to report transactional motivations for attending, are supported.

Table 3
Attendees' motivation to attend and attendee preferences for interaction with exhibitor staff functions.

	Mean preference of attendees			
	Informational motivation (A)	Mixed motivations (B)	Mean difference (A - B)	
Sales/Marketing	3.63	3.95	−0.32	***
Executive/Upper Management	3.34	3.49	−0.15	**
Production/ Operations	3.47	3.46	0.01	*n.s.*
Engineering	3.13	2.97	0.16	**
Scientific/Technical	3.34	3.13	0.21	***
Research/ Development	3.40	3.13	0.27	***

***: $p < .01$; **: $p < .05$; *: $p < .10$.

4.1.6. Motivations of attendee influencers vs. attendee decision-makers

Attendees were asked about their roles in the purchase of products or services for their companies. They could choose more than one role. Those who reported that they had the final say and/or that they were the ones who specified the brand/vendor, possibly among other roles,

Table 4
B2B/B2C attendees and attendee motivations to attend.

Motivations	Attendee type	
	B2B	B2C
Informational Only	1141 (1089.8)	1011 (1062.2)
Mixed (Informational + Transactional)	43 (94.2)	143 (91.8)

Cells show observed and (expected) frequencies. $\chi^2 = 61.24$, $p < .001$.

Table 5
Attendee firm size and attendee motivations to attend.

Motivations	Firm size	
	< 100	≥ 100
Informational Only	3347 (3405.9)	2257 (2198.1)
Mixed (Informational + Transactional)	226 (167.1)	49 (107.9)

Cells show observed and (expected) frequencies. $\chi^2 = 55.45$, $p < .001$.

Table 6
Attendee firm location and attendee motivations to attend.

Motivations	Firm location	
	Domestic	Foreign
Informational Only	6202 (6179.2)	1031 (1053.8)
Mixed (Informational + Transactional)	289 (311.8)	76 (53.2)

Cells show observed and (expected) frequencies. $\chi^2 = 12.04$, $p = .001$.

Table 7
Attendee Buying Center Roles and Motivations to Attend.

Motivations	Attendee Role	
	Influencer	Decision maker
Informational Only	2228 (2160.0)	4719 (4787.0)
Mixed (Informational + Transactional)	43 (111.0)	314 (246.0)

Cells show observed and (expected) frequencies. $\chi^2 = 63.56$, $p < .001$.

were categorized as 'decision makers' ($n = 5787$). Those attendees who stated that their roles were only to recommend, determine the needs or to influence were categorized as 'influencers' ($n = 2775$). The distribution of attendee motivations to attend and their role as influencer or decision-maker is presented in Table 7. These variables are found to be significantly related ($\chi^2 = 53.52$, $p < .001$). A comparison of observed and expected frequencies suggests that the number of attendee influencers who report information-acquisition motivations is greater than expected, and that the number of decision-maker attendees who report mixed motivations is greater than expected. Thus, $H6_a$, which predicted that attendees acting as influencers will report more interest in information acquisition, and H_{6b}, which predicted that attendees acting as decision makers will report more interest in completing transactions, are supported.

4.1.7. Motivations of attendees to regional, national and international trade shows

The distribution of attendee motivations to attend and the geographic scope of the trade show attended is presented in Table 8. These

Table 8
Motivations to attend among attendees at regional, national and international trade shows.

Motivations	Geographic scope of trade show		
	Regional	National	International
Informational Only	300 (364.5)	1393 (1364.8)	5563 (5526.7)
Mixed (Informational + Transactional)	83 (18.6)	41 (69.2)	244 (280.3)

Cells show observed and (expected) frequencies. $\chi^2 = 253.57$, $p < .001$.

variables are found to be significantly related ($\chi^2 = 253.57$, $p < .001$). A comparison of observed and expected frequencies suggests that the number of national and international trade show attendees who report information-acquisition motivations is slightly higher than expected, which provides support for H_{7a}. A comparison of observed and expected frequencies suggests that the number of regional trade show attendees who report transactional motivations in addition to information-acquisition motivations is slightly higher than expected, which provides support for H_{7b}. The number of attendees to regional trade shows is relatively small (383); Bathelt et al. (2014) argue that the importance of regional trade shows decreases as industries mature and markets globalize.

4.1.8. Staffing allocations of exhibitors by functional areas

Exhibitor staffing was assessed by asking exhibitor respondents: "Of the total personnel that staff your exhibits, what percentage of the total typically represents each of the following job functions? Provide percentage estimates for each category." The response categories were: executive/upper management; sales/marketing management; sales/marketing staff; production/operations; engineering; scientific/technical; research/development; and other personnel. The "sales/marketing management" and the "sales/marketing staff" response categories in the exhibitor sample were merged to make them comparable to the corresponding response category in the attendee questionnaire.

Hypothesis 8 predicts that most staff representing exhibitors at trade shows will be sales or marketing personnel. As shown in Table 9, sales and marketing personnel represents on 58.33% of booth staff on average. As a comparison, executive/upper management has the second greatest frequency with 27.03%. This provides support for H_8.

