

## GLOBAL EXHIBITION DAY AS A TOOL FOR BUILDING STAKEHOLDER EXPERIENCE IN THE EXHIBITION SECTOR

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**Purpose:** Conduct a case study of Global Exhibition Day (GED) as an event to build and share experiences of the exhibition sector worldwide.

**Design/methodology/approach:** 1) A literature review on building stakeholder experience in the exhibition sector. 2) Presenting the genesis and development of Global Exhibition Day. 3) Analysis of the specificity of the GED and its impact on building stakeholder experience in the exhibition sector (case study).

**Findings:** Global Exhibition Day (GED) has grown strongly since its inception. Every year, more and more trade fair organisers, exhibitors, service providers working for the industry and their organisations get involved in the initiative. In 2024, the day was celebrated in more than 100 countries and supported by more than 70 (in 2016 - around 30) trade fair organisations worldwide. The entire initiative has been coordinated from the beginning and documented on public social media by The Global Association of the Exhibition Industry (UFI), giving additional promotional resonance and inspiring further action for the rest of the exhibition industry. All the activities surrounding the GED build the experience of exhibition industry stakeholders and help to popularise it.

**Research limitations/implications:** The main limitation of the case study is the lack of opinion surveys of direct participants in the events to assess how the event is perceived by its participants. A quantitative study of GED participants will be a valuable development of this paper, which will indicate how to improve the delivery of the events that make up the GED.

**Practical implications:** The large number of events makes a comprehensive compilation of information about them hard to analyse. It would be good to group events not only by continent, such as 2024 but also by their specifics, target audience and objectives.

**Social implications:** Supporting the exhibition industry in seeking, selecting, assessing and learning about the trade shows development will ultimately result in an improved exhibiting sector.

**Originality/value:** Research on the trade fair industry is most often focused on its representatives' individual trade fair and exhibition activities dedicated to specific tag events. This work shows that their marketing activity is focused on popularising the industry as a whole. The paper shows that the GED is a simultaneous example of the cooperation and co-opetition of trade fair industry representatives that accompanies each participant's trade fair activity.

**Keywords:** stakeholder experience, trade shows, trade fairs, global exhibition day.

**Category of the paper:** case study and general review.

## 1. Introduction

Trade fairs, like the entire meetings industry (MICE sector), are evolving strongly (Alberca et al., 2018; Sarmiento, Simões, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic caused a number of restrictions on the development of the trade fair sector, including the temporary complete closure of the trade fairs. As a result, the situation for operators, operating in this sector, has radically changed. In most cases, trade fair organisers not only faced a drop in revenue but also had great difficulty maintaining financial liquidity (Vitali et al., 2022). The new beginning and the accompanying technological advances made the changes apparent. But even before the pandemic, the exhibition industry constantly looked for its way forward. One idea was to integrate the sector through a cyclical celebration of the entire industry, the Global Exhibition Day (GED). An initiative by the Polish Chamber of Exhibition Industry in 2014 resulted in the establishment of Global Exhibition Day, celebrated every first Wednesday in June since 2016.

This paper aims to conduct a case study of Global Exhibition Day and showcase it as an event to build and share the experiences of the exhibition sector worldwide. The growth of the exhibition industry requires an increasing investment in the exhibition infrastructure on which base trade fairs are organised (Vitali et al., 2022). Infrastructure development must consider the future expectations of trade fair participants (Celuch, 2021). The global exchange of experiences of the exhibition sector helps to diagnose the expectations of participants, anticipate the directions of the sector's development, and thus better plan exhibition investments (Alberca et al., 2018). Analysing the development process of Global Exhibition Day will allow one to see which activities are most popular and which do not live up to expectations.

The paper uses reports of the International Trade Fair Organisation and national organisations coordinating the exhibition industry in individual countries (including the Polish Chamber of Exhibition Industry), documenting the preparation and implementation of the event, as well as the pace of its development and results. The initiators of the GED idea emphasised that it was not a single event. They described it as an invitation to increase involvement in promoting the exhibition industry and its initiatives. The case study was preceded by a traditional literature review on building stakeholder experience.

