

The future of exhibitions: quality over quantity

By  Danette Breitenbach

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Covid has had a lasting effect on exhibitions and events, and what these will look like in the future. The recent Propak Africa (Propak) that took place at Nasrec, south of Johannesburg, is indicative of these changes, ushering in a new era for shows.



Source: supplied by Specialised Exhibitions. Propak 2022 is an example of what exhibitions will look like going forward

Gary Corin, managing director at Specialised Exhibitions, a division of the Montgomery Group, the company that owns and runs Propak, explains the importance of the industry.

“A show such as Propak is a B2B environment where an exchange of value takes place between customers and suppliers and this generates deals of big value, locally and throughout Africa and even overseas,” he says

A tough time for shows

Corin says that the impact of the last two years has decimated many of the smaller players in the industry, but that the core of the industry has survived. “The bigger organisers and shows have survived.”

“It has been a tough period for shows, with Covid, but we are now back on our feet,” adds Corin.

Adapting to a new way of working

Towards the end of 2020, Specialised Exhibitions hosted an event, #RestartExpo for the government. “We were restricted to 250 people and had to put in place all Covid protocols, such as sanitisers and masks. We had live streaming in place to get the event out to a bigger audience,” he explains.

“This was the start of changing the way we run shows; and how shows will look like in the future,” he says.

He adds that it was a good learning curve and that these learnings manifested in Propak Africa 2022.

"Just like the industry has had to adapt and change; so have people. Most people, from suppliers to exhibitors to visitors, understand the need for this in a social context," he says.

Quality over quantity

As a result, Corin says shows will be different in the future. “As we are rebuilding our events, we find we have fewer people - exhibitors and visitors - but the quality of both is higher,” he adds.

The Propak Africa event bears testimony to this. “While the show might have been smaller and visitor numbers less, the calibre of both was outstanding,” he says.

The impact of Covid was not only on exhibition and events companies but all industries have been affected. He says he has seen a shift from pre-Covid to post-Covid. “The industry is first world in terms of innovation and technology. They are on a par with multinationals but localised,” says Corin.

“These businesses are all high quality because survived the last few years,” he says.

Feedback from the show found that despite there being fewer exhibitors (compared to previous pre-Covid shows), the level of the local industry in terms of technology and innovation was world-class, and the local exhibitors really got to shine.

“In the beginning, many exhibitors were a bit sceptical about exhibiting, but the confidence they picked up from their clients and potential clients visiting them at the show removed these doubts,” he adds.

Specialised Exhibitions also found that while visitor numbers were less (as opposed to pre-Covid, they were not down ratio wise, and exhibitors were very happy with the calibre of visitors.

“On the upside, visitors are more respectful, disciplined and focused so the show engagements are of a higher quality,” he says.

But the reality that people are cautious cannot be ignored. “And they need to be,” he adds.

A hybrid show

The exhibitions and event industry has always adhered to strict environmental and safety regulations. “Investing into Covid protocols or health regulations was not an obstacle for us in this sense and has only increased the safety of our industry’s events,” says Corin.

The exhibition has become a hybrid event, and this will be the future of shows. “While exhibitions remain a face-to-face event, by combining technology with this, we can facilitate a better and safer experience,” Corin explains.

Technology has always been an enabler, but this is now more so than ever.

“Technology makes the exhibition experience much more pleasurable, driving many aspects of the live exhibition from registration to live streaming of events,” he explains.

In today’s world, no one leaves their home without a handheld device. “This has allowed us to really ramp up our digital offering. By entering all our information before you arrive, it takes only a few seconds to get into the show,” he says.

By partnering with associations, Specialised Exhibitions was able to bring an intellectual component into the environment in a safe way. “The seminar theatre could be watched on your mobile device.”

While Corin is happy about the success of Propak, he says the industry is still having to work very hard. “It is a rebuilding process.”

But he is optimistic about the future, saying that “Propak Africa 2022 is the start of what shows will look like in the future”.

He says people are simply hungry for shows. “People need to congregate, and what happens on the exhibition floor, you only get at an exhibition.

“People love to gather but now they are more discerning of where and how they do this,” he emphasises.

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Danette Breitenbach is a marketing & media editor at Bizcommunity.com. Previously she freelanced in the marketing and media sector, including for Bizcommunity. She was editor and publisher of AdVantage, the publication that served the marketing, media and advertising industry in southern Africa. She has worked extensively in print media, mainly B2B. She has a Masters in Financial Journalism from Wits.

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