4.2. Post-hoc analysis

To further explore the disconnect between attendee preferences and exhibitor staffing, we conducted post-hoc comparisons based on transformed data. Exhibitors reported trade booth staffing via a constant-sum scale where the percentages in all staffing categories add up to 100%. Attendees reported staffing preferences by rating the importance of each staffing category. We transformed the attendee data to facilitate comparisons between these measures. Constant sum percentages were calculated from the attendee preference scores. Each respondent in the attendee sample was asked to express the degree to

Table 9
Mean percentages for exhibitor staff by functional area.

	Exhibitor staff
	$n = 831$
Sales/Marketing	58.19%
Executive/Upper Management	26.96%
Production/Operations	3.71%
Engineering	4.04%
Scientific/Technical	2.21%
Research/Development	2.05%

Table 10
Mean percentages for exhibitor staff functional areas vs. attendee preferences for interaction with exhibitor staff functions.

	Mean percentage[a]		Mean difference (Exhibitors – Attendees)	
	Exhibitor staff	Attendee preferences		
	n = 831	n = 9028		
Sales/Marketing	58.19	19.98	38.21	***
Executive/Upper Management	26.96	17.08	9.88	***
Production/ Operations	3.71	16.80	−13.09	***
Engineering	4.04	13.73	−9.69	***
Scientific/Technical	2.21	15.96	−13.75	***
Research/ Development	2.05	16.45	−14.40	***

***: $p < .01$; **: $p < .05$; *: $p < .10$.

[a] Attendee scores reflect mean preferences for interacting with particular exhibitor staff functions while attending a trade show (see explanation for data transformation in the text of the Post-Hoc Analysis section). Exhibitor scores reflect the mean of actual trade show staffing reported by exhibitors.

which he/she wants to meet with people in area i on a 1 to 5 scale. We consequently have 6 preference scores for each attendee (one per functional area). For each attendee, the preference score for each staffing area i (s_i) is transformed into a percentage (p_i) as follows:

$$p_i = \frac{s_i - 1}{\sum_{i=1}^{6} (s_i - 1)} \times 100,$$

so, $p_i \in [0; 100]$ and $\sum_{i=1}^{6} p_i = 100$. This transformation provides us with a measure that is a constant sum percentage for every attendee, which can then be compared to the constant sum measures in the exhibitor sample.

Mean percentages were then calculated for each functional area in each sample and a series of t-tests for independent samples was performed comparing exhibitors' and attendees' ratings for each type of exhibit staff. All differences were found significant at the 0.001 level (see Table 10). Mean comparisons suggest that, relative to attendee preferences, exhibitors understaff with production/operations, engineering, scientific/technical and R&D (indicated by a significant negative mean differences), while they overstaff with executive/upper management and sales/marketing (indicated by significant positive mean differences). Fig. 5 illustrates these differences. The disconnect is most acute in the case of sales/marketing, where a 38.35 percentage point gap exists between the attendee preferences for sales/marketing personnel (19.98%) versus the exhibitor's staffing of the trade show (58.33%). Taken together, interaction with exhibitors from various technical functions (i.e., production/operations, engineering, scientific/technical, and R&D) was preferred by 66.94% of attendees, whereas only 12.04% of the exhibitor staff at the trade shows belonged to these functions.

4.2.1. Exhibitor staffing by functional area vs. preferences of attendees from B2B and B2C firms

Table 11 shows the comparisons between B2B and B2C attendee preferences regarding exhibit staff. These results are illustrated in Fig. 6. As in the case of the overall sample, this perspective suggests exhibitors overstaff with executive/upper management and sales/marketing personnel compared to B2B/B2C attendee preferences, with the disconnect being most acute in the case of sales/marketing. A large and significant 40.2 percentage point gap exists between the staffing of sales/marketing personnel by exhibitors and the preferences of B2B attendees, with the gap being 33.4 percentage points for attendees from B2C firms. Compared to B2B attendees, B2C attendees report a significantly greater preference for interacting with executives/upper management, and sales/marketing personnel.

Consistent with the pattern evident in the overall sample, exhibitors understaff with production/operations, engineering, scientific/technical and R&D by a significant margin relative to the preferences of both B2B and B2C attendees. The various technically-oriented functions (i.e., production/operations, engineering, scientific/technical, and R&D) were preferred by 65.8% of B2B attendees and by 56% of B2C attendees, while only 12% of the exhibitor staff are from these functions. B2B attendees report greater preferences for interacting with productions/operations, engineering, scientific/technical personnel at the trade show. The difference in the preference for R&D staff between B2B and B2C attendees was not statistically significant.