## 2. Building stakeholder experience in the exhibition sector – literature review

Experience encompasses the totality of thoughts, emotions, sensations, perceptions and interactions that define human identity (Lemke et al., 2011). Experience is inherently multifaceted and deeply subjective. Even identical events can be perceived differently by

different people, influenced by their culture, values, past experiences and context (De Keyser et al., 2020). Experiences are built when interacting with the market and its other participants (Prymon-Ryś, 2023; Gustafsson et al., 2024). A trade fair is a space where those involved in shaping a particular industry meet. Therefore, their contacts and relationships result in experiences that are important for the development of these companies.

Traditionally, exhibitors and visitors have been cited as the main stakeholder groups (Wreder et al., 2009; Lin et al., 2016) at trade fairs and are the most visible at these events (Zmyslony, Borodako, 2017). Trade fairs are a popular communication tool (Tafesse, Skallerud, 2017; Sarmiento, Simões, 2018). Their participants often decide intuitively and without deeper analysis to participate in them because they find them helpful in achieving many business objectives (Kennelly, 2017). However, when analysing the functioning of the fairs, one can observe an increasing integration of these events with the region, its inhabitants and the companies operating in their surroundings (Adamczyk, Gębarowski, 2008; Sarmiento, Simões, Cláudia Farhangmehr, 2015). Local governments are increasingly aware of the impact of organising such events on the development of the region and therefore strongly support them (Kowalik, 2012). At the same time, local entrepreneurs seek to take advantage of the event held in the region to present themselves, offer their services directly at the fair, and establish contacts for future cooperation. (Gruenberg, 2014). To support these objectives, the organisers seek to implement additional events to accompany the main fair event (Gopalakrishna et al., 2017). These events are designed to increase participant involvement and attendance, increasing media interest (Crowther, 2011). In this way, first and foremost, relationships were built with stakeholders, and there was an additional exchange of knowledge and experience (Çevik, Şimşek, 2020). Extensive photographic and film documentation makes it possible to prepare media publications by exhibitors, visitors, and media representatives (Gillooly et al., 2017). Analyzing the published content is an additional source of information and experience for former participants and those who did not participate directly in the fair (Wong, Lai, 2018).

However, multiplying the experience so that each successive one adds value for the participants is not straightforward (Derakhshan, Turner, 2022; Calza et al., 2023). It requires a broad understanding of the expectations of all stakeholders and the objectives behind their presence at the fair (Lin et al., 2015). In addition, the expansion of the offer for trade fair participants increases the problems of coordinating the preparations for the fair and optimising the schedule. The necessity to prepare the trade fair event much in advance, the limitations of its modification, and the difficulties in finding out precisely which visitors will show up at the trade fair make it impossible to adapt to all expectations fully (Lin, 2016). It is helpful in the quest to increase the satisfaction of trade fair participants by specifying what they can expect at the event. Such information will help them decide whether to attend the event and how to plan their time during the fair. One of the critical elements of building relationships with stakeholders is precise information about the nature of the event and its accompanying events. The 'event personality' appears in the literature as an element influencing exhibitor happiness

(Rai, Nayak, 2018). Defining an 'event personality' really helps position the event and attract the attention of those who might be interested in it.

Integral to the development of trade fair events is the assessment of their usefulness to participants (Hansen, 2004). One tool is the analysis of the trade fair experience of exhibitors and visitors. The main experience dimensions that are investigated are happiness and satisfaction (affective aspects), economic effect and contemporary learning (cognitive aspects), physical comfort (physical elements), uniqueness (unique dimension) and overall satisfaction (well-being dimension). The event experience scales proposed in the literature define different dimensions for evaluating experiences. The following works refer to the cognitive, affective and physical aspects of experiences (Mannell, Iso-Ahola, 1987; Getz, 2007). Unique and well-being dimensions appear in (Rinallo et al., 2010). Physical aspects are analysed in (Gopalakrishna et al., 2010; Tafesse et al., 2010; Sarmiento, Simões, 2018) write about the leisure aspects of individuals. The most extensive proposal is a five-dimensional event experience scale consisting of cognitive, affective, physical, unique, and well-being dimensions (Rai, Nayak, 2020)

Subsequent studies have increasingly clearly shown that the experience of trade fair participants is multidimensional and highly influences participants' future trade fair decisions. Hence, there is a constant need to analyse the trade fair experience and look for opportunities to enrich it.