4.2.2. Exhibitor staffing by functional area vs. preferences of attendee influencers and attendee decision-makers

In our sample, 1723 attendees self-identified as decision-makers in the purchase process, and 2843 self-identified as influencers. A series of Bonferroni comparisons presented in Table 12 and illustrated in Fig. 7 shows significant differences between the functional area preferences of these two types of attendees versus staffing by exhibitors. Attendees who identify as decision-makers report greater preferences for interaction with executive/upper management and sales/marketing personnel compared to attendees who identify as influencers. Attendees who identify as influencers report greater preferences for interaction with engineering, scientific/technical, and R&D. These differences are

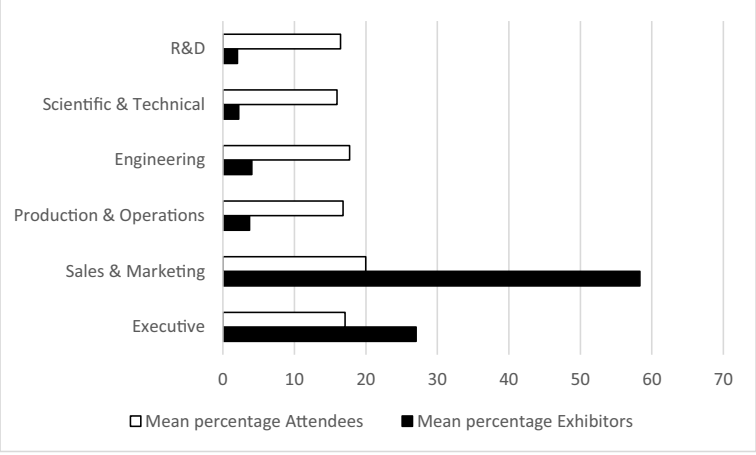

Fig. 5. Exhibitor staff functional areas vs. attendee preferences for interaction.

Table 11
Mean percentages for exhibitor staff functional areas vs. B2B and B2C attendee preferences for interaction with exhibitor staff functions.

	Mean percentages			Mean differences					
	Exhibitors	B2B attendees	B2C attendees	Exh. – B2B attendees		Exh. – B2C attendees		B2B–B2C attendees	
	n = 831	n = 1387	n = 1304						
Sales/Marketing	58.19	18.39	24.36	39.80	***	33.82	***	−5.97	***
Executive/Upper Management	26.96	17.02	19.22	9.94	***	7.74	***	−2.20	***
Production/Operations	3.71	17.19	16.43	−13.48	***	−12.72	***	0.76	**
Engineering	4.04	16.07	11.90	−12.03	***	−7.86	***	4.17	***
Scientific/Technical	2.21	16.13	12.28	−13.92	***	−10.07	***	2.85	***
Research/Development	2.05	15.20	14.81	−13.15	***	−12.76	***	0.39	

***: $p < .01$; **: $p < .05$; *: $p < .10$.

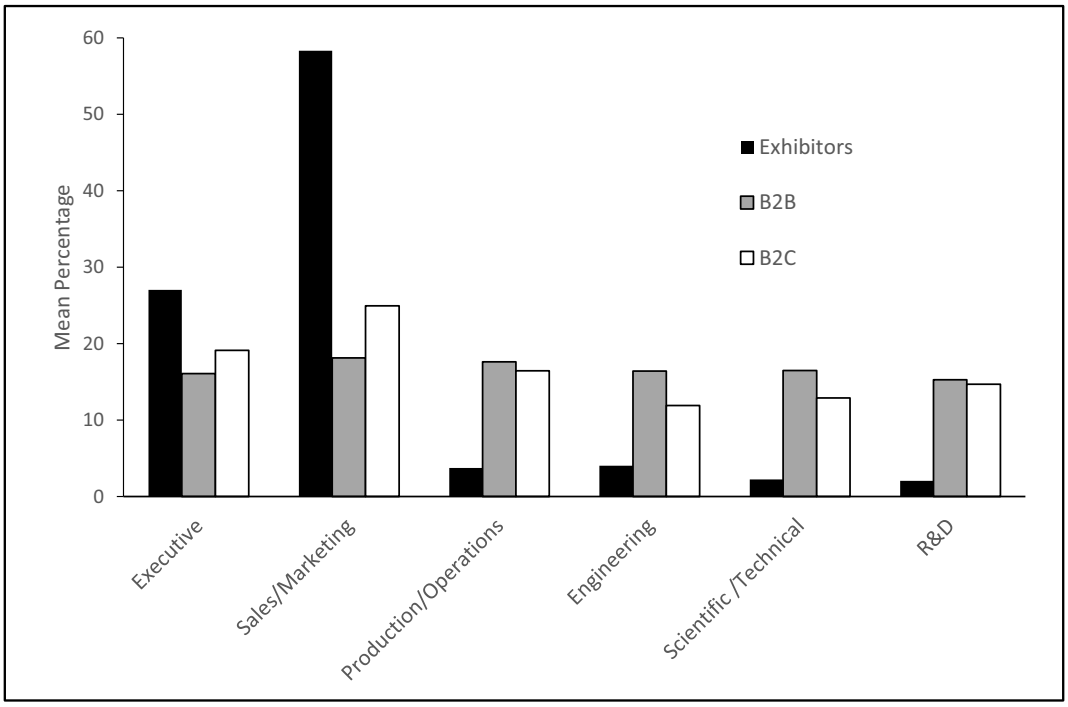

Fig. 6. Exhibitor staff functional areas vs. B2B and B2C attendee preferences for interaction.

statistically significant at $p < .05$ and beyond. Influencer and decision-maker attendees report similar preferences for interacting with productions and operations personnel.

Consistent with patterns reported above, exhibitors show significantly higher levels of staffing with sales and marketing personnel relative to the mean preference of both influencers (38.8 percentage point difference) and decision-makers (36.7 percentage point difference). While decision-makers indicate a stronger preference for interaction with executive staff compared to influencers, their preference for interacting with executive staff is still significantly lower than the level of executive staffing provided by exhibitors (mean difference of 11 percentage points for influencers and 8.9 percentage points for exhibitors). A significant disconnect remains in the staffing of trade shows relative to the preference attendees report for interaction

Table 12
Mean percentages for exhibitor staff functional areas vs. influencer and decision-maker attendee preferences for interaction with exhibitor staff functions.

	Mean percentages			Mean differences					
	Exhibitors	Influencer attendees	Decision-maker attendees	Exhibitors – Influencer		Exhibitors– Decision-maker		Influencer– Decision-maker	
	n = 831	n = 2745	n = 5744						
Sales/Marketing	58.19	18.98	20.60	39.21	***	37.59	***	−1.62	***
Executive/Upper Management	26.96	15.82	17.67	11.14	***	9.29	***	−1.85	***
Production/Operations	3.71	16.91	16.82	−13.20	***	−13.11	***	0.09	
Engineering	4.04	13.90	13.65	−9.86	***	−9.61	***	0.25	
Scientific/Technical	2.21	16.88	15.44	−14.67	***	−13.23	***	1.44	***
Research/Development	2.05	17.52	15.82	−15.47	***	−13.77	***	1.70	***

***: $p < .01$; **: $p < .05$; *: $p < .10$.

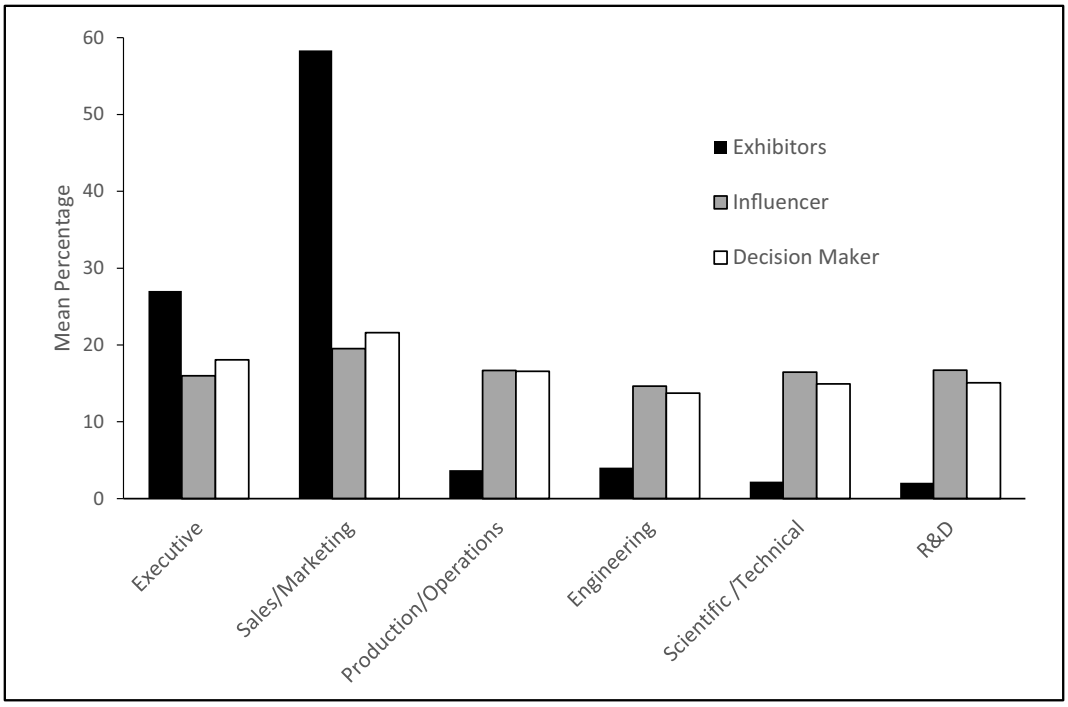

Fig. 7. Exhibitor staff functional areas vs. influencer and decision-maker attendee preferences for interaction.

with technically-oriented personnel. Taken together, the various technically-oriented functions (i.e., production/operations, engineering, scientific/technical, and R&D) were preferred by 64.5% of influencers and 60.3% of decision-makers, while being staffed by only 12% of the exhibitor staff.

4.2.3. Exhibitor staffing by functional area vs. preferences of attendees from small and large firms

Compared to attendees from larger firms, attendees from smaller firms report significantly greater preferences for interaction with exhibitors' executives/upper management and sales/marketing personnel (see Table 13 and Fig. 8). Compared to attendees from smaller firms, attendees from larger firms report significantly greater preferences for interaction with exhibitor representatives from engineering, scientific/technical, and research and development. However, relative to exhibitor staffing, attendees from both large and small firms had a greater interest in interacting with engineering, scientific/technical, production/operations, and R&D exhibitor personnel, and a weaker interest in interacting with executives/upper management and sales/marketing exhibitor personnel. The disconnect between exhibitor staffing and attendee preferences ranged from 9.6 percentage points for attendees from small firms interacting with exhibitor executives to 39.4 percentage points for attendees from large firms interacting with exhibitor sales and marketing personnel. These differences are statistically significant at $p < .05$ and beyond.