### **3. Global Exhibition Day – causes and circumstances of the origin**

In 2014, the Polish Chamber of Exhibition Industry took the initiative to establish a Global Exhibition Day. The first proposal for the date of this event was the fifteenth of April. The rationale behind this proposal was when the Global Association of the Exhibition Industry was established (UFI; 15.04.1925). The assumption was that such an event would help to raise awareness among entrepreneurs of the role of trade fairs in business marketing and their importance for economic development. In addition, a joint initiative of trade fair organisers should help them to unite and exchange experiences. Subsequent discussions meant that the final formula for the day brought together Paris-based UFI - The Global Association of the Exhibition Industry, and Dallas-based IAEE - The International Association of Exhibitions and Events, who began joint preparations for the day.

Finally, Global Exhibition Day was established in 2016 and is celebrated every year on the first Wednesday of June (only the celebration of the first edition of GED was exceptionally held on 8.VI.2016). Practical preparations for implementing the first edition of this day started in Europe on the fifth of January 2016, when the Operational Group of the Global Exhibitions Day campaign was established. On the eighth of April 2016, during the General Assembly of

CENTREX in Poznań, at the Poznań International Fair, the promotional campaign for the event was approved. In May 2016, the online campaign "Global Exhibitions Day 2016" was launched. The coordinator of the European part of the campaign was the Polish Chamber of Exhibition Industry. The Polish National Chamber of Commerce patronised the Global Exhibitions Day 2016 campaign.

The event has its website (<https://ged.eventmaker.io/en>; 10.07.2024), where you can see the status of the current edition of the event and archives from previous years. On Facebook, one can find the Global Exhibitions Day public group (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/GlobalExhibitionsDay>; 10.07.2024), which has 3600 members. On LinkedIn, the slogan 'Celebrate Global Exhibitions Day with me' has become very popular, and it is also accompanied by 'I'm celebrating Global Exhibitions Day! Join me'. And exhibition industry representatives greeted each other with the slogan "Happy Global Exhibitions Day!". Since the beginning of Global Exhibition Day, the hashtag #GED supplemented by the year the event takes place (e.g. #GED2024), has been used in subsequent years. This hashtag marks all events surrounding the day's celebration on social media. In addition, each year, the UFI prepares and makes the day's logo and complementary infographics highlighting the relevance of the exhibition industry globally and regionally available to interested parties. These materials help to unify the visual identity of the day and make it easier to recognise the associated events.

Today, you can get involved in celebrating the GED by:

- downloading the #GED2024 Toolkit,
- adding own GED Activity to the global map,
- claiming their tree in the GED Forests.

An exciting feature is the interactive world map showing where the events supporting the GED occur (<https://ged.eventmaker.io/en/join-global-activities>; 10.07.2024). You can see how the event has developed over the years. On the one hand, this map shows the scale of the event and on the other hand, it is very inspiring for others looking for a way to celebrate the GED. The Toolkit (<https://ged.eventmaker.io/en/toolkit>; 10.07.2024) on the Global Exhibitions Day website is very helpful for GED organisers in various regions. There, you can find poster designs advertising the current GED, posters, presentations and infographics with information about the fair prepared for the different areas of the world.

The first edition of the GED has already succeeded in uniting more than 30 trade fair industry coordination organisations worldwide, and the hashtag #GED2016 has become very popular on social media. Also, thanks to the mass distribution of manuals to industry employees explaining how to promote the GED on social media.

In the following years, further editions of the day were implemented. Each successive one was increasingly popular and spawned the involvement of new participants. A difficult time was the pandemic, when the organisation of offline events (including fairs) was periodically suspended. Despite this, the GED celebrations were hectic on social media, and many organisations shared information about their initiatives to celebrate the GED.

In 2023, Global Exhibitions Day activities carried out in the run-up to and during the day were accompanied by more than 3000 unique pieces of content (in the form of posts, comments and messages). Thousands of people worldwide used the hashtag #GED2023 to show their bond with the exhibition industry (<https://www.ufi.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/8th-GED-Celebrated-Worldwide.pdf>; 10.07.2024). The event has grown so much that in 2024 this event was celebrated in more than 100 countries and regions worldwide.

#### 4. Building stakeholder experience with Global Exhibition Day – case study

The themes and key areas of interest, which are defined for each edition of the GED, help to consciously shape the image of the day and use it to promote the trade fair industry. Each time, a different element of the trade fair reality is emphasised, but the authors always stress the role and importance of the trade fair industry for companies and the economy (Table 1).

**Table 1.**

*The themes of Global Exhibition Days (#GED2024)*

Year	Date of the GED	Themes/Key Areas of Interest
2016	08.06.2016	The Dynamics of Transition – Our Industry's Complex Future
2017	07.06.2017	Think Global – Act Local (the people and jobs in the exhibition industry)
2018	06.06.2018	Advocate industry issues with politicians and stakeholders, and finding new ways to connect with young people to attract the right talent to the exhibition industry
2019	05.06.2019	The global economic impact of trade fairs and their contribution to the protection of resources
2020	03.06.2020	Making The Invisible Giant Visible (exhibitions are keys to rebuilding economies)
2021	02.06.2021	Exhibitions are the fastest of fast tracks to economic recovery Exhibitions are the key instrument to implement and accelerate transformation towards sustainable and digital economies!
2022	01.06.2022	We Draw the New World Together
2023	07.06.2023	We Run The Meeting Places And Marketplaces For Everyone
2024	05.06.2024	Exhibitions Are Catalysts To Sustainable Futures

Source: own compilation based on UFI materials.

In subsequent years, the main slogans (Table 1) are supplemented with detailed information about the functioning of economic fairs and their role in the economy. For example, in 2024, the main slogan is also augmented by four complementary messages, which show that economic fairs are a source of progress and economic development. In addition, they bring people together and provide an opportunity for sustainable implementation.

UFI and IAEE coordinate Global Exhibition Day, but any member of the trade fair community can initiate individual events worldwide. Workshops and conferences on the role of trade fairs in the economy are organised to celebrate the GED. Regional trade fair organisations prepare competitions and presentations. They invite their exhibitors, visitors,

and representatives of local authorities and business organisations to celebrate together. These initiatives provide a basis for discussing the future of the trade fair sector and exchanging experiences in trade fair management. To make the discussion engaging for the broadest possible community, the workshops organised during the GED include topics on sustainability and climate concerns. The trade fair industry strives to develop solutions to help rationalise using materials to construct trade fair presentations.

The 2024 GED was supported by over 70 national and international exhibition industry associations. Some activities boiled down to a collaborative photograph accompanied by a hashtag. However, others included infographics summarising regional trade fair activity, reports, academic papers and multi-day conferences. ([https://www.ufi.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/9th-GED-Celebrated-Worldwide\\_Media-Release.pdf](https://www.ufi.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/9th-GED-Celebrated-Worldwide_Media-Release.pdf); 10.07.2024).

Social media activity included deep interactions between individual celebrants, and UFI and regional activity coordinators gave thanks for the commitment of individual partners. The unwavering scale of the Global Exhibitions Day celebrations and the high level of interest from businesses and media show that the GED can be considered a hit initiative. After the pandemic, there has been a growing interest in organising and participating in trade fairs, and the GED certainly has a part to play in this. At the same time, it should be noted that the trade fair industry is getting increasingly creative in developing its activities. In addition to the GED, further initiatives are emerging to ensure that more and more people learn about and discuss the importance of trade fairs throughout the year.