4.2.4. Exhibitor staffing by functional area vs. preferences of attendees at regional and national trade shows

Comparisons between exhibitor staffing and attendee preferences are presented for attendees to regional trade shows (Table 14 and Fig. 9) and national trade shows (Table 15 and Fig. 10). Consistent with the emerging pattern, exhibitors show significantly higher levels of staffing with sales and marketing personnel relative to the mean preference of both regional trade show attendees (12.59 percentage point difference) and national trade show attendees (35.58 percentage point difference). Taken together, the various technically-oriented functions (i.e., production/operations, engineering, scientific/technical, and R&D) were preferred by 49.5% of regional trade show attendees and 58.1% of national trade show attendees, while being staffed by only 5.3% of the exhibitor staff at regional shows and 10.2% of exhibitor staff at national shows. These differences are statistically significant at $p < .05$ and beyond. Note that compared to exhibitors at national trade shows, exhibitors at regional trade shows staff with slightly fewer sales/marketing personnel and slightly more executive/upper

Table 13
Mean percentages for exhibitor staff functional areas vs. large and small firm attendee preferences for interaction with exhibitor staff functions.

	Mean percentages			Mean differences					
	Exhibitors	Attendees small firms	Attendees large firms	Exhibitors – Small attendees		Exhibitors – Large attendees		Small – Large attendees	
	$n = 831$	$n = 4125$	$n = 2694$						
Sales/Marketing	58.19	21.03	19.51	37.16	***	39.68	***	2.52	***
Executive/Upper Management	26.96	17.80	15.97	9.16	***	10.99	***	1.82	***
Production/Operations	3.71	16.71	16.83	−13.00	***	−13.12	***	−0.12	
Engineering	4.04	13.35	14.23	−9.31	***	−10.19	***	−0.88	***
Scientific/Technical	2.21	15.27	16.85	−13.06	***	−14.64	***	−1.58	***
Research/Development	2.05	15.85	17.61	−13.80	***	−15.56	***	−1.76	***

***: $p < .01$; **: $p < .05$; *: $p < .10$.

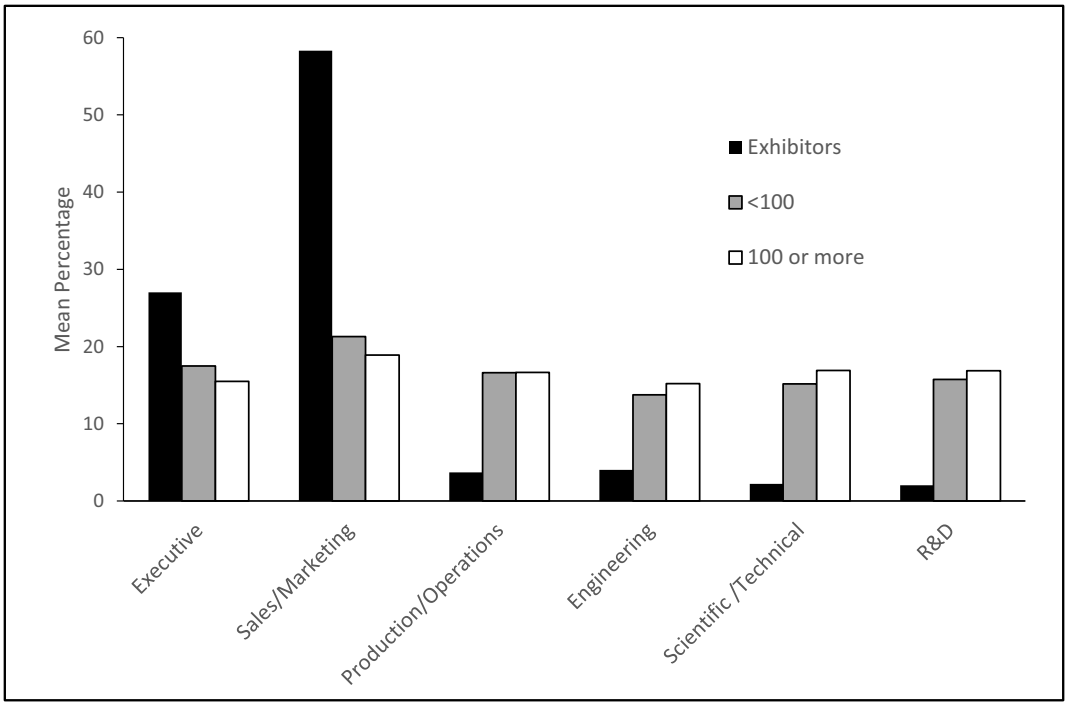

Fig. 8. Exhibitor staff functional areas vs. large and small firm attendee preferences for interaction.