Such activities include, for example, the permanent campaign of the Polish Chamber of Exhibition Industry (PCEI) under the slogan "Trade fairs give more" (<https://targidajawiecej.pl/>; 10.07.2024). Its activity centres around a blog with the same title, where one can learn much about the exhibition industry. It is a place for the publication of reports on the situation of the exhibition industry in the following years, initiatives of individual exhibition centres in Poland and international cooperation in the exhibition area. The constant contact of the exhibition community with this information is very inspiring for those looking for opportunities to intensify their marketing activities to popularise the exhibition industry in Poland. Another activity of PCEI is the Young at the Fair Club (<https://polfair.pl/klub-mlodzinatargach-przy-polskiej-izbie-przemyslu-targowego/>; 10.07.2024), an organisation established at the Polish Chamber of Exhibition Industry which brings together young people interested in fairs. Young people learn practically about the possibilities of the trade fair industry and become its natural ambassadors.

Individual trade fair organisations survey attitudes and expectations towards the trade fair industry in cooperation with research agencies to better prepare for the next GED and ongoing marketing activity. One such study is summarised in a report prepared by the Infuture.institute (infuture.institute, 2022), which shows that:

- One of the most important needs visitors and exhibitors meet at trade fairs is networking and nurturing relationships with others. Trade fair participants expect additional activities designed for specific groups of exhibitors or visitors. They want to have an active influence on their form so that they are fully responsive to their needs (themed groups in social media)
- Trade fair participants expect the organisers to take care of not only their business needs related to their role as exhibitors and visitors but also their well-being during their stay at the fair. And it is not only about toilets and restaurants but also about quiet areas, children's playgrounds, etc.
- Trade fairs should not only play a city-building role but should be organised like cities, where every space is dedicated to achieving marketing objectives.
- The trade fair industry (as well as MICE) should implement elements of modern technology in a functional way to meet the need for multi-sensoriality, building relationships and creating more engaging experiences.
- An essential element is the pursuit of self-sufficiency in energy (Lewicka et al., 2023, p. 7), water and digital fair facilities (in line with the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the Directive Agenda2030; <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>; 10.07.2024).
- Humanity's most significant challenge today is managing change and flexibly adapting to a changing environment. The ability to react quickly should also be subordinated to a long-term perspective, allowing to build resilience and prepare for future challenges.

The nature of Global Exhibitions Day and its accompanying events fits perfectly with the forecasts defined in the presented report and helps meet the expectations listed for the exhibition industry. It can be assumed that it is a needed component of the promotion and development of the sector.

## 5. Conclusions

Building relationships with others is today's exhibitors and visitors' most strongly articulated goal of participation (Proszowska, 2018; Karacaoğlu, Sert, 2019). Therefore, trade show organizers must search for opportunities to create spaces for these activities (Huang, 2016). Individually developed solutions will be improved when they draw on the experience of other organizers and are made based on surveys of their stakeholders.

Global Exhibitions Day is an initiative that strongly activates the exhibition community and shows entrepreneurs trade fairs as an essential instrument for shaping business reality. GED is a marketing activity of the exhibition industry focused on the post-pollination of the entire industry. Inaugurated in 2016, the initiative has been growing very well, even though in

the meantime the industry went through a challenging experience, which was the COVID-19 pandemic.

Each year, more people and institutions join the celebration of Global Exhibitions Day and more events are organized. All these activities are accompanied by very professional and intensive social media activities. It is precious that the initiators of the GED do not stop at creating an atmosphere of celebration of the industry but use the events accompanying the GED to survey the expectations of the entire exhibition industry. The GED is an example of the cooperation and competition of trade show industry representatives accompanying each participant's individual trade show activity.

Based on the analysis of the case study conducted on the mentioned event, it can be forecasted that the trade fair industry will develop in a sustainable manner and meet the future challenges of the business reality surrounding it.

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