Table 14
Mean percentages for exhibitor staff functional areas vs. attendee preferences for interaction with exhibitor staff functions at regional trade shows.

	Mean percentage		Mean difference (Exhibitors – Attendees)	
	Exhibitor staff	Attendee preferences		
	n = 37	n = 419		
Sales/Marketing	41.08	28.49	12.59	**
Executive/Upper Management	50.59	22.01	28.59	***
Production/ Operations	2.70	16.50	−13.80	***
Engineering	1.65	8.35	−6.71	***
Scientific/Technical	0.70	10.64	−9.94	***
Research/ Development	0.29	14.00	−13.70	***

***: $p < .01$; **: $p < .05$; *: $p < .10$.

Table 15
Mean percentages for exhibitor staff functional areas vs. attendee preferences for interaction with exhibitor staff functions at national trade shows.

	Mean percentage		Mean difference (Exhibitors – Attendees)	
	Exhibitor staff	Attendee preferences		
	n = 110	n = 1616		
Sales/Marketing	59.51	23.93	35.58	***
Executive/Upper Management	25.28	17.99	7.29	***
Production/ Operations	3.49	18.21	−14.71	***
Engineering	2.05	9.60	−7.55	***
Scientific/Technical	1.65	13.24	−11.58	***
Research/ Development	3.01	17.04	−14.03	***

***: $p < .01$; **: $p < .05$; *: $p < .10$.

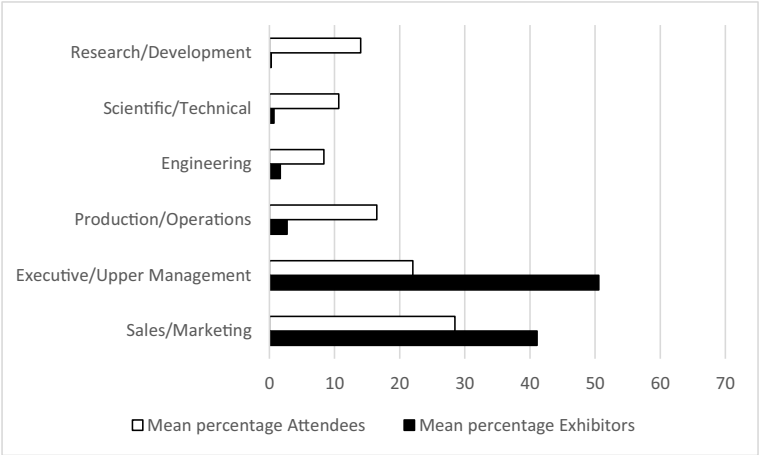

Fig. 9. Exhibitor staff functional areas vs. attendee preferences for interaction functions at regional trade shows.

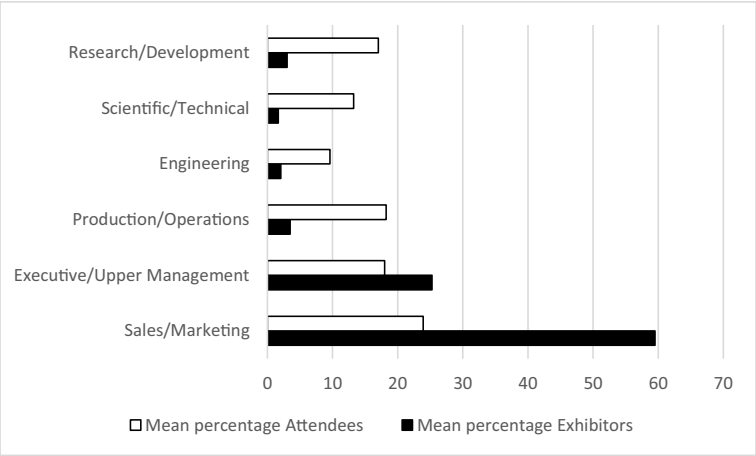

Fig. 10. Exhibitor staff functional areas vs. attendee preferences for interaction functions at national trade shows.

management personnel. However, the significant disconnect between exhibitor staffing of trade shows and preferences that attendees report for interaction with exhibitor personnel persists regardless of the geographic scope of the trade show.

Compared to attendees from larger firms, attendees from smaller firms report significantly greater preferences for interaction with exhibitors' executives/upper management and sales/marketing personnel (see Table 13 and Fig. 8). Compared to attendees from smaller firms, attendees from larger firms report significantly greater preferences for interaction with exhibitor representatives from engineering, scientific/technical, and research and development. However, relative to exhibitor staffing, attendees from both large and small firms had a greater interest in interacting with engineering, scientific/technical, production/operations, and R&D exhibitor personnel, and a weaker interest in interacting with executives/upper management and sales/marketing exhibitor personnel. The disconnect between exhibitor staffing and attendee preferences ranged from 9.6 percentage points for attendees from small firms interacting with exhibitor executives to 39.4 percentage points for attendees from large firms interacting with exhibitor sales and marketing personnel. These differences were statistically significant at $p < .05$ and beyond.

5. Discussion

Despite its importance, the trade show channel has not received adequate attention in previous research (Sarmento & Simões, 2018; Tafesse & Skallerud, 2017). This study is a modest step in the direction of recognizing the important role that trade shows play as opportunities for information exchange. It is one of only a few studies that examine responses from both exhibitors and attendees (Sarmento & Simões, 2018; Tafesse & Skallerud, 2017).

Based responses from 9215 trade show attendees, we find that the overwhelming majority of trade show attendees are motivated only by information-acquisition objectives, such as “to see and talk to current vendors/suppliers” or “to gain insights on industry conditions.” Furthermore, most attendees report that at the trade show, they would like opportunities to interact with information-rich exhibitor personnel such as personnel from engineering, production and operations, and R&D. Relative to these attendee motivations and preferences, exhibitors consistently and significantly overstaff trade shows with executive/management and sales/marketing personnel, while significantly understaffing trade shows with technically-oriented personnel (i.e., production/operations, engineering, scientific/technical, and R&D). With minor differences, these disconnects are consistent and pervasive regardless of whether the attendees are from B2B vs. B2C firms, small vs. large firms, or play a decision-maker vs. influencer role in the purchasing decision process. The disconnect is also pervasive at both regional and national trade shows.

Recent research from the economic geography perspective on trade shows suggests that trade shows serve as temporary clusters that facilitate diffusion of knowledge across geographical distances (e.g., Bathelt et al., 2014; Rinallo et al., 2017). In light of this emerging perspective, our work suggests that current trade show staffing practices may not be optimal for facilitating such knowledge exchanges.

Our findings may help exhibitors to optimally allocate their staffing resources at trade shows in order to serve attendees more effectively. Our findings indicate that there is a large and unmet demand for interactions with technical personnel at trade shows, which offers these technical personnel an opportunity to capture customer and market input firsthand from a diverse set of customers. Such information, while essential, is typically hard to come by, and/or expensive to obtain using traditional market research channels. Information gathered by the technical personnel through customer interactions at trade shows can be critical in driving business opportunities in the future (Bettis-Outland, Johnston, & Wilson, 2012; Sharland & Balogh, 1996). Trade show organizers should also communicate to exhibitors the potential benefits of staffing with technical personnel. Attendees may be more likely to attend trade shows that are perceived to offer more information-acquisition opportunities (Berne & García-Uceda, 2008).

Previous research on trade shows and anecdotal evidence about trade show exhibitors suggests that exhibitors plan trade shows on an ad hoc basis (Tanner Jr. & Chonko, 1995) or they plan around selling stages of pre-, at- and post-show marketing phases (Sridhar et al., 2015). A more customer-oriented perspective would suggest that exhibitors plan around buying stages (pre-transactional, transactional and post-transactional) and buying center roles. We recommend that exhibitors view trade shows strategically, rather than merely as venues for soliciting short-term sales orders. Trade shows offer exhibitors opportunities to showcase core competencies and to generate or nurture long-term business relationships (Tafesse & Skallerud, 2015). Attendees' reported desire for information and interest in interacting with technical personnel also suggest that trade show exhibitors might do well to prioritize information infrastructure, and to explore a team selling or selling center approach (Jones, Dixon, Chonko, & Cannon, 2005; Moon & Gupta, 1997).

Like other studies, this research suffers from limitations. The scope of our study is limited. While our sample is large and diverse, it drew respondents from U.S. trade shows, and the majority of respondents are from the U.S. Given the trade shows in our sample, we are limited in our ability to make comparisons at the level of the trade shows; we focus instead on attendees and exhibitors.

This study relies on secondary data from the Center for Exhibition

Industry Research (CEIR) a highly reputable industry organization that conducts research on trade shows. As with any study that relies on secondary data, the measures were not always optimal for the research at hand. For example, future researchers should consider continuous and/or interval-scale measures for many variables, such as firm size and exhibitors trade booth staffing. Despite these limitations, we argue that applying theory to industry data is an important part of bridging the theory-practice gap (Möller & Parvinen, 2015).

Future studies can extend this line of inquiry in several directions. Future research might compare the long-term performance of exhibitors with higher proportions of technical personnel at the trade shows to those with low proportions of technical personnel. For example, researchers might explore how and whether trade show participation by technical personnel leads to innovation and improved products or services, to higher levels of attendee satisfaction, and/or to further inquiries or requests for sales proposals from attendees. For technical personnel attending trade shows for the first time, a carefully designed study can compare the level of market knowledge and customer insights pre- and post-attendance at the event. This could shed light on the criticality of such interactions for technical personnel, and on the value of trade shows in facilitating such essential interactions.

Future research can take a broader approach, exploring the role of internet communication before, during and after trade show participation, exploring interactions among organizers, exhibitors, buyer attendees and non-buyer attendees (e.g., media representatives; Tafesse & Skallerud, 2017), and exploring variations among different types of trade shows (Rinallo et al., 2017). Virtual trade shows can take place entirely in a computer-mediated environment (Bathelt & Schuldt, 2010; Sarmento & Simões, 2018; Schuldt & Bathelt, 2011). Future studies might also explore how or whether informational needs of trade show attendees differ according to aspects of the purchase situation (e.g., buyclass, purchase complexity, new vs. mature products/services) or industry type. The basic premise of this study could be extended to different geographic areas, looking at the differences between exhibitor staffing and preferences of attendees from different geographies and cultures (Peñaloza, 2000; Tafesse & Skallerud, 2015). In addition to cultural differences, trade shows will differ in terms of how they function in the international marketplace. Bathelt et al. (2014) propose a 4-way typology of trade shows, distinguishing between local trade shows (local attendees, local exhibitors), export-oriented trade shows (foreign attendees, local exhibitors), import-oriented trade shows (local attendees, foreign exhibitors), and international hub trade shows (foreign attendees, foreign exhibitors). Findings of studies that explore these differences with respect to attendee motivations and exhibitors staffing could have significant implications for B2B firms selling regionally, nationally, and internationally.

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Appendix A. Excerpts from the questionnaires

A.1. Attendees

When you attend trade or professional exhibitions, conventions or annual meetings in-person with exhibits, what are your top 2 reasons for attending? [Items were listed in random order, except for “Other”)].

	First reason	Second reason
To see and talk to current vendors/suppliers	☐	☐
To look for new products/vendors	☐	☐
To look for specific products/vendors	☐	☐
To make a purchase	☐	☐
To discuss problems with vendors	☐	☐
To attend conference programs/sessions	☐	☐
To network with vendors or colleagues	☐	☐
For continuing education credits, e.g. CME's, etc.	☐	☐
To get inspiration/motivation	☐	☐
To gain insights on industry conditions/trends	☐	☐
Other	☐	☐

Please rate your preference as to the type of person that you would like to talk to when visiting an exhibit where 1 is the least preferred and 5 is the most preferred. Check one for each item.

	Least preferred				Most preferred
Executive/Upper management	①	②	③	④	⑤
Sales/Marketing	①	②	③	④	⑤
Production/Operations	①	②	③	④	⑤
Engineering	①	②	③	④	⑤
Scientific/Technical	①	②	③	④	⑤
Research/Development	①	②	③	④	⑤

What role(s) do you play in the purchase of products or services for your company? Check all that apply.

☐ Final Say
☐ Specify Vendor/Brand
☐ Recommend/Determine the Need
☐ End User/Influence
☐ No Role

A.2. Exhibitors

Of the total personnel that staff your exhibits, what percentage of the total typically represent each of the following job functions? Provide percentage estimates for each category.

Executive/Upper Management	__ %
Sales/Marketing Management	__ %
Sales/Marketing Staff	__ %
Production/Operations	__ %
Engineering	__ %
Scientific/Technical	__ %
Research/Development	__ %
Other Personnel	__ %
TOTAL =	100%

A.3. Attendees and exhibitors

What is your company's primary type of business/field? Check one.

☐ *Business Services* (Business, Advertising & Marketing, HR, Security, Printing, Architecture, Engineering, Plant Engineering & Operations, Audio Visual, Funerals)
☐ *Consumer Goods/Retail* (Apparel, Gifts, Hardware, House Wares, Jewelry, Laundry & Dry Cleaning, Leather Goods & Luggage, Lighting, Office Equipment & Supplies, Photography)
☐ *Discretionary Consumer Services* (Toys & Hobbies, Beauty & Personal Care, Religious, Consumer Services, Art, Wedding, Rental & Leasing)
☐ *Education* (Education, Associations, Libraries)
☐ *Food/Beverage* (Food & Beverage, Food Processing & Distribution, Restaurants & Food Service)
☐ *Financial, Legal and Real Estate* (Financial, Real Estate, Legal, Insurance, Accounting, Banking)
☐ *Government* (Government, Military, Police, Fire & Fire Protection, Safety)
☐ *Building/Construction/Home and Repair* (Building and Construction, Home Economics, Home Furnishings & Interior Design, Housing, Landscape & Garden Supplies, Stores & Store Fittings, Wood Workings)
☐ *Industrial/Heavy Machinery and Finished Business Outputs* (Air Conditioning, Heating & Refrigeration, Manufacturing, Metal Working & Coatings Technology, Packaging, Robotics, Waste Management, Welding)
☐ *Communications/IT* (Communications, Computers & Computer Applications, Electrical & Electronics, Publishing, Radio, TV and Cable, Telecommunications, Telephone)
☐ *Medical/Healthcare* (Dental, Industrial, Medical & Health Care, Nursing, Pharmaceuticals, Veterinary)
☐ *Raw Materials/Science* (Agriculture & Farming, Ceramics & Glass, Chemical, Energy, Floriculture & Horticulture, Forest Products, Mining, Ocean Science & Equipment, Paint, Paper, Petroleum, Oil, Gas, Plastics, Pollution Control, Science, Textiles, Water, Wire)
☐ *Sporting Goods, Travel and Amusement* (Sporting Goods, Travel Industry, Amusement, Recreation, Boats, Recreational Vehicles)
☐ *Transportation* (Aerospace & Aviation, Automotive & Trucking, Physical Distribution, Railroads, Transportation)
☐ *Other*

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